

THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY
OF THE
*G*OSPELS
SECOND EDITION



CRAIG L. BLOMBERG

THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY
OF THE
GOSPELS

SECOND EDITION

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FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION (1987)

There is, I imagine, no body of literature in the world that has been exposed to the stringent analytical study that the four Gospels have sustained for the past two hundred years. This is not something to be accepted with satisfaction. Scholars today who treat the Gospels as credible historical documents do so in the full light of this analytical study, not by closing their minds to it.

A problem arises in this television age from the exposure of the public to a bewildering variety of opinions about the Gospels in particular and the New Testament in general, including both the current scholarly consensus (if such a thing exists today) and every sort of way-out interpretation of the data, with little or no guidance being given about the criteria by which competing views are to be assessed and a reasonable conclusion reached. In this situation a work like Dr Blomberg's is really helpful.

Dr Blomberg is a member of a team of scholars who have for a number of years been engaged on a 'Gospels Project', designed to explore the main critical issues in the study of the Gospels in our time. The findings of this team have been published in a series of six volumes entitled *Gospel Perspectives*. But these volumes are written by scholars for scholars. What Dr Blomberg has done is to digest their contents and present them, in the light of his own study and understanding of the subject, to a wider public. His book calls for careful thought on the part of its readers, but does not require technical knowledge. Here is an answer to the questions: Is it possible for intelligent people nowadays to approach the Gospels as trustworthy accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus? Must they be read with scepticism until their detailed information is confirmed? Or can we, in the light of present knowledge, take it for granted that their authors intend to record things that really happened? The answer Dr Blomberg gives to these questions is positive and satisfying, because he gives ample evidence of accurate and up-to-date acquaintance with the subject of his work and the relevant literature. I am happy to commend it warmly to readers who are interested in this question, and especially to theological students.

F. F. Bruce

PREFACE

From 1980 to 1986 a series of six volumes entitled *Gospel Perspectives* appeared from Sheffield University's JSOT Press. All six addressed the question of the historical reliability of the Gospels at a technical, scholarly level. Volumes 1 and 2 gathered together a relatively unstructured collection of essays, while volumes 3, 5 and 6 presented articles relating to more specifically delineated themes. Volume 3 set the Gospels against the background of the various types of Jewish history-writing of the day, volume 5 discussed the evidence for the traditions about Jesus from sources other than Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, while volume 6 grappled with the unique problems surrounding the miracles of Jesus. Volume 4 was the only one that was not a multi-author work. Here David Wenham provided an intensive study of Mark 13, its parallels in Matthew and Luke, and related passages containing Jesus' teaching on events involving the end times and Christ's return.¹ The entire series was the product of the Gospels Research Project of Tyndale House, Cambridge, a residential library and centre for biblical research under the auspices of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship in England. The series eventually presented the fruit of the labour of an international team of scholars over a period of nearly ten years.

During my doctoral studies in Aberdeen, Scotland, between 1979 and 1982, and thanks to the gracious invitation of my supervisor, Professor I. Howard Marshall, I became a part of this team and contributed essays to volumes 3, 5 and 6, along with helping David Wenham edit volume 6. The UCCF offered me a fellowship for the 1985–6 academic year, enabling me, along with my wife, Fran, to live, research and write in Tyndale House and produce the first edition of this book. This enterprise was born out of the Gospels Research Project's

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1. See the bibliography for full publication information for the six volumes: France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1; France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2; France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 3; Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 4; Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5; and Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6.

desire to disseminate the findings of its work to a wider audience at a somewhat more popular level. The book was geared especially for the new theological student and the educated layperson, but its wide-ranging survey was designed to help scholars and pastors as well. Although birthed by the *Gospel Perspectives* series, the work became an independent volume in its own right. It in no way gave each essay in the series equal attention and a few were virtually relegated to footnotes. At the same time, it drew freely from a breadth of recent research, discussing numerous topics that the Gospels Research Project had not addressed. But one objective remained the same as for the six-volume series: 'to provide answers to the questions of historicity which will stand up to serious academic scrutiny and will provide some help for those who are perplexed by scholarly disagreement'.²

When I submitted the manuscript in 1986 to be published the following year, I never allowed myself to imagine that it might stay in print for twenty years. If it lasted ten, I thought, I should consider myself extremely fortunate. But here we are twenty years later and IVP have asked for a revised, twentieth-anniversary edition. I am profoundly grateful to my editor, Philip Duce, in the UK office for the suggestion and to his counterpart, Jim Hoover, in the US office for his willingness (again!) to co-publish it. Where my original wording still seemed to be clear and its logic cogent, I have retained the text unchanged. Where better style or more recent study have suggested alterations, and particularly a fair number of additions, I have introduced them. Two appendices add brief treatments of topics that I did not discuss in the first edition and that would break my narrative flow if I included them in the text proper. The vast majority of all of the original footnotes have been replaced and/or supplemented with references to more recent works, in many cases thanks to considerable help from research assistants Zac Hicks and Mike Hemenway. These sources are more likely to be in print and/or reflect the most accurate and up-to-date scholarship. The main exception comes when I am citing or summarizing portions of the *Gospel Perspectives* series itself, both because I want to preserve this feature of the original edition and because I find very few places where that series does not still present reliable and useful material. The recent reprinting of all six volumes (2003–4) reinforces this perception.

In keeping with one of the objectives of the first edition – accessibility to the thoughtful layperson – I have kept references to foreign language material to a minimum, even while increasing their numbers slightly where particularly important or recent works cry out for notice. But I have read or skimmed a

2. France and Wenham, 'Preface', *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1, p. 6.

much larger volume of literature than the footnotes explicitly reflect. I have increased substantially the total number of footnotes, along with the number of items in numerous existing footnotes, not least to demonstrate the wealth of scholarship that supports the positions defended here. It may have been just barely understandable twenty years ago that some scholars were not aware of the strength of the case for the Gospels' trustworthiness; it is inexplicable today in the light of the voluminous quantity and excellent quality of relevant works that have appeared in the last two decades.

Early in August of 1987, within a few months of when the first edition of *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* rolled off the presses, I celebrated my thirty-second birthday. Our first child, a daughter, was not yet a year old. I was preparing to teach my initial full-time year at Denver Seminary in Colorado. Near the end of that month, Fran and I enjoyed our eighth wedding anniversary. In keeping with Genesis 2:24, I knew that I wanted to dedicate my first book to her. Readers can easily do the arithmetic and determine my age and years of marriage in 2007. Authors regularly thank their families for putting up with their long hours of work on their books; after sixteen singly or co-authored or edited volumes, I could scarcely express profuse enough thanks for such longsuffering! At least our older daughter has been away at college during the revision of *this* particular volume. And my younger daughter has been busy with high-school activities, while Fran herself has embarked on her doctorate in missiology and begun teaching half-time in our Intercultural Ministries Department at Denver Seminary. So I suspect that they have not noticed (or been bothered by) my work nearly as much as when I was occupied on various other writing projects a number of years back!

It remains all the more fitting, nevertheless, to dedicate afresh this revised volume to Fran. The percentage of people who remain faithful to their wedding vows has dropped dramatically in the years since we made ours, making me that much more grateful that I married not only a marvellously loving companion, an amazingly hard worker, and a bright thinker with a wonderful wit, but also a true promise keeper. For all her love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, especially when I have displayed less of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), I give God enormous thanks in Christ Jesus. And to him be all the glory.

Craig L. Blomberg

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABR</i>	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
<i>AJT</i>	<i>Asia Journal of Theology</i>
<i>ANRW</i>	H. Temporini and W. Haase (eds.), <i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980)
<i>ATR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
AV	Authorized (King James) Version
<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud
<i>BAR</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
<i>BI</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>Bible Translator</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>Chm</i>	<i>Churchman</i>
<i>CSR</i>	<i>Christian Scholars' Review</i>
<i>CTR</i>	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
<i>DR</i>	<i>Downside Review</i>
<i>EJ</i>	<i>Evangelical Journal</i>
<i>EJT</i>	<i>European Journal of Theology</i>
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>EstBib</i>	<i>Estudios bíblicos</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</i>
<i>ExpT</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
GNB	Good News Bible
<i>GP</i>	<i>Gospel Perspectives</i>
<i>GTJ</i>	<i>Grace Theological Journal</i>
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>

<i>HT</i>	<i>History and Theory</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IBS</i>	<i>Irish Biblical Studies</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JPT</i>	<i>Journal of Pentecostal Theology</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JRH</i>	<i>Journal of Religious History</i>
<i>JSHJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
NASB	New American Standard Bible
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
<i>NIDNTT</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i>
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NT	New Testament
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>p.</i>	Palestinian Talmud
pars.	parallels (in the Gospels)
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
<i>PRS</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>RelStud</i>	<i>Religious Studies</i>
<i>RestQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RSR</i>	<i>Recherches de science religieuse</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
<i>SBET</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
<i>SBLSP</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
<i>SBT</i>	<i>Studia biblica et theologica</i>
<i>SCJ</i>	<i>Stone-Campbell Journal</i>
SCM	Student Christian Movement

<i>ScriptTheol</i>	<i>Scripta theologica</i>
<i>SecCent</i>	<i>Second Century</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>Studies in Religion</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Studia theologica</i>
<i>StVTQ</i>	<i>St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
TCNT	Twentieth Century New Testament
<i>ThB</i>	<i>Theologische Beiträge</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>Theol</i>	<i>Theology</i>
<i>TJT</i>	<i>Toronto Journal of Theology</i>
TNIV	Today's New International Version
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TU</i>	<i>Texte und Untersuchungen</i>
<i>TynB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>
<i>VoxEv</i>	<i>Vox Evangelica</i>
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

INTRODUCTION

Every year, countless university students around the world are taught that only a small percentage of the New Testament accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth reflect what he really said and did. In most cases, lecturers are simply passing on what they have received from their teachers. The reasons for their opinions may vary over the years according to the latest sceptical fashions, but some arguments prove remarkably persistent: the Gospels were not written by people in a position to know what Jesus was like, primitive cultures believed in miracles like the virgin birth and resurrection that we know are impossible, oral traditions quickly distorted early Christian claims, theological interest precludes historical accuracy, what we call ‘heresy’ actually preceded ‘orthodoxy’, non-canonical Gospels disprove the stories found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and so on. Probably few of the instructors who pass on such claims even realize how weakly supported their positions are and how some of these claims have actually been disproved. In most cases, they leave their students wholly unprepared to sift truth from error.

Sometimes students’ confusion is compounded by the fiction promoted in popular culture. Since 2003, tens of millions of people worldwide have either read the book or seen the film *The Da Vinci Code*. The story is almost entirely fictitious, but its very first page erroneously claims that ‘all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are

accurate'.¹ In fact, virtually everything it claims about documents from the first five centuries of Christian history is false,² but myriads of readers do not have the educational background, the research skills or the desire to investigate the story's claims, and thus they wind up believing them. In 2004, Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* enthralled viewers around the world. This film *was* based on some serious historical research but it, too, contained some glaring errors, most notably the exclusive use of either Aramaic or Latin on the lips of Jewish and Roman characters who would have communicated *with each other* almost entirely in Greek!³ In 2006, a flurry of media interest surrounded the release of the English translation of the *Gospel of Judas*, a late second-century Gnostic document that briefly recasts portions of the passion narratives of the canonical Gospels so as to make Jesus commission Judas to betray him and promise to reward him in the afterlife for doing so.⁴ Although even very liberal scholars recognized that this document posed no threat to the traditional accounts of *first-century* history, popular novelists have still based fanciful reconstructions of Christian origins on this Judas-Gospel.⁵ Is it any wonder that the international public has difficulty separating fact from fiction concerning Jesus of Nazareth?

On other occasions, bona fide but eccentric, unrepresentative scholarship adds to the confusion. Throughout the decade of the 1990s, the Jesus Seminar met semi-annually to discuss and vote, passage by passage, on the probability of Jesus having said or done everything attributed to him in the four New Testament Gospels and in the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*. They concluded that only 18% of the sayings and 16% of the deeds described in the *five* Gospels corresponded even reasonably closely to the words and actions of the historical Jesus.⁶ By successfully courting media attention in ways that most scholars do not, they succeeded in convincing a wide swathe of news gatherers that they spoke for the majority of scholars, even though with a few

1. D. Brown, *Da Vinci Code*, p. 1.

2. The best exposé is Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*. Cf. esp. Witherington, *Gospel Code*. Even radically liberal New Testament scholars acknowledge this fact. See Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction*; Price, *Da Vinci Fraud*.

3. For a thorough analysis, see Corley and Webb, *Passion of the Christ*.

4. Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*.

5. Cf., respectively, Ehrman, *Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, and Mawer, *Gospel of Judas*.

6. Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *Five Gospels*; and Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *Acts of Jesus*.

exceptions they instead represented the radical fringe of New Testament scholarship.⁷

On the other hand, one of the better kept secrets of the last quarter of a century is the growth of what has been dubbed the third quest of the historical Jesus, in which a large number of scholars, and by no means just conservative Christian ones, have been growing in their confidence in how much we can know about the Jesus of history and in how reliable the New Testament Gospels are.⁸ Indeed, Grant Osborne, probably overly generously, attributes the *Gospel Perspectives* series on which this book is based, and the first edition of this book itself, as one of two sets of publications that ‘paved the way for a reappraisal’ of the relationship between history and theology in the Gospels, leading to the most recent period of scholarship in which history is viewed not as the antithesis to theology but as a vehicle for it.⁹ In reality, the shift was more gradual and the influences more diverse, but the current trends remain undeniable, notwithstanding the Jesus Seminar’s utter lack of acknowledgment of them.

N. T. Wright thus sums up the current options for the role of historical research in the doing of theology and the life of faith under three main headings. (1) Some scholars – the smallest percentage – find it is appropriate to apply the standard criteria of historical investigation to the Gospels but believe that the results prove largely negative: not much turns out to be historically probable. (2) More commonly, others believe that it is methodologically inappropriate to apply historical criteria to documents that were first of all intended to be theological. (3) A final group, perhaps a plurality among fully credentialled New Testament scholars today, agrees with the first in the use of the criteria but argues that the results actually make the historicity of the main contours of the canonical Gospels more probable than not.¹⁰ Certainly, a

7. The best book-length response to the Jesus Seminar is Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus under Fire*.
8. For the overall landscape, see Witherington, *Jesus Quest*. For key excerpts from some of the most important contributions, see Dunn and McKnight, *Historical Jesus in Recent Research*. For the gains to date, see C. A. Evans, ‘Assessing Progress’, pp. 35–54; and Bird, ‘Really a “Third Quest”?’ pp. 195–219.
9. Osborne, ‘Historical Narrative and Truth’, p. 676. The other set is the pair of works by Meyer (*Aims of Jesus*) and Harvey (*Jesus and the Constraints of History*). Cf. Osborne, ‘History and Theology’, esp. pp. 12–15.
10. Cf. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 28–124. The reason scholars in the first two camps often speak as if numbers in category 3 are small is that they eliminate conservative or evangelical scholars a priori, as if their faith disqualified

majority of New Testament scholars fall into camps 2 and 3 put together. Wright himself is perhaps the most able and prolific exponent of position 3 at present.

But why is there still as much disagreement as remains? Some of it is due to varying presuppositions. Is the miraculous possible or not? Should we be a priori more sceptical of the biblical material due to its theological nature or not? Some involves varying criteria or varying uses of the same criteria, which in turn often relates to the question of how similar or dissimilar we expect Jesus to be from the Judaism of his day and the Christianity that followed him. Still other differences stem from the broader philosophical questions surrounding the relationship between religion and historical investigation. We shall return to all of these questions at the appropriate places below.

Yet another issue that accounts for the complexity of the question of the Gospels' trustworthiness involves the nature of the other ancient data available with which to compare them. Two somewhat opposite problems confront historians here. On the one hand, they discover much less independent testimony to the life of Jesus than they might have expected concerning one who founded such a major world religion. On the other hand, when they look just at Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it seems as though there is too much testimony. Many of the details of Christ's life reappear in two or more of the Gospels, sometimes with the identical wording, while in other places apparent discrepancies and contradictions cast doubts on the trustworthiness of the information supplied.

This study will begin, therefore, by examining the various methods of historical criticism that have been applied to the Gospels. Chapter 1 surveys the main approaches employed throughout the history of the church. Chapter 2 turns to the distinctive developments of the last century, which are often equated with 'modern scholarship'. Chapter 3 addresses the unique problems associated with the study of the miracle stories in the Gospels. While focusing primarily on the issues raised by the application of historical criticism to these narratives, it also briefly considers the scientific and philosophical questions surrounding the concept of the supernatural. The next three chapters turn to the two problems of too much and too little historical testimony.

Footnote no. 10 (*cont.*)

their votes! But of course, all scholars' ideologies bias their views to some degree, but never *necessarily* in any insuperable way, while, in fact, many conservative scholars have come to their ideological positions as the result of their study, rather than vice versa.

Chapters 4 and 5 consider some of the most significant apparent contradictions among the Gospel parallels, first by looking at several of the seeming discrepancies among the three Synoptic¹¹ Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), and then by examining the distinctive questions raised by the Gospel of John. Chapter 6 deals with the evidence for Jesus' life and teachings outside the Gospel tradition: in contemporary Jewish and Graeco-Roman sources, in other early Christian literature, and in the rest of the New Testament writings. Finally, the question suggested by the title of this book is raised again: do the New Testament Gospels present reliable history? Chapter 7 thus consolidates the findings of previous chapters and outlines a method for dealing with the details of the Gospel tradition that have not been discussed.

In 1943, Professor F. F. Bruce, who during his lifetime was one of the most widely respected evangelical biblical scholars, produced his first book-length work, entitled *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* This book underwent six editions, the most recent in 1981, and faithfully served a generation of students and interested lay people. In many ways, my first edition of the present study sought to function as an expanded and more amply annotated supplement to Bruce's fifth edition of 1960, though limiting the focus of attention to the Gospels. It was no coincidence that its title resembled Bruce's title, but the word 'historical' was added to make clear that it was the question of historical reliability and not just theological trustworthiness that was under investigation.¹²

A comparison of tables of contents discloses important similarities and differences between this work and Bruce's. Bruce devotes a chapter to the Gospel miracles just as this study does. He uses three chapters to survey the evidence for the Jesus-tradition outside the Gospels; here the topic has been

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11. So called because of their remarkable similarities, such that parallel accounts can easily be set alongside one another in a 'synopsis' (literally, a 'together-look').
 12. The words 'history' and 'historical' can of course themselves mean several different things. For a helpful survey of the range of definitions, see Marshall, *I Believe*, pp. 47–48. Many of these definitions overlap and this study will normally have several of them in mind: a historical narrative recounts that which actually happened; it is the opposite of fiction; it does not contain numerous errors. The approach to history that believes it is impossible to separate fact from fiction in a given narrative is self-defeating. See below pp. 92–94. Although complete objectivity is never possible, one can successively more closely approximate it as one gathers more and more data and better understands what they do and do not demonstrate. This is called a 'critical realist' approach, on which see esp. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion*.

condensed into one chapter. He dwells at some length on the archaeological evidence that confirms the accuracy of details in the New Testament and on the early dating of the documents, which brings them into relatively close proximity with the events they narrate. He also emphasizes the New Testament's abundant textual attestation; that is, the number and nature of ancient manuscripts that have been copied and preserved from the Greek originals. These issues are not explored in as much detail here, because their relevance for the Gospels is more limited than for some of the other sections of the New Testament. Most of the events of Jesus' life have left no physical traces for archaeologists to unearth (but see also Appendix A).¹³ Even a conservative approach to authorship and dating of the Gospels places them about thirty years after Jesus' death, with two of them written by non-eyewitnesses, a sufficient scenario for errors and distortions to creep into their accounts, if other factors conducive to such changes were present, while even on late dates and theories of pseudonymous authorship, the early church could easily have preserved accurate information (see pp. 53–62 below). And almost no-one denies that highly accurate texts of what the four Evangelists originally wrote have been preserved;¹⁴ the controversy today centres on whether or not what they wrote was true; that is, a valid or faithful record of the events (but see also Appendix B).

At the same time, new challenges to the Gospels' trustworthiness have arisen that played little or no role in the scholarly debates of past generations. Biblical critics have begun to draw much more heavily on the study of oral traditions in ancient cultures and on the insights of literary and sociological

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13. Nevertheless, the kinds of things that archaeology can corroborate (place names, topography, chronology, names of public figures, industries and occupations etc.) have far more often been confirmed than called into question by excavations throughout Israel. See McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament*; and Finegan, *Archeology of the New Testament*, pp. 3–291.
 14. An important exception is Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*. Ehrman highlights the most significant textual variants in the New Testament but fails to put them in perspective. Note that 97–99% of the original New Testament is almost certainly represented *somewhere* within the existing Greek manuscripts, given that we have over 5,000 of them, beginning already with small fragments from the early-to-mid second century. See further my review of Ehrman in *Denver Journal* 9 (2006), accessible at www.denverseminary.edu. For an excellent, succinct introduction to New Testament textual criticism, see D. A. Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism*. For the standard scholarly overview. See Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*.

criticism; hence the survey of the ‘newer methods in Gospel study’ in chapter 2. The distinctives of John lead virtually all commentators to treat the Fourth Gospel quite differently from the Synoptics, so this Gospel has been given special consideration. Nevertheless, even though a wide range of topics has been surveyed, there are still gaps and omissions. Much of what has been chosen for discussion has been dictated by the direction of recent research in general and of the *Gospel Perspectives* series in particular (see pp. 9–11).¹⁵ For the most part this survey makes no attempt to break fresh ground, but instead seeks to make the terrain traversed by recent scholarship familiar to a wider audience.

Lack of space has clearly prohibited the kind of detailed treatment that each individual topic requires if it were to be argued comprehensively. A non-technical work of this nature thus risks two pitfalls. On the one hand, theological students may complain that its discussion is too brief and selective. On the other hand, laypeople who are unaccustomed to the complexities of modern scholarship may wish that the issues were even less intricate. Nevertheless, the book reflects the sincere hope that it may find a welcoming readership among both groups of people, for it is intended for student and layperson alike. For those who require more detail, there are frequent footnotes and the works to which they refer. The abundance of in-depth, well-reasoned conservative scholarship on the topics surveyed here, which has appeared in recent decades, deserves more serious attention than it has often received. For those who find the discussion complex, a careful checking of the scriptural references provided throughout should offer much illumination. The issues are not simple, and simplistic summaries serve neither the cause of Christianity nor of scholarship.

The thrust of this volume should be compared and contrasted with two opposing perspectives, both of which have acquired much popular currency. On the one hand, many who write as if they had never studied the Gospels in a scholarly context believe that biblical criticism has virtually disproved the existence of Jesus or that no-one can take the Gospels seriously as sources of reliable historical information without surrendering intellectual integrity. One thinks, for example, of many of the publications of Prometheus Books¹⁶ or

15. For some thoughts on the major omissions in the latter, see Blomberg, ‘Concluding Reflections’, in Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, pp. 443–457.

16. E.g. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus, Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*; or Helms, *Gospel Fictions*. On the other side of the debate, cf. Dunn, *Evidence for Jesus*; France, *Evidence for Jesus*; or Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History*.

of a work like Ruth H. Green's *The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible* (1999). Countless self-appointed experts have created websites, too, that either attack or defend Scripture, often without adequate knowledge of the full breadth of biblical research that needs to be taken into account. For the most part, the present study has ignored the most outlandish claims of isolated scholars, along with the Internet material that is posted without having passed the rigorous process of peer review that characterizes true scholarship. It has interacted instead with what is widely accepted as genuinely academic, however well or poorly known it is outside the academy and whether or not it is available online.

At the same time, a very popular conservative apologetic for the deity of Christ stems from C. S. Lewis's famous 'trilemma': the person who did and said the types of things the Gospels portray Jesus as doing and saying could be no merely human teacher or prophet, however enlightened or exalted. He must be a liar, a lunatic or the Lord.¹⁷ The problem with this argument is that it assumes what is regularly denied, namely that the Gospels give substantially accurate accounts of the actions and claims of Jesus. One can preserve Lewis's alliteration and introduce a fourth option: the stories about Jesus were legends. This option represents the most common unorthodox explanation of the more spectacular deeds and extravagant claims of Jesus in the Gospels: they were the product of the early church's desire to glorify him, and so it exaggerated its portraits of him above and beyond what the facts permitted. Unless one can successfully dismiss this alternative, one cannot appeal to Lewis's apologetic. An examination of the Gospels' historical reliability must therefore precede a credible assessment of who Jesus was.

Throughout my professional career, a variety of people have jumped to the conclusion that I hold the views that I do because I was raised to believe in a conservative or evangelical form of Christianity. I was not. I was brought up in a mainstream Protestant church and educated at a college with a very liberal department of religion that was associated with that denomination. I came to the scholarly positions that I hold through academic investigation and inquiry, not because my upbringing or education predisposed me to believe as I do. Others assume that I *continue* to hold the views that I do because I teach at a seminary that endorses a very high view of Scripture. If I changed my perspectives noticeably, I would need to resign and look for a different teaching position; certain critics assume that I would be unwilling to do this. Again the

17. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 52. Cf. McDowell (*New Evidence*), who appears to have coined the term 'trilemma'.

assumption errs. I have had an adequate number of diverse job offers over the years so that I would not hesitate to seek employment elsewhere rather than annually sign a doctrinal statement I could not affirm with integrity, if I ever changed my mind on the topic of this book.

Indeed, the goals of this volume remain modest. I neither presuppose nor argue for the complete inerrancy, infallibility or inspiration of Scripture, even just with the Gospels. These are the logical and/or theological corollaries of other prior commitments. I believe there are good reasons for holding them, but a defence of that conviction would require a very different kind of book.¹⁸ I wear my historian's hat, not my Christian believer's hat in this project. If readers wish to reject my conclusions, let them show how my arguments fail on historical grounds rather than simply accusing me of presupposing my conclusions because of some predisposition or bias they wrongly think I maintain. It is true, though, that it is the sceptics whose views are novel and aberrant in comparison with the vast majority of people who have carefully examined the issues throughout church history. To that degree I am influenced by history. But this consensus should give us pause before we glibly overturn time-tested tradition. Of course, Western culture is steeped in the myth that newest means best. So we need to resist this temptation and examine the evidence afresh with as much openness as possible to the directions in which it leads.

18. See esp. Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*. Cf. Geisler, *Inerrancy*.

1. TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO THE RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPELS

From the earliest days of the church until the late eighteenth century, belief in the historical reliability of the Gospels usually followed as a corollary from belief in Scripture as inspired and infallible.¹ Few took the time to investigate systematically the extent to which the Gospels could be shown to be reliable apart from this belief. The problem of the Gospel parallels, however, was obvious from the start; if the Gospels were completely trustworthy, then the apparent contradictions between parallel accounts had to be explained. As a

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1. Attempts to deny that the beliefs of the Christian church during this period included a commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture on every matter that came under its purview (most notably Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*) seem to misrepresent the evidence. See esp. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority*. The problem with this type of debate is that virtually all students of the Bible have recognized various degrees of imprecision in the Gospel records, but they disagree on when that imprecision deserves the label of ‘error’. N. T. Wright (*Last Word*) rightly stresses what the ‘Bible wars’ of the 1970s and 1980s did not always highlight – the proper *interpretation* of and *obedience* to Scripture in the context of its five-act narrative. But one cannot jettison the foundation of inspiration and inerrancy and still have the same kind of collection of authoritative documents to interpret and obey.

result, the dominant approach to the question of Gospel historicity for the first seventeen centuries of Christian reflection centred on the task of harmonizing the various Evangelists' testimony. In the last two hundred years and a bit, all this has changed. From the late eighteenth until the early twentieth centuries, scholarly study of Scripture often focused more on the dissonance between its component parts than on the harmony. An important question underlying the analysis of Gospel parallels from either perspective involves the literary relationship among them. Why, especially with the Synoptics, do the Gospels often agree with each other word for word while elsewhere greatly diverging one from another? Did one or more of the Evangelists know and use the work of his colleagues in any form? Although these questions continue to be debated vigorously, they have been around long enough to be distinguished from the newer questions of Gospel study on which Chapter 2 will concentrate, and to warrant brief consideration in this chapter under the heading of 'traditional approaches'.

Harmony in the Gospels

The oldest known testimony about the formation of the Gospels comes from second-century Christian writers who provided information about the authorship and dates of these documents. Papias, early in the 100s, taught that Mark was Peter's interpreter (or translator) 'and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord'.² Toward the end of that same century, Irenaeus affirmed that 'Mark the disciple and interpreter of Peter also transmitted to us what he had written about what Peter had preached', while Clement of Alexandria adds that this occurred during Peter's lifetime.³ If the early church tradition is correct that Peter was martyred during the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Nero between AD 64 and 68, then obviously Mark's Gospel had to have been written by that time. This conclusion accords with Jerome's later declaration that Mark died in Alexandria, Egypt, in AD 62.⁴ Regarding Matthew, Irenaeus wrote that Matthew produced his work 'while Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel

2. Quoted by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15, in the early fourth century.

3. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.38–41; agreed with by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.6–7.

4. Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 8. For a detailed defence of Marcan authorship of the Gospel that bears his name, see Gundry, *Mark*, pp. 1026–1045.

and founding the church in Rome' (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1.), a reference that most naturally fits a date within the 60s. Papias agrees that Matthew was the author of this Gospel, alleging that he initially wrote the 'sayings' of Jesus in a Hebrew dialect (quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.16). If accurate, this tradition could suggest an earlier 'draft' of part of Matthew as early as the 50s.⁵

Less is known from the external tradition about a precise date for the Gospel of Luke, but the abrupt ending of Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, was often interpreted as meaning that the book was written before the results of Paul's appeal to Caesar were known and hence no later than AD 62.⁶ The strongest early church tradition does not date John until the 90s, though a minority placed his Gospel in the 60s as well. Still, given that Jesus was crucified no earlier than AD 30, we are still speaking of only one or two generations between the events narrated in the four canonical Gospels and the time of their being recorded (a point that remains true even if we accept the modern, more 'liberal' consensus that Mark should be located in the 70s and Matthew and Luke in the 80s). Compared to the centuries that typically elapsed between other people and events of antiquity and the time of their first biographers or historians, this is a remarkably short period of time that should inspire confidence in the Gospels' trustworthiness.

That two of the four Gospels were attributed to individuals as comparatively obscure in early Christianity as Mark and Luke also inspires confidence in the tradition.⁷ John Mark was a companion of both Peter and Paul but best known for having 'defected' from the Pauline mission (cf. Acts 13:13 with 15:37). Luke was Paul's 'beloved physician' (Col. 4:14 AV) and travel companion throughout those portions of Acts written in the first person plural, but is known by name in the New Testament only from brief references in the closing greetings of three of Paul's letters (see esp. 2 Tim. 4:11 and Phlm. 24).

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5. It is interesting to speculate if this might have been something along the lines of what scholars today call 'Q' (see below, p. 38). For detailed support of Matthew as author and for a date in the 60s, see Gundry, *Matthew*, pp. 599–622. Gundry's treatment proves that much more significant because of his far less traditional views on Matthew's manner of composition (see below, pp. 81–82). More briefly, cf. Blomberg (*Matthew*, pp. 37–46).
 6. The fullest discussion in recent decades remains Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke I–IX*, pp. 35–62, although he comes to no firm conclusions. More positive is Hemer, *Book of Acts*, pp. 308–334, 362–363.
 7. Cf. Holzapfel, Huntsman and Wayment, *Jesus Christ and the World*, p. 80.

Even Matthew, though one of the twelve apostles (also known as Levi, a converted tax-collector), would not have been a natural choice for someone falsely ascribing authorship to a Christian authority, given his ignominious background as a Jew who had worked for the hated Roman invaders.⁸ Only John, son of Zebedee, and one of the inner core of three closest associates of Jesus (along with his brother, James, and Peter) makes sense as a candidate for pseudonymous attribution, though a good case can be made for the accuracy of this tradition as well.

Intriguingly, however, the only canonical Gospel for which there is any uncertainty in the ancient church regarding its authorship is John, because Papias' remarks can be interpreted as referring to a church elder by the name of John who was a disciple of the apostle John. Specifically, Papias wrote, 'if ever anyone came who had followed the elders, I inquired into the words of the elders, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples had said, and what Aristion and the elder John, the Lord's disciples, were saying'.⁹ It is unclear whether Papias is referring to one or two different individuals named John here.¹⁰ It may be that the apostle John is simply listed twice, because he was the only living apostle at the end of the first century and thus he fit both groups: the original elders/apostles and the second generation of church leaders to whom Papias had access. Nevertheless, it is doubtful if the early church would have allowed this ambiguity to stand if it was concerned to associate the Fourth Gospel deceptively with some apostolic authority with whom the document in fact had no link.¹¹

The conviction that apostles or close associates of the apostles penned the four Gospels already in the first century led Christians throughout most of church history to believe that they recorded historically reliable as well as theologically authoritative material.¹² Thus they regularly attempted to reconcile

8. Cf. Witherington, *Matthew*, p. 5.

9. Quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4.

10. For a vigorous argument in favour of differentiating the two, see Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 412–437. Equally convinced, on the other side, of the need to equate them is Gundry, *Old Is Better*, pp. 49–73.

11. For a more detailed discussion of the authorship and dating of the Fourth Gospel, see Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, pp. 22–44. Cf. esp. Croteau, 'Analysis of the Arguments', pp. 47–80; and Nixon, 'Who Wrote the Fourth Gospel?', pp. 81–98.

12. For some of the earliest responses to sceptics, see Baum, 'Authentizität von Herrenworte', pp. 303–317.

apparent contradictions, confident that plausible solutions would emerge. The first known attempt to construct a Gospel harmony,¹³ in which all four Gospels were combined into one consecutive narrative, came in the late second century from a Syrian Christian named Tatian. His *Diatessaron*, from the Greek phrase ‘through four [Gospels]’, roughly follows the outline of Matthew for most of Jesus’ ministry, and of John for Jesus’ final week, while inserting supplementary information from Mark and Luke at the places Tatian felt most appropriate.¹⁴ Some of Tatian’s solutions to the more noteworthy differences between parallels were regularly adopted from then on. For example, in dealing with Matthew’s ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (Matt. 5–7) and Luke’s ‘sermon on the plain’ (Luke 6:17–49), Tatian arranges the introductory verses in the order, Matthew 5:1; Luke 6:13–17; Mark 3:14–15; Matthew 5:2ff., to underline the fact that Luke’s Jesus was also in the mountains but then descended to speak to the crowds at a place sufficiently level to accommodate everyone comfortably. Tatian then proceeds to record Matthew’s longer version of the sermon, omitting the passages in which Luke mostly duplicates Matthew, but inserting verses where Luke adds unparalleled material.

In other cases, Tatian’s solutions are highly improbable. For example, Tatian splits Luke’s account of Jesus’ preaching in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30) into two parts, separated by twelve sections of intervening material, in order to place part of the account at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry (as in Luke) and part of it as parallel to Mark’s first mention of Jesus in Nazareth, which does not occur until his Galilean ministry is well under way (Mark 6:1–6). In a few instances, Tatian anticipates an approach that has only really caught on in recent years – recognizing that many of the Gospel passages are grouped together topically rather than chronologically. Thus, in contrast to subsequent harmonists who insisted that Jesus must have cleansed the temple twice, once at the beginning of his ministry (John 2:14–22) and once during the last week of his life (Matt. 21:12–13 and Mark 11:16), Tatian combines all twelve of these verses into one coherent narrative. He then appends the story of the widow’s mite (Mark 12:41–44) and the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9–14), presumably because they likewise deal with the issue of true worship in the temple. Mark’s sequence is then resumed with the two parts of the story

13. The reader of this book will be greatly helped by consulting a modern Gospel harmony or synopsis while proceeding. Perhaps the most helpful is K. Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*.

14. Tatian probably wrote originally in either Syriac or Greek, but complete versions survived only in other languages. Cf. Tatian, *Earliest Life of Christ*.

of Jesus cursing the fig tree (Mark 11:12–14, 19–23), but having already used the story of the temple cleansing, Tatian inserts the story of Nicodemus in between these groups of verses, because of its proximity in John to the temple cleansing (John 3:1–21).¹⁵

The church Fathers display a similar variety of approaches to the Gospel data. In a famous passage, the late second-century bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus, accounts for the overall differences in perspective on theological grounds: John wrote of Jesus as the divine Word of God, Luke emphasized his priestly role, Matthew spoke of him as a human being, and Mark stressed the importance of prophecy.¹⁶ Interestingly, only the first of these four characterizations would be accepted today as a major emphasis of that Evangelist. In the early third century, Origen of Alexandria recognized that some of the proposed harmonizations were incredible and admitted that at the historical level certain contradictions did in fact exist. But Origen argued that many texts had an allegorical meaning as well as a literal meaning; if harmony could not be achieved at the latter level, it could at the former. The example of the two temple cleansings is just such a case. Origen solves the difficulty by assuming that John's more 'spiritual' account is not the description of a literal activity of Jesus in Jerusalem but a symbolic narrative about the need for Jesus' followers to put away unrighteousness from their midst and to stop exploiting those who like oxen and sheep are senseless or empty and unstable like doves!¹⁷

Although Origen's orthodoxy was suspect on several counts, the allegorical approach to solving problems and to interpreting Scripture more generally would have a long history ahead of it. Not until the Reformation would it meet sustained opposition. Nevertheless, more sober exegetes did arise from time to time. The great fourth-century preacher John Chrysostom displayed a healthy blend of the type of 'additive' harmonization emphasized by Tatian, that is, where divergent accounts are explained as different extracts from a much fuller body of information, and of the type of theological explanation encountered in Irenaeus, where the unique emphases of the individual Gospels are taken into account. In addition, Chrysostom seemed to

15. For Tatian's overall rationales for his project, see Baarda, '*DIAPHŌNLĀ – SYMPHŌNLĀ*', pp. 133–154.

16. *Against Heresies* 3,9–11. On Irenaeus' approach to the fourfold Gospel, see Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, pp. 105–110.

17. *Commentary on John X* 16. Cf. several of the contributions to Kannengiesser and Petersen, *Origen of Alexandria*. For more detail on the approaches of a wider variety of early church Fathers, see Grant, *Earliest Lives of Jesus*.

foreshadow those who would later limit the infallibility of Scripture to matters of faith and practice, rather than also including details of history and geography: ‘But if there be anything touching times or places, which they have related differently, this nothing injures the truth of what they have said . . . [but those things] . . . which constitute our life and furnish out our doctrine, nowhere is any of them found to have disagreed, no not ever so little.’¹⁸ St Augustine’s approach was somewhat more nuanced, emphasizing that the Gospels often fail to give a clear indication of the location or sequence of the events they are reporting, and that one is to assume continuity of time and place only when it is explicitly mentioned in the text. He also emphasized that parallel passages may vary in wording yet still convey the same sense, whereas highly divergent ‘parallels’ may in fact represent similar events from separate occasions in Jesus’ life.¹⁹

Helmut Merkel seems to be correct in concluding that ‘the mediaeval and Reformation expositors could add nothing fundamentally new to the solutions developed in the early church. Under Augustine’s influence harmonization remained for most the reasonable approach.’²⁰ Not every apparent contradiction among the Gospels was resolved to everyone’s satisfaction, but most people were content to trust that future study would offer better solutions. One contribution to research from the Reformation era that must not be overlooked was John Calvin’s magnificent commentary on *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Latin orig. 1555). Although many of Calvin’s conclusions concerning exegetical perplexities relied on previous commentary, his rejection of the predominantly allegorical approach of mediaeval Catholicism rescued biblical interpretation from a sea of arbitrariness. Calvin also adopted perspectives that are still debated by contemporary expositors. For example, after comparing the two versions of the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4), he considered the suggestion that Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount might in fact be a composite construction gathering Jesus’ teaching from several different occasions.²¹ But Calvin nevertheless followed his predecessors in trying to fit all the Gospel passages together into one orderly outline of the life of Christ, even if in many cases his exposition was more concerned with what the individual Evangelists meant rather than with a close comparison of all the apparent discrepancies.

18. *Gospel of St Matthew* 1.6. Cf. further Quinn, ‘Saint John Chrysostom’, pp. 140–147.

19. Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, 2.21.14 and 29, respectively.

20. Merkel, *Pluralität der Evangelien*, p. xxvii.

21. *Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 1, pp. 204–205.

Dissonance in the Gospels

With the dawn of the Enlightenment, harmonizations of the Gospels became increasingly suspect.²² The presupposition that all Scripture could be equated with God's inspired word was challenged, and scholars began to consider more seriously the possibility that some of the problems between Gospel parallels did not have plausible solutions. This was because they appeared to involve significant embellishments, distortions, or contradictions of historical fact. As parts of the Bible came to be treated more and more as merely human literature, it became easier to assume that they contained errors like those found in any other ancient history book. Early traditions concerning authorship and dating were often doubted, as scholars sought to free themselves from what they viewed as the stranglehold of church teaching. The internal evidence of biblical documents became at times all-governing; while external evidence became almost inherently suspect. Two German scholars who wrote during the late eighteenth century are often credited with pioneering this approach: J. S. Semler and J. D. Michaelis.

The two key theses for Semler's study were (1) the Word of God and Holy Scripture are not identical, and (2) the question of what belongs in the canon of Scripture is purely a historical, and not an ecclesiastical, one. In other words, as a Protestant who did not believe in the infallible authority of any church tradition to tell him what to believe, Semler argued that scholarship had the responsibility to reopen questions of what belongs in Scripture and what is to be considered as reliable and of 'permanent worth for further religious development'.²³ Semler himself found much in Scripture that he believed to be inspired and authoritative, and he considered himself to be as faithful a Christian as his more traditional colleagues. In fact the principal corollary of his two theses was that Christians ought to seek to understand the original meaning of the Greek and Hebrew texts in their original historical settings much more so than was the case in his day.

What Semler initiated in part and unsystematically, Michaelis expanded with rigour and comprehensiveness, writing the first full-scale critical

22. Harmonizations were and are still produced, however, in various forms. One of the most recent, which divides the four Gospels into 223 passages and arranges them according to one possible chronological sequence, with commentary, is Knight, *Simplified Harmony of the Gospels*.

23. Kümmel, *New Testament*, p. 63, referring primarily to Semler's *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung*.

New Testament introduction, *Einleitung in die göttlichen Schriften des Neues Bundes* (*Introduction to the Divine Scriptures of the New Covenant*) in 1750. He also refused to accept the church's definition of the canon as a starting point for his research but sought instead 'in a purely historical way to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the writings'.²⁴ He believed that many of the apparent discrepancies among the Gospels could be harmonized, but did not feel constrained to eradicate them all. Semler's and Michaelis's relative conservatism, however, would not prevail for long. Many scholars came to apply the philosophical position of Gotthold Lessing, arguing that the universal truths of religion could not be dependent on historical evidence, since the study of history leads only to probable rather than to infallible conclusions.²⁵ As a result, harmonization of the Gospels, or of any other seemingly conflicting portions of Scripture, was seen as both unnecessary and misguided.

The history of the last two centuries of Gospel criticism, therefore, has been dominated by hypotheses that presuppose that the four Evangelists frequently do not narrate reliable history. D. F. Strauss's two-volume *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*) in 1835–6 rejected both orthodox belief in Jesus' miracles as supernatural events and rationalist attempts to explain them as misinterpreted natural events. Instead, Strauss argued that the miracle stories were unhistorical myths composed by the first Christians to explain what Jesus meant to them in language intelligible to their contemporaries, a view that to a large extent still prevails in scholarly circles, with only modest alterations. In fact, Strauss believed that the presence of contradictions between parallel accounts was one possible indication of the presence of myth. To cite just one example, in Luke 5:1–11 Jesus calls Peter to follow him after leading him miraculously to catch a great shoal of fish. In Mark 1:16–20 (cf. Matt. 4:18–22) Jesus calls

24. Kümmel, *New Testament*, p. 72. For a broader overview of the rise of the approaches like those of Semler and Michaelis to New Testament criticism, see Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 1. For a focused look at other key participants from the 1600s to the present, see Harrisville and Sundberg, *Bible in Modern Culture*.

25. Lessing's so-called 'ugly ditch' originally referred to the claim that 'the contingent truths of history can never serve as the demonstration of eternal truths of reason'. See Neill and Wright, *Interpretation of the New Testament*, p. 300. Despite the dates in the title, this book also begins with a 34-page chapter concisely surveying the situation from the late eighteenth century onwards.

Peter without working any miracle, yet in 3:13–19 he seems to choose his twelve disciples all over again. John has parallels to neither of these stories but does describe a miraculous catch of fish, followed by a commissioning of Peter, in his stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances (John 21:1–19). Strauss ridicules previous attempts to harmonize all these data and concludes that the stories were 'placed by tradition in different periods' of Jesus' life and invented to illustrate his calling his disciples to 'fish for people' (Matt. 4:19).²⁶

A second 'giant' in nineteenth-century New Testament criticism was F. C. Baur. Building on the dialectic philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, Baur interpreted the first century and a half of Christianity as the antithesis and subsequent synthesis between a conservative Petrine theology and a liberal Pauline one. When this interpretation was applied to the Gospels, Matthew was seen as the most Jewish, and therefore most authentic, of the Synoptics, Luke as the most Gentile or Pauline, and Mark as a second-century attempt to reconcile the two.²⁷ Baur's views have been largely rejected by twentieth-century scholarship,²⁸ but his general principle that contradictory theologies best account for the divergences of the Gospels is a regular presupposition of current research.

These and other developments led to a proliferation of liberal 'lives of Jesus': books that sought to identify those features of the Gospel narratives that could be accepted as true indicators of what Jesus was really like in the midst of more mythical or legendary developments. In a landmark study at the turn of the century, however, Albert Schweitzer exposed the weakness of a large percentage of these works: Jesus was being recreated in the image of their authors at the expense of objective scholarship. Unfortunately, Schweitzer fell into the same trap, as he reinterpreted the Gospels in view of his own commitment to 'thoroughgoing eschatology' – the belief that Jesus thought that he would see the end of the age in his lifetime but died mistaken.²⁹

26. For a thorough study of the man and his significance, see H. Harris, *David Friedrich Strauss*.

27. Baur, *Church History*, vol. 1, pp. 77–82, 147–152. For an overview of Baur's 'school' and its influence, see H. Harris, *Tübingen School*.

28. But see Goulder (*Paul and the Competing Mission*) for an attempt to revive them.

29. Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, esp. pp. 168–189. For a briefer survey of the nineteenth-century quest for the historical Jesus in general, see esp. Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, pp. 25–48.

Evaluating the debate

In today's academic world, any biblical scholar who sets out to harmonize the Gospels risks severe criticism from his or her colleagues. Some of this criticism is justified; some is not. On the one hand, it cannot be stressed too strongly that seeking responsibly to reconcile seemingly discordant testimony is the task of every historian, whether dealing with the biblical literature or with any other work of purported history, ancient or modern. Although the traditional desire to harmonize the Gospels stems from a belief in their uniquely sacred nature, secular historians also regularly fit together apparently conflicting testimony in a way that vindicates the integrity of many or all the witnesses involved. Gilbert Garraghan's standard historiography textbook emphasizes that 'almost any critical history that discusses the evidence for important statements will furnish examples of discrepant or contradictory accounts and the attempts which are made to reconcile them'.³⁰

In addition, more often than one might expect, the details of two different events will reveal striking similarities, such as when the main characters of separate stories have the same names. In other cases, varying testimony will reflect the fact that the evidence consists of fragmentary excerpts from a much fuller, self-consistent body of evidence. Of course, quite commonly, certain discrepancies will prove to be genuine, and certain witnesses will be shown to have erred in various, often peripheral, details. But, as Murray Harris emphasizes, even then 'the presence of discrepancies in circumstantial detail is no proof that the central fact is unhistorical'.³¹

A striking analogy to the problem of the four Gospels appears with the four extant accounts of Julius Caesar's crossing the Rubicon River and committing himself to the civil war that would lead to his becoming emperor and turning the Roman republic into his empire. No-one knows for sure the exact date or location of this crossing. Not all of the details in each account readily square with one another; one even contains a narrative of the miraculous. Still, classicists have no doubt that the event was historical (and of historic significance).³² On the other hand, some proposed reconstructions of the life of Christ or certain solutions to apparent contradictions are so improbable

30. Garraghan, *Guide to Historical Method*, p. 314. Cf. Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, pp. 69–79.

31. M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal*, p. 68. Harris gives a good illustration with the accounts of Polybius and Livy of Hannibal's crossing of the Alps.

32. Merkle, 'Gospels as Historical Testimony', pp. 328–336.

that they are quite rightly discarded. But rejecting one attempt to solve a problem does not mean that the problem should be regarded as insoluble; other explanations may prove more persuasive.³³

Just as harmonization, in principle, is by no means limited to texts believed to be inspired by God, so also Michaelis's rejection of an a priori commitment to Scripture's inspiration can be a valid approach even for commentators who believe in that doctrine. It is possible to defend the accuracy of much of Scripture on purely historical grounds. As the 'evidentialist' approach to Christian apologetics stresses, one can apply widely accepted historical criteria to demonstrate the general trustworthiness of the Gospels. The competing school of thought known as 'presuppositionalism' maintains that one must first assume their reliability and then demonstrate that the data form a consistent whole, thereby confirming one's presupposition.³⁴ Surely there is a place for both approaches. Much of the rationale for a series like *Gospel Perspectives* (see introduction) is that open-minded enquirers from many different theological perspectives share enough common ground to enable them to proceed towards plausible resolutions of the differences that still separate them. Even presuppositionalists owe the sceptic an honest and considered reply rather than a terse dismissal of his or her views simply because they are based on different presuppositions; by definition, presuppositionalism gives its adherents no grounds for rejecting an approach that argues *consistently* from a different starting point.³⁵

At the same time, the cumulative evidence of earlier research need not be neglected every time the biblical historian begins to work on a fresh issue. If previously 'intractable' problems have consistently yielded to patient analysis, the commentator may become more and more confident that new challenges can be met with equal success and less and less willing naively to equate superficial divergence with genuine contradiction. And despite two centuries

33. For more detail and numerous examples from both biblical and extra-biblical sources, see Blomberg, 'Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization', pp. 139–174. Childs (*New Testament Canon*, pp. 143–209) goes a long way towards rehabilitating harmonization of the Gospels as a valid enterprise, but limits himself to broad, theological themes.

34. The classic proponents of each of these viewpoints are Warfield and Van Til, respectively. See esp. Warfield's *Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*; and Van Til's *Defense of the Faith*.

35. On the complementary use of both evidentialism and presuppositionalism, see esp. C. S. Evans, *Historical Christ*, pp. 231–301.

of sceptical onslaught, it is fair to say that all the alleged inconsistencies among the Gospels have received at least plausible resolutions. Chapters 4 and 5 will look at some of the most well-known and controversial examples in more detail.³⁶

Above all, Lessing's absolute dichotomy between the truths of history and religion must be rejected. It is unfair to demand failsafe proof of religious doctrines before one will accept them, since there is no way to acquire such proof. Although Lessing's position remains widely influential today in many theological circles, its only consistent corollary is a thoroughgoing agnosticism. People may of course act inconsistently and choose to believe in God or Jesus in spite of seemingly inadequate historical evidence. But this behaviour is by definition irrational, and actually sub-Christian, since Christianity is based on the concept of God acting *in history*. Despite the oft-quoted verse 'we walk by faith and not by sight' (2 Cor. 5:7), Christianity does not require a 'leap in the dark' or a sacrifice of the intellect. Paul is quoted entirely out of context when this verse is treated as a rationale for believing without evidence (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3–8).³⁷ Biblical faith is fundamentally commitment to a God who has intervened in the history of humanity in a way that exposes his activity to historical study.³⁸ Christians may not be able to prove beyond a shadow of doubt that the Gospels are historically accurate, but they must attempt to show that there is a strong likelihood of their historicity. Thus the approach of this book is always to argue in terms of probability rather than certainty, since this is the nature of historical hypotheses, including those that are accepted without question.³⁹ Graham Stanton clearly summarizes the significance of this enterprise:

at least some aspects of the portrait of Jesus are essential to faith, for if historical

36. For a very balanced analysis of 'the implications of inspiration' and 'conservatism and scepticism' in the historical analysis of the Gospels, see the sections so entitled in Marshall, 'Historical Criticism', in Marshall, *New Testament Interpretation*, pp. 132–135.

37. For a proper, contextual interpretation, see, e.g., M. J. Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 396–399. The contrast is between not seeing Jesus visibly in the present age vs. seeing him directly in the age to come.

38. C. S. Evans, *Historical Christ*, pp. 47–97.

39. Cf. Barzun and Graff, *Modern Researcher*, p. 79: 'The historian arrives at truth most often through probability' but 'this does not mean "a doubtful kind of truth" but a firm reliance on the likelihood that evidence which has been examined and found solid is veracious'.

research were ever able to prove conclusively that the historical Jesus was quite unlike the Jesus of the gospels, then faith would certainly be eroded. The gospel is concerned with history: not in that it stands if its claims could be verified by the historian, but in that it falls if the main lines of the early church's portrait of Jesus of Nazareth were to be falsified by historical research.⁴⁰

In fact, a good case can be made for accepting the details as well as the main contours of the Gospels as reliable. But, as noted above, even if a few minor contradictions genuinely existed, this would not necessarily jeopardize the reliability of the rest or call into question the entire basis for belief. In sum, no Christian should shrink from interacting with any critique of traditional opinion. If the critique is valid, he or she should want to know about it and reassess the tradition, however associated with orthodoxy it may be in his or her mind or community. If it is invalid, careful study and analysis should sooner or later reveal that fact, and faith ought to be strengthened for having been tested and refined.

The Synoptic problem

One central issue in the last two centuries of Gospel scholarship has been passed over deliberately so that it might receive special attention here. Closely related to the question of whether or not the Gospels contradict each other is the question of their literary relationship. Since they are so similar in many respects, the question naturally arises as to whether any of the Gospel writers knew one or more of the other Gospels and utilized that information as he wrote. Certainly, Luke admits familiarity with previous, presumably written, accounts of the events of Jesus' life (Luke 1:1),⁴¹ but it is impossible to know if he had in mind any of the other three Gospels in finished form. The question becomes particularly acute for a study of the Synoptic Gospels because they are much more like each other than like John, and because there are so many other conceivable ways that details from Jesus' life could have been collected and narrated (John 21:25). A competent teacher knows enough to suspect some type of collaboration if two or more students submit essays with identical wording recurring time and again; the situation is no different with

40. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 189.

41. The Greek word for 'narrative' in this context (*diēgēsis*) most naturally refers to a written account. See Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, p. 6.

the historian examining written testimony of past events.⁴² The specific question of the literary relationship of the Synoptics has been called the Synoptic problem and has elicited several different hypotheses by way of reply. Because later chapters will presuppose a particular solution to this problem, brief consideration must be given to it here.

Interestingly, less than a half-century ago Stephen Neill could write that the Synoptic problem was one of the few settled issues of New Testament scholarship.⁴³ Mark was viewed as the first written Gospel. Matthew and Luke then copied from Mark in various places, as well as drawing on a second source for a large number of Jesus' sayings that they had in common but that were missing from Mark. This hypothetical document was designated Q after the German word *Quelle*, meaning 'source'. Diagrammatically, the relationship resembles figure 1 below:

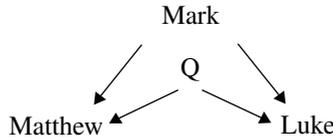


Figure 1

The virtual unanimity of support that this 'two-document hypothesis' commanded was due largely to the magisterial study from a previous generation by B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins*.⁴⁴ Streeter had in fact proposed an even more elaborate 'four-document hypothesis': in addition to

42. Of course, God *could* have chosen to inspire four separate Gospels with the precise kinds of similarities and differences one finds in the New Testament without any literary dependence, but Luke 1:1–4 strongly suggests that he did not. Luke describes the composition of his Gospel according to the standard processes of ancient history-writing – consulting written sources, learning from oral tradition, interviewing eyewitnesses, selecting what is deemed most important for one's own purposes and putting the material together with a view toward implementing those objectives. Given the similarities in form between Luke and the other three Gospels, presumably their writers functioned similarly. Failure to appreciate these observations is one of the biggest weaknesses of Thomas and Farnell, *Jesus Crisis*.

43. Neill, *Interpretation of the New Testament*, p. 339.

44. Streeter of course built on the work of many before him, most notably the nineteenth-century scholars C. H. Weisse and H. J. Holtzmann. For a full review of the debate over the centuries, see Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*.

depending on Mark and Q, Matthew and Luke had access to reliable, independent traditions peculiar to their respective Gospels, designated M and L respectively (see fig. 2 below).⁴⁵

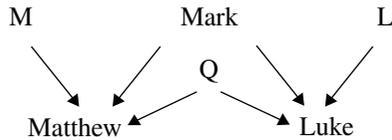


Figure 2

Additionally, Streeter believed that Luke first wrote a shorter form of the Gospel, which Streeter dubbed ‘proto-Luke’, that combined the information Luke had acquired from Q and L. Only later did Luke learn of Mark’s Gospel, which then prompted him to revise and expand his first draft by incorporating Marcan elements into it.

All the pieces of evidence that led to the formation of these hypotheses and to the widespread acceptance of the less speculative ‘two-document hypothesis’ have been spelled out clearly elsewhere.⁴⁶ Perhaps the most significant are that Mark is by far the shortest of the Gospels while consistently containing longer versions of parallel passages than do either Matthew or Luke, that the Q material (which by definition Mark lacks) contains many of the most beloved teachings of Jesus, and that less than 10% of Mark remains unparalleled in either Matthew or Luke. If Mark did not write first, we must imagine him substantially abbreviating his sources, while expanding most of the passages he did preserve, yet failing to preserve most of Jesus’ ethical and parabolic teachings! If Mark did write first, then one can understand why Matthew and Luke wanted to edit and supplement his work and also why their parallel accounts are regularly less Semitic in style, less rugged in syntax and diction, and more concerned to reword and clarify potential exegetical anomalies.⁴⁷

As for Q, we know that Graeco-Roman writers liked to compile anthologies of key teachings of their favourite philosophers. In unorthodox Christian

45. Many would equate M and L with the distinctive *oral* traditions available to either Matthew or Luke rather than seeing them as written documents. Some would want to view Q in a similar light. These scholars will then speak of the ‘two source’ or ‘four source’ hypotheses, rather than of two or four ‘documents’.

46. See esp. Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 29–152. Cf. Osborne and Williams, ‘Case for the Marcan Priority View’, pp. 19–96.

47. Cf. Blomberg, ‘Synoptic Problem’, pp. 20–23.

circles, we have the second-century *Gospel of Thomas* (on which, see pp. 264–268), with its 114 consecutive sayings attributed to Jesus as another example of this genre. That Matthew and Luke each about half of the time seem to preserve the more literal translation of Jesus’ originally Aramaic words suggests that neither is borrowing directly from the other. That the amount of verbal parallelism is often not as great as when Matthew or Luke follow Mark reinforces this conclusion. That no-one has ever found Q does not count as strongly against the hypothesis as it would with many hypothetical documents, because by definition much if not all of Q *has* been preserved – embedded in the finished forms of Matthew and Luke. If Q by itself was never viewed as inspired or authoritative, why would anyone have wanted to preserve it after the fuller, canonical Gospels were completed?⁴⁸

A sizeable majority of scholars thus still accept the two-document solution to the Synoptic problem, but this was not the case throughout most of the history of the church, and for the last forty-plus years a growing minority have also been advocating different solutions. Evidence from the early church Fathers is ambiguous, but, as noted above (p. 26), the second-century writer Papias was quoted as saying that Matthew first wrote down the ‘sayings’ of Jesus, seemingly something less than a full-scale Gospel, in ‘the Hebrew dialect’ (possibly a reference to Aramaic). Certainly, from the time of Augustine on, it was regularly believed that the Gospels were written in the order in which they appear in Scripture, and Mark was seen as a ‘digest’ of Matthew. Luke, in turn, drew on both previous Gospels (see fig. 3 below).⁴⁹

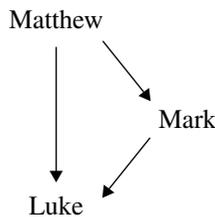


Figure 3

The priority of the Gospel of Matthew for Augustine, however, seems to have been based at least as much on its greater popularity in the church, which

48. Cf. further Bock, ‘Questions about Q’, pp. 41–64.

49. Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels* 1.2.4; 4.10.11. It is unclear, however, whether Augustine is talking merely about chronological order or also literary dependence. See H. J. de Jonge, ‘Augustine’, pp. 2409–2417.

in turn stemmed from its fuller accounts of Jesus' teaching, than on any historical information he had about the order of writing. Today Streeter's greatest rival is J. J. Griesbach, a late eighteenth-century scholar, who believed that Mark stood third rather than first or second, as a summarizer of Luke as well as of Matthew. The material that Luke shares with Matthew is then attributed to his direct dependence on Matthew rather than to any hypothetical common source (see fig. 4 below).

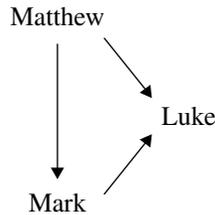


Figure 4

The most ardent instigator of this revival of Griesbach's hypothesis was William Farmer, who through voluminous writings and the organization of several international conferences on the topic succeeded in winning to his position a number of notable figures. Their primary arguments involved the so-called 'minor agreements' of Matthew and Luke against Mark, Luke's 'great omission' of Mark 7:1 – 8:26, the less drastic changes that result when one assumes that Mark abridged Matthew and Luke rather than that Matthew and Luke each expanded Mark, and the common practice by ancient historians of creating digests of longer works.⁵⁰

On the other hand, Matthew and Luke only rarely deviate from Mark in the same way at the same time. This dissimilarity is precisely what one would expect if they were each utilizing Mark largely independently of one another; wider agreement with each other against Mark in passages where all three are 'parallel' would suggest some closer relationship between Matthew and Luke. The minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark can in many cases be explained according to the processes of oral tradition and/or human memory.⁵¹ The Griesbachians, on the other hand, have to assume that Mark,

50. Beginning with Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*; and culminating with idem, *Gospel of Jesus*. For a detailed list and discussion of conferences, supporters and their publications, see Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, pp. 373–383.

51. Baum, 'Mündliche Faktor', pp. 264–272. For other elements of the similarities and dissimilarities among the Synoptics that may be explicable along these lines, cf. idem, 'Experimentalpsychologische Erwägungen', pp. 37–55.

as he combined and condensed Matthew and Luke, was unwilling to deviate widely from information on which both his sources agreed. But this leaves them unable to explain why Mark omitted the large sections of so-called Q-material, which account for approximately 250 verses in Matthew and Luke. Second, despite valiant attempts to draw parallels with other confections or abridgements from the ancient world, Mark remains much more unlike any known summary or digest than like one.⁵² Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the explanations of the rationale behind each jump in Mark's hopscotch alternation between Matthew and Luke have so far proved unconvincing,⁵³ while the two-document hypothesis provides a basis for more credible outlines of the Evangelists' editorial activity. It is also significant that studies of individual passages in the Gospels, as opposed to more general works on the Synoptic problem overall, almost never utilize the Griesbach hypothesis in explaining the similarities and differences of content.⁵⁴

A second important rival to the two-document hypothesis is Michael Goulder's modification that dispenses with Q and has Luke directly dependent on Matthew. Marcan priority, however is retained (see fig. 5 below).

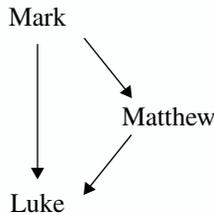


Figure 5

Among other improbabilities, Goulder postulates that Luke proceeded

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52. See the detailed demonstration in Derrenbacher, *Ancient Compositional Practices*.
53. The only sustained attempts to make sense of Mark passage-by-passage via the Griesbach hypothesis have been Mann, *Mark*, in the Anchor Bible commentary series (which proved so meagre in exegesis and unpersuasive in method that a replacement was commissioned the very next decade – half of which has now appeared in Marcus, *Mark 1–8*); and Peabody with Cope and McNicol, *One Gospel from Two*. This volume, for the most part, does not explain *why* Mark would go back and forth between Matthew and Luke several times in each passage, but merely outlines *how* he might have proceeded, if one *presupposes* what they prefer to call the ‘two gospel’ hypothesis.
54. For all three points, see Tuckett, *Revival of the Griesbach Hypothesis*.

through Matthew in *reverse* order for nine consecutive stages of Luke 12:22 – 18:8.⁵⁵ For a different trio of supporters of Luke’s use of Matthew, Luke 3:1 – 10:22 can be accounted for on the assumption that Luke worked through Matthew 3:1–18:5 five times forward, picking up different bits and pieces each time!⁵⁶ But where are the parallels that show editors working in such bizarre fashions? Luke’s dependence on Matthew has also been championed by Goulder’s former student Mark Goodacre, who mostly avoids such extraordinary suggestions, focuses primarily on problems with the Q-hypothesis, but also highlights how Luke’s topical collections of material and literary artistry could account for the order of much of the material he shares with Matthew.⁵⁷ But then Robert Gundry does exactly the same thing for Matthew’s supposed use of Luke in considerably greater detail (see fig. 6 below),⁵⁸ so it seems as if the arguments cancel each other out or at least reveal how tenuous it is to assert direct dependence by either Gospel on the other.⁵⁹

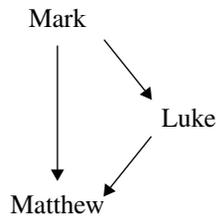


Figure 6

Still other solutions to the Synoptic problem have been offered, but none has commanded even the noticeable minority support that the Greisbach–Farmer and Goulder–Goodacre hypotheses have garnered.⁶⁰ It seems safest, therefore,

55. Goulder, *Luke*, p. 582. Cf. also McNicol with Dungan and Peabody, *Beyond the Q Impasse*; and Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels*. Goulder himself was building on the work of Farrer, *St Matthew and St Mark*.

56. McNicol with Dungan and Peabody, *Beyond the Q Impasse*, conveniently summarized in Chart A foldout in the back-inside cover pocket.

57. Goodacre, *Synoptic Problem*; idem, *Case against Q*. Cf. also Goodacre and Norman Perrin, *Questioning Q*.

58. Gundry, *Matthew*. Cf. Huggins, ‘Matthean Posteriority’, pp. 1–22.

59. For an excellent response to Goodacre’s main arguments, identifying the problems still remaining in his proposals, see Foster, ‘Possible to Dispense with Q?’, pp. 313–337.

60. See Blomberg, ‘Synoptic Problem’, pp. 34–39.

to retain Marcan priority as the most convincing solution to the Synoptic problem and to assume that Matthew and Luke also had access to a common tradition (Q), whether orally, in writing or via some combination of both. Two additional qualifications, however, are in order. First, the number of different oral and written sources on which the Gospel writers depended is probably large enough to suggest that a full account of the interrelationships among the Synoptics is even *more* complex than any of the fairly simple hypotheses here discussed.⁶¹

Second, there has been an entire cottage industry of studies on the hypothetical Q-document alone. The most likely original form of each saying in Q has been reconstructed and debated. Two or more layers of tradition have been postulated, so that an original collection of apocalyptic sayings was later overlaid with 'wisdom' sayings or vice versa. Suggestions as to the nature of the 'Q-community' that produced and/or received this document, along with the nature of the itinerant prophets that supposedly promulgated it have been debated. Q's lack of a passion or resurrection narrative has regularly been taken as meaning that there was an early form of Christianity that did not believe in, or at least find special significance in, these seemingly pivotal events in Jesus' life.⁶² This last conclusion, however, proves most improbable. The reason 'Q' does not have accounts of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus is because these were central to Mark's Gospel, while Q by definition contains that which is common to Matthew and Luke but absent from Mark! If Q was one consecutive collection of written sayings, who knows what sayings from the latter stages of the Gospel narratives it may have included? But these are also the stages of the life of Christ where there are the fewest sayings detachable from their contexts anyway; most of the material remains narrative in form. So a collection of largely self-contained teachings of Jesus would not include much here with or without Mark.⁶³ As to all of the other

61. See esp. Sanders and Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 51–119.

62. For a succinct, recent overview, see Keylock, 'Sayings of Jesus', pp. 119–130. For a cumulative bibliography of studies from 1950 to 1995, see Neiryck, Verheyden and Corstjens, *Gospel of Matthew*. As representative as any work is Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q*. The 'definitive' edition of the reconstructed text is Robinson, Hoffmann and Kloppenborg, *Critical Edition of Q*.

63. In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that Q may have contained a passion narrative, given the greater number of agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark in the triple tradition of this section of the Gospels and given the theological coherence of this material with Q-material elsewhere (and the same can be said of certain 'L'-texts). See Franklin, 'Passion Narrative for Q?', pp. 30–47.

hypotheses about Q, few are inherently improbable. It is just that there is so much speculation in all of them, because we have no *external* evidence to demonstrate that Q even existed, much less to tell us anything else about it. If three independent hypotheses with even a 50% chance of being true are combined, the resulting likelihood of all three being simultaneously true is $.5 \times .5 \times .5$ or 12.5 %, not a figure that inspires great confidence in the overall package.

Moreover, we must still account for the external evidence that does exist. Augustine's view based on the order of the Gospels in the New Testament cannot be set aside altogether. Studies of individual portions of the Gospels have frequently found plausible the idea that where their stories run parallel, Matthew preserves certain passages in forms that reproduce the original tradition more literally than Mark does.⁶⁴ Volume 4 of *Gospel Perspectives* analyses one such passage in great detail (see below, pp. 183–185). The testimony of the church Fathers cannot be dismissed as easily as some would like,⁶⁵ and a view that sees Matthew as revising and expanding a 'first draft' of his Gospel in the light of Mark, similar to Streeter's approach to Luke, makes sense of much of the data. The more one is willing to accept the traditional claim that the Gospel of Matthew was written by the apostle himself, the more likely such a hypothesis becomes, because it is hard to imagine an apostle and eyewitness of most of Jesus' ministry so indebted to a non-apostolic writer like Mark, who at best caught firsthand only glimpses of isolated events in Jesus' life. Yet the fact that, according to early church history, Mark derived much of his information from Peter, who was the leader of the Twelve and present for certain events (usually along with James and John) when the rest were not, does make it credible that Matthew would want to consult Mark for at least some information.⁶⁶

The rest of this study does not depend on the traditional claims about the authorship of the canonical Gospels or on any form of 'proto-Matthew' or 'proto-Luke', however probable any of those hypotheses may be.⁶⁷ What *is*

64. E.g. Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, pp. 185–197.

65. In defence of its reliability, see Petrie, 'Authorship', pp. 15–32; and Glover, 'Patristic Quotations and Gospel Sources', pp. 234–251. It is even possible that the collection of sayings that Papias says Matthew wrote in Hebrew or Aramaic was something akin to what today is labelled Q. See M. Black, 'Use of Rhetorical Terminology', pp. 31–41; and Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, p. xlvi.

66. So also Holzapel, Huntsman and Wayment, *Jesus Christ and the World*, pp. 66–67.

67. Since the titles to the books of the Bible probably did not form part of the original manuscripts, all four Gospels are, strictly speaking, anonymous. The names

presupposed, however, is that whoever wrote Matthew and Luke had access to early traditions about Jesus in addition to Mark and Q. The view that all Matthew's unparalleled material must be historically suspect flies in the face of Luke's claim to have had 'many' predecessors and does not tally with the evidence of second-century church Fathers who still had access to orally transmitted teachings of Jesus not found in the four Gospels (see below, pp. 258–263).⁶⁸

The same openness must be maintained toward Luke's unparalleled material. Admittedly, even the traditional claims concerning authorship place Luke, most probably a Gentile, one step further removed from the original events that he describes. He was probably never even in Palestine during the lifetime of Jesus. His information was therefore entirely second-hand, even if he believed it was nevertheless fully reliable (Luke 1:1–4).⁶⁹ Indeed, there is good evidence to support Luke's confidence in the accuracy of his narrative. The two primary portions of Luke that have no verbal parallelism with either Mark or Matthew are the infancy narratives (1–2) and the nearly twenty parables that comprise the bulk of his central section, often called the Perean ministry or travel narrative (9:51–18:14). Here more than anywhere Luke used to be suspected of giving free rein to a creative imagination rather than following reliable historical sources.⁷⁰

Footnote no. 67 (*cont.*)

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John appear nowhere in the texts as their authors and it is likely they were added to distinguish one from the others when the four were gathered together in early Gospel collections. But see Hengel (*Four Gospels*, pp. 48–56), who believes Mark invented the superscription and the other Evangelists copied his form.

68. Cf. Bauckham, 'Study of Gospel Traditions', in Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5, p. 377: 'Since the Apostolic Fathers knew non-Markan traditions in oral form, it is inconceivable that Matthew and Luke should not have [known them]. Christian literature outside the Synoptic Gospels provides so much evidence of independent, varying forms of Synoptic material that the *probability* is in favour of more, not fewer, Synoptic sources.' Bauckham goes on to argue for Matthew's widespread use of 'M' as a trustworthy source. On M more generally, cf. S. H. Brooks, *Matthew's Community*.
69. In part because Luke is so improbable an author to whom to attribute an anonymous Gospel unless he in fact wrote it, a fair number of scholars suspicious of the other Gospel attributions nevertheless are more open to accepting Luke as the writer of the Third Gospel and Acts. See R. E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 267–269, 322–327.
70. On the former, see esp. idem, *Birth of the Messiah*; on the latter, J. Drury, *Tradition and Design*.

Stephen Farris, however, has shown that the Greek of Luke 1 – 2 is filled with grammatical and stylistic nuances not found with the same frequency elsewhere in Luke, or in a sizable selection of other ancient Greek writings surveyed, but that make good sense as a very wooden, literal translation of Hebrew or Aramaic into Greek. Farris emphasizes that these features are not the kinds that lend themselves to conscious imitation by one who might want to give his writing a biblical (i.e. Old Testament) flavour, because they involve the frequency and usage of various prepositions, articles, adverbs and adjectives rather than more readily reproducible vocabulary or parts of speech. Luke therefore most probably relied on earlier tradition for these chapters.⁷¹ As for the parables of Luke's central section, I have argued elsewhere that when one separates them from the surrounding teachings that Luke has attached to them, they line up in a remarkable pattern of inverted parallelism. Luke's outline seems to be a topical one, but he has preserved intact an arrangement of the parables that was widely used in the ancient world as a mnemonic device, suggesting that this unparalleled material also stemmed from a prior, faithfully transmitted source.⁷²

There is ample reason therefore to believe that in all the major sections of their Gospels, the three Synoptic writers depended on early sources for the information that they have recorded. The fears of certain Christians that 'source criticism' somehow requires a conclusion that the Gospels cannot be trusted or were not Spirit-inspired are groundless. Source criticism cannot demonstrate that the first accounts of the various portions of Jesus' life were entirely trustworthy, but it can suggest that those accounts arose in a time and place in which many who had personally known Jesus still lived. The possibility of preserving reliable information was certainly present. Whether or not that possibility should be strengthened to a probability depends on other factors yet to be discussed.

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71. Farris, 'On Discerning Semitic Sources', pp. 201–237. Cf. idem, *Hymns of Luke's Infancy Narratives*. Farris's statistical method, however, does not always yield consistent results. Jung (*Original Language*) thus argues more modestly that Luke relied on a Greek source filled with Septuagintalisms. Either way, the likelihood of Luke having used earlier tradition inspires greater confidence in his historical reliability for these chapters.
72. Blomberg, 'Midrash, Chiasmus', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 3, pp. 217–261. Cf. Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, pp. 525–531. For a somewhat different structure, but coming to similar source-critical conclusions, see McComiskey, *Lukan Theology*.

2. NEWER METHODS IN GOSPEL STUDY

The last hundred years of biblical scholarship have produced a bewildering array of new theories about the composition and interpretation of the Gospels. Not surprisingly, most have met with a fair amount of suspicion at first, because cherished traditions die hard. From a theological perspective, many people understandably ask if God would have left his people in the dark all these centuries and revealed the truth only to a group of twentieth- or twenty-first century scholars. If pushed too far, this type of reasoning leads to results that few Christians would want to accept. If truth is determined by what was believed for the longest period of time in church history, then Christians should revert to medieval Roman Catholic theology. This is a move that almost no branch of Christianity today would be prepared to take, including mainstream Roman Catholicism after its famous modernizations in the 1960s stemming from the second Vatican Council. Of course what most Christians down through history have argued, whenever they have rejected the prevailing opinion on some matter of controversy, is that they are returning to a position held in *earlier* times that had been forgotten or distorted. The Protestant Reformation's emphasis on justification by grace through faith and on Scripture as the sole authority for establishing theology and ethics provides a classic illustration of a movement that believed it was returning to New Testament and first-century Christian tradition, while at the same time differing radically from the rest of Christendom in its day.¹

Most of the modern critical tools have been developed by Protestant scholars who see themselves as continuing in the spirit of the Reformation. Believing that many of the popular, traditional views about the Bible's formation still stem from inaccurate church tradition, they seek with more scientific and historical rigour to lay bare the true nature of the origins of Christian faith and its sacred Scriptures. How successful they have been, at least in the application of their methods to the study of the Gospels, is the major focus of attention in this chapter. But at the outset it must be emphasized that this particular motive prompting modern criticism is a praiseworthy one. Of course other factors enter in. Movements that question traditional opinion on any facet of life are regularly seized and utilized by people whose objectives are more extreme than those of the movements' founders. Yet even the most conservative students of the New Testament today draw on findings and discoveries about the biblical world that have been unavailable to almost all their predecessors. Anyone who follows a translation more up to date than the Authorized Version, or consults a modern dictionary of New Testament Greek, or adopts the insights of any contemporary commentary, dictionary, or encyclopaedia on a given part of Scripture, or accepts the interpretations of a preacher who does any of the above, is heavily indebted to the textual, linguistic and historical criticism of recent scholarship. And all three of these branches of criticism have discovered information about what the writers of Scripture at various points said and meant that subsequent generations failed to preserve.²

The methods of studying the Gospels surveyed below are similarly valuable, and they should be approached in a positive spirit. At the same time, every tool of criticism can be abused. Conclusions can be drawn that the data do not warrant. What for many people separates these 'newer' methods from other approaches is that they have been most commonly employed to challenge the historical reliability of the Gospels. But such a use of these new tools is unjustified; when handled properly, each of them can actually help to corroborate the reliability of the Gospels in various places.

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1. See, e.g., Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle*; Greenman and Larsen, *Reading Romans*.
 2. For good introductions to these disciplines, see, respectively, Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*; Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*; and Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*.

Form criticism

The classic approach

Rudolf Bultmann was probably the most dominant figure in twentieth-century New Testament scholarship. Following closely on the heels of his German colleagues K. L. Schmidt and Martin Dibelius, Bultmann helped to pioneer for Gospel study in the 1920s a method already used in German Old Testament criticism: *Formgeschichte*; literally, ‘form history’.³ This method has been widely recognized to involve three major components.⁴

(1) The various passages and stories in the Gospels about what Jesus said and did are categorized according to ‘form’. Some are parables, some miracle stories, and some proverbial sayings of wisdom. Some stories serve only to lead to a climactic saying of Jesus, and have thus been called ‘pronouncement stories’ (e.g. Mark 2:15–17 or 3:31–35).⁵ A few are termed ‘legends’, and are often, though not always, regarded as unhistorical accounts of Jesus or the disciples, designed to illustrate some virtue or vice (e.g. Luke 2:41–49 or Matt. 27:3–8). Several other categories have also been suggested though not always agreed upon. As in the case of the ‘legend’, some of the forms seem to be classified according to their contents more than their structure.

(2) Each form is assigned to a context in the life of the first-century church in which it would most likely have been used. The presupposition employed here is that the different kinds of passages circulated independently of one another in the early church. Pronouncement stories, for example, could have provided effective illustrations for popular preaching. Miracle stories certainly aided early Christian apologetic against Greek and Roman religions that deified their heroes. Legends are said to reflect the sincere but overenthusiastic attempts of popular storytellers to dramatize and glorify a genuine attribute of one of the Gospel characters.

3. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*; Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*; Schmidt, *Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu*.

4. For a more detailed presentation, see E. V. McKnight, *What Is Form Criticism?* Cf. Bock, ‘Form Criticism’, pp. 106–127.

5. This term comes from the first of the English form critics, V. Taylor, *Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, p. 30. Bultmann had called them ‘apophthegms’; and Dibelius, ‘paradigms’. More recently, the term ‘controversy story’ has become popular for those passages in which the pronouncements arose out of some conflict that Jesus had with the Jewish leaders and in which he adopted a radical stance.

(3) The history of the oral transmission of each form is postulated for the period of time before it was first written down in one of the Gospels or in one of their source documents. Parables, it is said, were relatively well preserved because of their distinctive character and structure, but their beginnings and endings were often altered, especially as they were applied to new contexts. The ‘pronouncement’ in a pronouncement story was likely to have been better preserved than the material preceding it, much like the punchline of a joke that can be led up to in several ways. In fact, form critics developed detailed ‘laws’ describing the transmission of oral tradition based on analogies from apocryphal Christian tradition and from other ancient non-Christian oral traditions. Thus they concluded that the information that the Gospel writers finally collected and wrote down was a fairly unstable mixture of fact and fiction, history and legend, sober narrative and fanciful embellishment.⁶ At the same time, many of the early form critics were reacting against an almost thoroughgoing agnosticism about the ability of historical research to substantiate the information in the Gospels, so that in one sense their movement represented a swing in a slightly more conservative direction.

As the oldest of the ‘new’ methods that this chapter surveys, form criticism has lost much of the appeal it once had even among its greatest devotees. It is appropriate, therefore, to begin a critique with recognition of its positive value. By far the most significant of its three endeavours was the first. To recognize what for a longer work of literature would be called its ‘genre’ is necessary for valid interpretation. Parables, for example, must not be interpreted like straightforward history; although they are very lifelike in many ways, Jesus may have included some details in them simply to make the stories lively and interesting. One of the most misinterpreted of Jesus’ parables is the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), which has been used repeatedly to provide in great detail a realistic depiction of life after death. In fact, the picture of the rich man in Sheol and Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom separated by a chasm but able to call to each other across it is paralleled by popular Jewish and Egyptian folk tales. Jesus may simply have adopted well-known imagery

6. Step 3 has sometimes come to be separated from 1 and 2 and labelled ‘tradition criticism’ or ‘tradition history’; here it is being treated as part of ‘form criticism’ to which it is historically and organically connected. In the study of the New Testament, ‘the Gospel tradition’ usually refers to the body of information about Jesus’ teaching and ministry that was passed along from one person to the next before the four Gospels were written.

but then adapted it in a new and surprising way to warn the godless wealthy about their need for repentance in this life before their fate is sealed (vv. 27–31 are less paralleled in their counterparts).⁷ The objection that Luke does not specifically call this passage a ‘parable’ is most decisively countered by form criticism; approximately half the stories in the Gospels that are commonly called parables are not specifically labelled as such, but they are recognized by the common form and structure they share with passages specifically termed parables. In the case of Luke 16:19–31, the introduction alone offers important cues. The parable begins, ‘There was a rich man who . . .’ This is the exact formula Jesus employed in the two preceding parables of the prodigal son (15:11–32) and the unjust steward (16:1–13) and seems to correspond to the modern ‘Once upon a time . . .’ Just as people today recognize such a phrase as the opening of a fairy tale, so Jesus’ audience would have been prepared by the start of a parable to recognize it as a fictitious narrative.⁸

Not only can form criticism help us to analyse the form properly and therefore correctly interpret the meaning of an individual passage, but it can also illuminate larger sections of the Gospels. The Gospels’ outlines of the life and teachings of Christ are often non-chronological; the order of passages is simply too different from one Gospel to the next to argue otherwise. Form criticism, however, rules out the idea that these stories were arranged in arbitrary sequence, since many times the rationale for juxtaposing passages seems to be their similarity in form. Thus Mark 2:1–3:6 (cf. Matt. 9:1–17; 12:1–14; Luke 5:17–6:11) collects a group of pronouncement or controversy stories and Mark 4:35–6:6a (cf. Matt. 8:23–34; 9:18–26; 13:53–58; Luke 8:22–56; 4:16–30), a group of miracle stories. Matthew and Luke follow Mark’s sequence in certain places and radically depart from it in others, as shown by the parenthetical references above to the parallels. They in turn offer their own collections of forms: a concentration of healing stories in Matthew 8–9 and of parables in Luke 14–16, to cite two of the more noteworthy examples.

The second item on the form critic’s agenda proves more speculative. It is very difficult to recover clear-cut evidence as to how the various gospel stories

7. See Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, pp. 182–186. Jeremias’s work is by far the most masterful example of both the strengths and weaknesses of form criticism as applied to the parables. For a full catalogue of the literary forms embedded within New Testament documents, see Bailey and Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament*. For even more detail, including rhetorical forms, cf. Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments*.

8. For more detail on this and similar examples of the form criticism of the parables, see Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp. 71–99.

were used in the early church prior to their being written down. Although the hypothesis of the use of pronouncement stories in popular preaching seems plausible enough, it is striking that the rest of the New Testament and other early Christian literature supplies no concrete example of that actually happening. The legend may be an inappropriate form to apply to the Gospel traditions because of Christianity's unique concern for earthing God's actions in history. On the other hand, second-century evidence makes it quite likely that the miracle stories were used apologetically as the form critics claimed (see below, p. 119). In this case recognizing how the early church used a particular portion of the Gospel tradition may then suggest ways in which the church today can do likewise.⁹

The biggest problems with form criticism arise when one takes the third and final step; that is, writing the history of the traditions. Several considerations challenge the notion that stories of what Jesus did and said would have been significantly distorted as they were passed along by word of mouth.¹⁰

(1) The short period of time between the actual events described (c. AD 27–30) and the time in which Mark wrote (c. AD 70–75 at the latest, and probably pre-70) distinguishes the formation of the Gospels from most other allegedly parallel processes of oral transmission in antiquity, which generally span several centuries. Eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry, including hostile ones, could easily have refuted and discredited the Christian claims during this period if they were in any way mistaken. Eyewitnesses interested in preserving testimony about the life of Christ and those who interviewed them could likewise readily have produced accurate history. Luke 1:2 claims access to precisely such testimony.¹¹ And these eyewitnesses are hardly limited to the apostles; most of the characters who appear on the pages of the Gospels could have functioned in this fashion.¹²

9. Very useful in this respect is Franklin, *How the Critics Can Help*, pp. 11–23. Cf. M. D. Johnson, *Making Sense of the Bible*.

10. For elaboration, see, e.g., Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher*; idem, *Story and History*; and several of the chapters in Wansbrough, *Jesus and Oral Gospel Tradition*.

11. 'The ancient historians – such as Thucydides, Polybius, Josephus and Tacitus – were convinced that true history could be written only while events were still within living memory, and they valued as their sources the oral reports of direct experience of the events by involved participants in them. . . . Good historians were highly critical of those who relied largely on written sources.' See Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 8–9.

12. Cf. K. A. Kuhn, 'Beginning the Witness', pp. 237–255.

(2) This relatively short span of time was probably even shorter than the forty-year maximum just noted, since Q (see pp. 38–40) probably dates from the 50s. Additionally, as with the disciples of the ancient Jewish rabbis, Jesus' followers may well have privately kept written notes, using a form of shorthand, while passing along the tradition orally in public. There is no reason why Jesus' disciples could not have begun such note-taking even while he was still alive, since Jesus sent them out on their own on at least two missions to preach the gospel. After the ascension this practice would have become even more likely.¹³ The amount of literacy among adult Jewish males in Israel was probably higher than has often been estimated, given the proliferation of elementary education in the synagogue schools (see p. 57), and the early Christian use of the codex (or book form) for the Gospels suggests that the Jesus-movement preserved this priority for learning to read and write.¹⁴

(3) The so-called laws of the transmission of the tradition are anything but 'laws'. E. P. Sanders, in one of the earliest studies to use computer technology to gather data relevant to biblical studies, analysed in detail the Gospel traditions that have been preserved in textual variants, the early church Fathers and New Testament apocrypha, and demonstrated that no consistent trends exist concerning the lengthening or shortening, preservation or distortion of the tradition.¹⁵ If anything, other shorter studies have demonstrated a slight tendency for detailed material to become abbreviated, condensed, more stereotyped and less vivid as the stories of Jesus were continually retold in the Gentile world, all precisely the opposite of what the first form critics alleged! Certainly, this is the trend that is observable if one compares parallel passages in Mark and Luke, and to a lesser extent in Mark and Matthew.¹⁶ These phenomena led a group of Scandinavian scholars to propose a very different approach to the history of the oral tradition behind the Gospels.

13. Cf. Millard, *Reading and Writing*, pp. 175–176, 202–204, 227–229; Latourelle, *Finding Jesus through the Gospels*, pp. 157–168.

14. See esp. Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*; cf. Stanton, 'Early Reception of Matthew's Gospel', pp. 42–61.

15. Sanders, *Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition*.

16. Cf., e.g. Keylock, 'Bultmann's Law of Increasing Distinctness', pp. 193–210; Blomberg ('Orality and the Parables', Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 39–66) demonstrates the decreasing frequency of proper names in the tradition, at least until the fourth century.

Memorizing the tradition?

In 1959, Professor Harald Riesenfeld of Uppsala published a seminal article, 'The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings'.¹⁷ In it he argued that the appropriate analogy for understanding the history of the oral tradition behind the Gospels was not the relatively fluid process of transmitting popular folk tales, as the form critics had assumed, but the much more rigid patterns of memorization and paraphrase dominant in rabbinic circles in the centuries immediately following the birth of Christianity. According to Riesenfeld, Jesus probably had his disciples memorize his most significant teachings and perhaps even certain narratives about what he did. Thus there is every reason to believe that they were reliably preserved. Riesenfeld's student, Birger Gerhardsson, developed these ideas into a full-length technical monograph, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (1961). In addition to documenting how widespread and prodigious the practice of memorization was in ancient rabbinic circles (many rabbis had the entire Old Testament and much of the oral law committed to memory!), Gerhardsson also developed the idea that Jesus' twelve disciples formed an authoritative circle of leadership that carefully safeguarded the traditions and prevented them from the inevitable distortion to which indiscriminate use would have led. Paul especially points to the existence of such a circle when he speaks of 'delivering' and 'receiving' tradition handed down to him (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3), employing language also used by the rabbis to refer to the transmission of their teachings.¹⁸

Reaction to Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson was largely negative, as reaction to wholesale challenges to the status quo often is. But their critics had some legitimate questions. Was not Jesus sufficiently different from other Jewish teachers so as to make any hypothesis based on the assumption that he taught just like any other rabbi rather dubious? Were not the practices of second- and third-century rabbis, almost exclusively the product of the Pharisaic branch of

17. The article was reprinted in the more accessible collection of Riesenfeld's essays, *Gospel Tradition*, pp. 1–29.

18. For a more detailed summary of the positions of the 'Scandinavian school', see Davids, 'Gospels and Jewish Tradition', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1, pp. 75–99. Davids also offers a balanced critique that underlies the comments in the next paragraph. For quite recent reflections and general endorsement of the Twelve as guarantors of the tradition, see Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 93–113. For a catalogue of potential references in Matthew to the use of memory in the transmission of the gospel, see Loubser, 'Memory and Oral Aesthetics in Matthew', pp. 61–86.

Judaism, more uniform after the destruction of the temple and of rival Jewish sects in AD 70 than before? Is not the evidence in the Gospels and Acts of Jesus' disciples' memorizing teaching and passing it on in fixed form so scant as to call into question massive inferences based on a few comments by Paul? Most crucially, does not the sheer diversity of language and detail between Synoptic parallels almost entirely undermine a hypothesis of memorization, which would require the Gospels to be even more similar to each other than they are?

Gerhardsson has remained undaunted in the face of his critics and has explained and refined his position further.¹⁹ But it is a German scholar, Rainer Riesner, in his doctoral dissertation at Tübingen, who advanced the discussion initiated in Uppsala to a promising new level.²⁰ Rather than focusing exclusively on rabbinic practices that Jesus might not have adopted, Riesner comprehensively surveyed the educational methods common to ancient Israel and her neighbours. He concluded that at least six good reasons exist why Jesus' followers would have carefully preserved accurate information about him without necessarily memorizing it word for word.

(1) Jesus followed the practice of Old Testament prophets by proclaiming the Word of the Lord with the kind of authority that would have commanded respect and concern to safeguard that which was perceived as revelation from God. Just as many parts of Old Testament prophecy are considered by even fairly sceptical scholars to have been quite well preserved, so Jesus' words should be considered in the same light.

(2) The fact that Jesus presented himself as Messiah, even if in a sometimes veiled way, would reinforce his followers' concern to preserve his words, since one fairly consistent feature in an otherwise diverse body of first-century expectations was that the Messiah would be a teacher of wisdom.

(3) The Gospels depict Jesus as just such a teacher of wisdom and phrase over 80% of his sayings in forms that would have been easy to remember, using memorable imagery and figures of speech much like those found in

19. Gerhardsson, *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity*; idem, *Origins of the Gospel Tradition*; idem, *Reliability of the Gospel Tradition*; and numerous journal articles. For his current thinking, see esp. idem, 'Secret of the Transmission', pp. 1–18.

20. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*. A promised English translation of this work never appeared, but the gist of many of his views can be found in his 'Jesus as Preacher and Teacher', pp. 17–58. The direction of Riesner's discussion was anticipated in his 'Jüdische Elementarbildung und Evangelienüberlieferung', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1, pp. 209–223.

Hebrew poetry and in carefully preserved Middle-Eastern tradition more generally.²¹

(4) There is widespread evidence in the Gospels of Jesus commanding the Twelve to 'learn' specific lessons and to transmit what they learn to others, even before the end of his earthly ministry. In addition to the obvious missions of Mark 6:7–13 and parallels (in this book abbreviated 'pars.') and Luke 10:1–17, subtler hints appear in Mark 13:28, Luke 11:1, Mark 9:10 and Acts 2:42.²²

(5) Elementary education for boys until at least the age of twelve was widely practised in Israel in Jesus' day, so texts like Acts 4:13 cannot mean that the disciples had no competence in reading, writing and memorization (but more likely that they had not gone on to study for the rabbinate).²³

(6) Almost all teachers in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds gathered disciples around them in order to perpetuate their teachings and lifestyle. Thus, however different he was from the rabbis in other ways, Jesus probably resembled them in this respect. If he envisaged his disciples as in some sense continuing his ministry for any length of time (see pp. 64–66), then he certainly would have been concerned that they preserve his message and mission intact.

Riesner's conclusions were strengthened by two other German theses that discussed the general conservatism of tradition in the early church and the role of Christian 'teachers' in preserving that tradition.²⁴ The only problem that Riesner did not cover in detail is the question of the differences among the Synoptics as they now stand. However much may have been memorized, clearly at some stage of the tradition the early church felt free to paraphrase, rearrange, explain and abbreviate the information it had acquired. On this

21. Stein (*Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching*, pp. 1–32) provides an excellent sampling of these forms. Cf. also Baum, 'Bildhaftigkeit als Gedächtnishilfe', pp. 4–16.

22. It has often been argued that Matthew and Luke have added an emphasis concerning Jesus as teacher that was not important to earlier stages of the tradition. Yet, despite the longer sermons of Matthew and the additional parables in Luke, Mark actually refers to Jesus as a teacher and to his teaching activity proportionately more often than either Matthew or Luke. For this and other reasons France ('Mark and the Teaching of Jesus', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1, pp. 101–136) demonstrates that Mark is also very much interested in portraying Jesus as an authoritative teacher.

23. Cf. also Foster, 'Educating Jesus', pp. 7–33.

24. Müller, *Traditionsprozess im Neuen Testament*, and Zimmermann, *Urchristlichen Lehrer*, respectively.

issue illumination appears from a different source: what has been called a modern revolution in the study of ancient folklore and its oral transmission.

Flexible transmission within fixed limits

Studies by anthropologists such as A. B. Lord on Eastern Europe and Jan Vansina on Africa have enabled scholars to observe twentieth-century examples of oral folklore and sacred history being preserved by specially designated members of very traditional communities uninfluenced by the development of literacy or technology.²⁵ Their discoveries demonstrate the viability of a mediating view between the classic form-critical and memorization hypotheses, although it is a view that turns out to be much closer to the latter than to the former. Lord, for example, studied certain Yugoslavian folk singers who had ‘memorized’ epic stories of up to 100,000 words in length. The plot, the characters, all the main events and the majority of the details stayed the same every time the stories were retold or sung. Members of the community were sufficiently familiar with them to correct the singer if he erred in any significant way. Yet anywhere from 10% to 40% of the precise wording could vary from one performance to the next, quite like the variation found in the Synoptic Gospels. Lord itemizes the types of changes as (1) ‘saying the same thing in fewer or more lines’, (2) ‘expansion of ornamentation, adding details of description’, (3) ‘changes of order in a sequence’, (4) ‘addition of material . . . found in texts of other singers’, (5) ‘omission of material’ and (6) ‘substitution of one theme for another, in a story held together by inner tensions’.²⁶ The similarity between this list and a list of changes describing the differences among the Synoptics is striking indeed.²⁷ When one recalls that ancient Jews regularly sang, or chanted, their traditions, not the least as a help to the memory, one recognizes the presence of a helpful analogy.

25. Lord, *Singer of Tales*; Vansina, *Oral Tradition*. The second edition of Vansina’s book is almost an entirely new work: *Oral Tradition as History*.

26. Lord, *Singer of Tales*, p. 123. Cf. esp. Baum, ‘Oral Poetry und synoptische Frage’, pp. 17–34.

27. For one such list, see Latourelle, *Jesus*, pp. 207–211. For Lord’s own application of his findings to Gospel criticism, see his ‘Gospels as Oral Traditional Literature’, pp. 33–91; and cf. the responses to his paper by Talbert, ‘Oral and Independent’, pp. 93–102; and Keck, ‘Oral Traditional Literature and Gospels’, pp. 1033–122. The biggest weakness of Lord’s application was his attempt to attribute *all* of the differences among the Synoptics to oral tradition, without recognizing the evidence for literary dependence as well.

A second important contribution of studies like those of Lord is an emphasis on the fundamental difference between the process of transmitting oral tradition and that of editing written documents. In the former instance, there is no single identifiable, stereotyped 'original form' of the tradition. Each time the folk singer recreates the story, it is slightly different and no version is significantly closer to or further from the historical events being narrated. Once a community fixes its traditions in writing, all this can change suddenly. Now there is a fixed, authoritative document that serves as the standard by which to judge all further narrations of the events in question. This has led a few scholars to reject the applicability of the oral model to the Gospels as they now exist, in that the Evangelists apparently drew on written sources for at least part of their information.²⁸ But this overlooks the fact that oral traditions often continued and remained highly authoritative even after written accounts of them were produced; many ancient writers comment on the greater trustworthiness of the former over the latter. To cite Lord once again, 'The use of writing in setting down oral texts does not *per se* have any effect on oral tradition.' It is only when a community accepts the idea of a fixed text that the situation changes. 'This means death to oral tradition and the rise of a generation of "singers" who are reproducers rather than re-creators.'²⁹ By the mid-second century, a similar phenomenon was occurring in Christianity, but it is obvious that in the earlier years in which the Evangelists were writing their Gospels they did not see their sources as dictating the only way in which the life of Jesus could be told.

Although he has published only two short works on the topic, Kenneth Bailey, a lifelong educator and researcher in the Middle East, has reinforced this model of oral performance by describing and contrasting three approaches to oral tradition that still exist in various preliterate or semiliterate cultures today: formal, controlled transmission; informal, uncontrolled transmission; and informal, controlled transmission. The first involves nearly exact memorization and occurs primarily when there is an existing written text with contents that must be preserved. The second produces numerous changes that deviate significantly from the original contents and meaning of a tradition, occurring usually with folk tales or stories of no historic or sacred significance. The third most closely matches what Lord and Vansina observed and applies most often to sacred or very important traditions prior to their existence in written

28. See esp. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*. Kelber has since moderated his views somewhat in his 'Jesus and Tradition', pp. 139–167.

29. Lord, *Singer of Tales*, pp. 128, 137.

form.³⁰ James Dunn has recently argued that, while not jettisoning either Marcan priority or some form of the Q-hypothesis, we should change the 'default' mode of our thinking from literary dependence to oral tradition. In other words, until the amount of verbal parallelism becomes large enough to suggest knowledge of written sources or demonstrates theologically or stylistically motivated changes from earlier documents, we should assume that the differences among the Synoptics stem from the natural freedom of oral storytellers to vary minor details in their accounts that do not affect the overall meaning of their stories.³¹

Dunn suggests a large number of Synoptic examples where there is considerable variation among the parallels. To mention just three, compare those portions of the resurrection accounts that run parallel to one another (Mark 16:1–8 pars.), the two versions of Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30), and the various versions of the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1–9 pars.). Dunn's student Terence Mournet analysed these and numerous other examples, suggesting that when there was less than 70% verbatim parallelism between two parallels, the chances were good that at least some of the differences were due to oral tradition.³² For those whose views of biblical inspiration border on the concept of divine dictation, these findings could prove disconcerting. But if inspiration means instead that God superintended the processes of the formation of Scripture so that exactly what he wanted written appeared there (as suggested by 2 Pet. 1:21), then there is no problem. Darrell Bock, for example, explains that 'each Evangelist retells the living and powerful words of Jesus in a fresh way for his readers, while faithfully and accurately presenting the "gist" of what Jesus said'. The same should now be said of those who passed on along the tradition in its oral stage of transmission.³³

With certain kinds of oral tradition, even greater care in preservation was required. Historical accounts were more assiduously conserved than fictional tales. That such distinctions were made and affected the way the oral traditions were treated directly refutes the common, popular claim that the ancients did not draw any clear lines between history and fiction.³⁴ Indeed, with some

30. Bailey, 'Informal Controlled Oral Tradition', pp. 34–54; 'Middle Eastern Oral Tradition', pp. 563–567.

31. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 173–254; 'Altering the Default Setting', pp. 139–175; *New Perspective on Jesus*; 'Q1 as Oral Tradition', pp. 45–69.

32. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency*, p. 202.

33. Bock, 'Words of Jesus in the Gospels', p. 77.

34. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, pp. 25–26; Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 272–273.

rhetorical or literary forms, memorization remained as important as with sacred Scriptures. 'In the case of proverbs and poems, verbatim reproduction is mandatory. A mistake of even a single word by the person reciting will be emphatically corrected by the listeners in general, and if the reciter hesitates he will be assisted by the group, drawing on their "collective memory"'.³⁵

This observation leads naturally to the consideration of another new area of scholarly focus, namely the whole field of 'social memory'. It is one thing to think back several decades and recall key events in one's personal life; it is quite another to reflect on the history of a group, particularly when various members of that group have told portions of its story over and over again throughout the years. Again, different details will vary from one recounting to the next but elements or events valued by the members of the group overall will become more fixed and indelibly impressed in individuals' memories in ways they might not have otherwise.³⁶ Tom Thatcher has recently written a book accounting for many of the distinctive contents of John by means of the forces of social memory, while Samuel Byrskog has made initial overtures in Matthean applications.³⁷ What is more, groups fix the histories of their movements not only, and sometimes not primarily, for the sake of preserving key historical data but also to shape others' perceptions of them. In societies in which more people are illiterate than literate, for example, public imperial documents are posted or inscriptions engraved not so much to communicate information as to remind people who is in power.³⁸ Again we find ourselves enmeshed in a discipline that demonstrates flexible transmission of tradition within fixed limits.

What is important from all of these studies, however flexible the tradition could at times become, is what a far cry we are from the original form-critical model of largely uncontrolled tradition. Thus when Bart Ehrman likens the transmission of the Jesus-tradition to the children's game of 'telephone' in which a whispered message is quickly distorted as it is passed from one child to the next,³⁹ he has chosen an utterly inappropriate and irrelevant analogy to what would actually have gone on among first-century Christians!⁴⁰ Instead,

35. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 255–256.

36. See esp. Kirk and Thatcher, *Memory, Tradition, and Text*. Cf. Horsley, Draper and Foley, *Performing the Gospel*.

37. Thatcher, *Why John Wrote a Gospel*; Byrskog, 'New Quest', pp. 319–336.

38. J. A. Draper, 'Less Literate Are Safer', pp. 340–357.

39. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, pp. 51–52.

40. Or as Murphy (*Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 22) phrases it, 'this analogy limps badly'.

the studies surveyed in this section have been suggesting as a working hypothesis that there is every reason to believe that many of the sayings and actions of Jesus would have been very carefully safeguarded in the first decades of the church's history, not so slavishly as to hamper freedom to paraphrase, explain, abbreviate and rearrange, but faithfully enough to produce reliable accounts of those facets of Christ's ministry selected for preservation.⁴¹

Two issues not inherently bound up with form criticism have nevertheless regularly prevented scholars who have studied the oral history behind the Gospels from adopting as conservative a conclusion as this. To these we now turn.

Christian prophecy

The first issue involves the claim that, when early Christians exercised the gift of prophecy, they regularly spoke what they believed were messages revealed by the risen and ascended Lord, which were not always distinguished from the words of the earthly Jesus. Many of the sayings in the Gospels attributed to Jesus would therefore be creations of the early church attempting to apply the Word of God to pressing concerns in local fellowships. Sometimes these prophets would have been entirely faithful to the spirit of Jesus, but, allowing for human error, sometimes they probably were not.

Despite acceptance of this theory by many scholars, there is scant evidence to support it.⁴² The closest parallels come from the practices of certain Graeco-Roman prophets speaking in the name of mythological gods, especially at oracles or temples of healing. The only New Testament example that records words of the ascended Lord spoken directly to his people appears in the book of Revelation in the letters to the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2:1–3:22). Yet even here it is clear that John is not claiming that these sayings of Jesus came from his earthly life. The examples of Christian prophecy in Acts are clearer still. Here Luke gives the name of the prophet speaking

41. For appropriate nuancing of the study of social memory, and especially for its more conservative nature when eyewitness testimony is involved, see Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 310–357. Similar challenges to classic form criticism arise from a study of the oldest targums, the Aramaic paraphrases of biblical books, used in the ancient Jewish synagogues, which interspersed occasional commentary into the text itself. See esp. Chilton, 'Targumic Transmission and Dominical Tradition', in FRANCE and WENHAM, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1, pp. 21–45; 'Comparative Study of Synoptic Development', pp. 553–562.

42. See esp. Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, pp. 160–185.

(Agabus: Acts 11:28; 21:10–11), so that no-one could confuse his words with those of his Lord. And even if such confusion did occur elsewhere, it seems unlikely that the church would ever have accepted any purported message from Jesus noticeably unlike the things he taught during his earthly life. Paul clearly stressed that all alleged prophecy had to be evaluated (1 Cor. 14:29), and the fundamental biblical criterion for evaluating prophecy was that it must conform to the previously revealed word of God.⁴³ Further, if the Gospel writers felt so free to include prophetic messages as words of the earthly Jesus, it is astonishing that there are no ‘sayings’ of Jesus addressing some of the most divisive controversies in the early church; for example, the role of circumcision or speaking in tongues.

M. E. Boring avoids some of the objections to previous hypotheses of creative prophecy by limiting his analysis to first-century Christian texts, by emphasizing that the prophets probably would have reworked authentic sayings of Jesus or else invented material largely consistent with those sayings, and by showing how expressions like ‘the word of the Lord’ or ‘the Lord said’ in the New Testament are often ambiguous: they can introduce Old Testament quotations, sayings of Jesus or inspired utterances of later Christian speakers and writers.⁴⁴ What Boring fails to demonstrate, however, is that the phrase ‘Jesus said’ was similarly ambiguous or that it was ever attached to a Christian prophet’s creation in a way that made it indistinguishable from Jesus’ earthly teachings. Boring goes to great lengths to establish detailed criteria by which these prophets’ teachings may be identified in the Gospels, but one of these criteria requires the teaching to be suspect already on other grounds. One cannot thus postulate the widespread influence of Christian prophecy as a reason for believing much of the Jesus-tradition to be inauthentic. One can appeal to this theory only to help explain why the tradition was accepted as authoritative, given other reasons for rejecting its historical reliability. David Aune, in the most detailed analysis so far produced, explains further and concludes that

scholars, it appears, have seized the hypothesis of the creative role of Christian prophets because it both accounts for the additions to the sayings tradition and absolves the early Christians from any culpability in the forging of inauthentic words

43. See esp. Dunn, ‘Prophetic “I”-Sayings’, pp. 175–198; Penney, ‘Testing of New Testament Prophecy’, pp. 35–84.

44. Boring, *Sayings of the Risen Jesus*. For an expansion of his treatment, see idem, *Continuing Voice of Jesus*.

of Jesus. In spite of the theological attractiveness of the theory, however, the historical evidence in support of the theory lies largely in the creative imagination of scholars.⁴⁵

Indeed, Ben Witherington shows that a majority of Jesus' teaching would have been viewed as more akin to wisdom literature – the instruction of a sage – than like formal prophecy at all.⁴⁶

The delay of Christ's return

The second issue that many sceptics raise in questioning the reliability of the oral tradition that preceded the writing of the Gospels deals with the length of time that Jesus and his followers thought would elapse before the end of the world. Several of Jesus' very solemn pronouncements sound as though he believed that he would return within the lifetime of at least some of his disciples: 'Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power' (Mark 9:1); 'Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened' (Mark 13:30); 'Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes' (Matt. 10:23). As time went by and Jesus did not come back, so this view affirms, Christians' hope for his imminent return began to recede and they recognized the need to preserve the story of Jesus for future generations. But not having anticipated this need, they had not preserved entirely reliable traditions on which to draw.

The hypothesis about the 'delay' of Christ's return influences the interpretation of the New Testament in a number of significant ways. But at least three key observations weigh against it.

(1) None of the verses cited above should be taken to mean that Jesus mistakenly believed that he would return to earth in the first century. In fact, each has several alternative interpretations that are more likely. Perhaps the best are that in Mark 9:1 Jesus was referring to his subsequent transfiguration as an important foreshadowing of his final coming 'with power',⁴⁷ that in Mark

45. *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, p. 245. For further reply to Boring's two books, see Gillespie, *First Theologians*, pp. 1–25; and Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, pp. 293–328. See also Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*.

46. *Jesus the Sage*, pp. 147–208, and esp. 177.

47. See, e.g., Cranfield, *Gospel according to St Mark*, pp. 285–288. Others argue that an emphatic proclamation that some would not die before an event only a week away

13:30 the 'all things' do not include his return but only the signs leading up to his return,⁴⁸ and that in Matthew 10:23 he is predicting the continually incomplete mission of preaching the gospel to all the Jews.⁴⁹

(2) A large percentage of Jesus' teaching, including that which even more radical scholarship accepts as authentic, presupposes the continuing existence of Jesus' followers as an organized community teaching others about him. For example, Jesus takes ethical stands on such issues as marriage and divorce, payment of taxes and submission to the government, and, perhaps most important of all, the application of the Old Testament commandments to everyday life, as epitomized in the Sermon on the Mount.

(3) Even if the disciples had interpreted Jesus' teaching to mean that he would return in their generation, they would not have been the first Jews to have believed that the end of the age would come quite soon. Ever since the days of the writing prophets of the Old Testament, Israel had been hearing the message that the Day of the Lord was at hand (e.g. Joel 2:1; Obad. 15; Hab. 2:3). Yet this seldom deflected her from her course of carrying on with the ritual of the Law and living as though she had centuries ahead of her. The Essenes at Qumran at times seem to have been convinced they were living in the very generation that would see the fulfilment of all the Messianic promises but it did not prevent their very prodigious output of literature, including those documents that describe their founder, the anonymous Teacher of Righteousness.⁵⁰ Should one expect any less from Jesus' followers? The behaviour of those Thessalonians who stopped working because they believed that Christ's return was imminent (2 Thess. 3:6–15) seems to have been an exception; at least Paul certainly discouraged it. 2 Peter 3:8–9

makes no sense. Against this, see idem, 'Thoughts on New Testament Eschatology', p. 503: 'I would assume that the point of the solemn language about not tasting death is that the persons referred to would have the privilege of seeing in the course of their natural life what others would only see at the final judgment.' Taking similar tacks are C. A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*; and France, *Gospel of Mark* pp. 344–346.

48. Cranfield, *Gospel according to St Mark*, pp. 407–409; Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days*, pp. 443–449; Gundry, *Mark*, p. 746.

49. Bruce, *Hard Sayings of Jesus*, p. 109. Cf. McDermott, 'Mt. 10:23 in Context', pp. 230–240; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 1, pp. 187–192.

50. Cf. VanderKam, *Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, p. 113. The book overall is also an excellent introduction to Dead Sea Scrolls research more generally.

shows how Christians need not have changed their theology or invented alleged teaching of Jesus to mask his original claims when the delay in his return became apparent; rather, they simply underlined the vast chasm between God's and humanity's perspectives on time: 'With the Lord a day is like a thousand years . . . The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness'. Moreover, this interpretation of God's delay, based on Psalm 90:4, had already been applied by Jews in pre-Christian times to *their* questions concerning God's 'tardiness'.⁵¹ The idea that the early church must have drastically altered her approach to the Jesus-tradition when it dawned on her that his return might not be so immediate seems very poorly founded.

Michael Bird has recently collected a convenient catalogue of reasons why the early church would have wanted to preserve accurate information about Jesus completely apart from the question of the timing or interpretation of the parousia. These include practical guidance for Christian living, help for defining the Jesus-movement over against other forms of Judaism in the polemical environment of those early years, biographical interest in the movement's founder, authentication of its beliefs and practices in the context of all the various religious and philosophical alternatives of the day, the desire to imitate Jesus' example, and sheer curiosity and interest in the figure of Jesus.⁵²

To sum up, form criticism has rightly focused attention on the period in which information about Jesus' life circulated primarily by word of mouth. No matter how trustworthy and competent the Gospel writers may have been, if the tradition on which they relied was faulty, then the Gospels that they composed would be defective. But, far from undermining one's confidence in the church's ability and desire to preserve such information intact, the understanding of the oral stage of the Gospel tradition presented here in fact serves to corroborate the claim made explicit by Luke that his Gospel enables enquirers into Christianity to know the certainty of the things about which they have been taught (Luke 1:4).

51. Bauckham, 'Delay of the Parousia', pp. 3–36. The most thorough study of the tension between the imminence and delay of Christ's return in the New Testament is A. L. Moore (*Parousia in the New Testament*), who concludes that the end for Jesus 'was *in some sense* near' but that 'evidence is lacking that he held to a delimited hope' (p. 190). Cf. esp. Holman, *Till Jesus Comes*.

52. Bird, 'Purpose and Preservation', pp. 161–185.

Redaction criticism

The method

Although much of the variation between Gospel parallels undoubtedly stems from the period of oral tradition, not all of it does. The four Evangelists by their own admission have different perspectives on the life of Christ that they wish to emphasize (see esp. John 20:31). The early church's decision to include four Gospels rather than just one, or rather than a harmony like Tatian's, reflects the recognition that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each had distinctive emphases that should not be abandoned or blurred. Form criticism too easily tended to view the Gospel writers as mere compilers of tradition, splicing together various snippets of information into a somewhat disjointed whole. It was only natural, then, that the pendulum should eventually swing away from this extreme and move in the direction that has come to be known as 'redaction criticism' (in German, *Redaktionsgeschichte*). This discipline recognizes the Evangelists as fully fledged redactors; that is, editors, in selecting, arranging and rewording their sources to highlight particular theological and stylistic emphases. In the words of Richard and Kendall Soulen, redactional study 'seeks to lay bare the theological perspectives of a biblical writer by analysing the editorial (redactional) and compositional techniques and interpretations employed by him in shaping and framing the written and/or oral traditions at hand (see Luke 1:1–4)'.⁵³

The three scholars who are regularly credited with the development of modern redaction criticism are Günther Bornkamm, Willi Marxsen and Hans Conzelmann, with their impressive studies of the theologies of Matthew, Mark and Luke, respectively.⁵⁴ To cite just one conclusion from each, Bornkamm argued that Matthew consistently portrayed Jesus' disciples in a more positive light than did his sources in order that he might encourage the fledgling faith of the young Christians to whom he was writing. Marxsen maintained that Mark focused more on Jesus' ministry in Galilee and on teaching about his second coming because he was writing to a church in that region who believed in Christ's imminent return. Conzelmann claimed that Luke was the first to envision an ongoing church age and so inserted features into his Gospel that pointed to a delay in Christ's return.

53. Soulen and Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, p. 158. A few writers want to separate these two tasks and speak of 'redaction criticism' and 'composition criticism', but the majority keep them together.

54. Bornkamm, Barth and Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*; Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist*; Conzelmann, *Theology of St Luke*.

Critique

In many ways, redaction criticism has proved a healthy corrective to form criticism, not least because it focuses on the Gospel texts as they now stand rather than on their uncertain prehistory. One can defend only the *probability* of Christians accurately preserving the details of Jesus' teaching as they passed it on by word of mouth, because there is no ancient testimony that specifically describes how they did this. But one can look at the four Gospels and see how they vary. In other words, granted that the early church *could* have handed down reliable information about Jesus, do the differences even just among the Synoptics permit one to maintain that it *did* do so? As chapter 1 demonstrated, the varying theological perspectives of the Evangelists have been recognized since antiquity. Redaction criticism in this sense is scarcely a new method; just its name is. But only with the recent, widespread acceptance of the two-document hypothesis as the solution to the Synoptic problem could the method be refined and the question specifically be phrased: how drastically have Luke and Matthew altered the passages that they acquired from Mark and Q?⁵⁵

All redaction critics, therefore, have at least this much in common: by analysing the various ways in which the Gospel writers have edited their sources, they seek to identify the distinctive theology of each, which is so easily lost sight of in a harmonistic study of the life of Christ. No-one who respects the fact that Scripture contains four distinct Gospels should object to this endeavour. Those who argue that redaction criticism is inherently destructive because it focuses on the apparent contradictions between Gospel parallels cannot make those discrepancies disappear merely by ignoring them!⁵⁶ Nor do a majority of them yield to straightforward 'additive' harmonization: creating one large whole by simply combining every detail about an event from every Gospel.⁵⁷ But many redaction critics bring unwarranted presuppositions with them to their work, which have tended to give the

55. Two excellent introductions to redaction criticism, which also stress this point, are Osborne, 'Redaction Criticism', pp. 128–149; and Piñero and Peláez, *Study of the New Testament*, pp. 399–425.

56. North American evangelicals, e.g., heatedly disputed this question; the debate was well chronicled in D. L. Turner, 'Current Inerrancy Crisis', pp. 263–288; and 'Evangelicals, Redaction Criticism and Inerrancy', pp. 37–45.

57. This is the point that is lost on the few remaining conservative holdouts who still object even to a cautious appropriation of redaction criticism. See esp. Thomas, 'Redaction Criticism', pp. 233–267.

method a bad name in certain quarters. Eight of the most serious of these follow.⁵⁸

(1) Some have assumed that an author's perspective emerges only from a study of how he has edited his sources. But most authors regularly cite information from various authorities precisely because they agree with it and do not need to modify it in any way. The theological emphases of the different Gospel writers must therefore be determined on the basis of what is stressed where they leave their sources unchanged as well as where they make alterations. Bornkamm, for example, fails to take adequate notice of all the instances where Matthew echoes Mark's criticism of the disciples' lack of faith.⁵⁹ The need to consider a whole Gospel as a unity becomes that much more urgent in the cases of Mark and John, where any written sources on which they may have relied no longer exist and can be reconstructed only with great speculation and margin for error. This point is increasingly being recognized by redaction critics of all stripes and is not as much of a problem as it once was.

(2) Some treat virtually every pair of passages with any similarity as variants of one original saying or event in Jesus' life. Yet most good teachers or preachers regularly repeat themselves, so it is highly unlikely that Jesus did not do the same. The contexts of alleged parallels must be carefully examined to make sure that they are referring to the same event, especially if the details make it seem as if two or more Evangelists have contradicted each other. Jesus almost certainly used many of his short, proverbial sayings in several different contexts, and probably some of the parables that seem similar and yet very different can be explained in this way as well (see below, p. 191). On the other hand, one cannot resolve all the apparent discrepancies among the Gospels this way. Jesus, for example, celebrated only one Last Supper with his disciples, so it will not work to explain the differences between the Synoptic accounts of that meal as coming from different occasions in his ministry!

(3) Drawing conclusions about the nature of the communities that the Gospel writers were addressing is a much more subjective process than many critics admit. It is one thing to note characteristic differences between two

58. For a more comprehensive list of problems, with elaboration, see Carson, 'Redaction Criticism', pp. 123–128. For some appropriate cautions against extending the list quite this long, see S. Smith, 'Changing Face of Redaction Criticism', pp. 130–145.

59. For this and additional critique, see Feiler, 'Stilling of the Storm in Matthew', pp. 399–406.

Gospels; it is another entirely to infer from these the precise situations in the early church that led to these emphases.⁶⁰ And not every passage in the Gospels was included simply because it addressed an immediately relevant need in the church; some stem from historical or biographical interest in the person of Jesus as well. The preservation, for example, of distinctive and/or characteristic ways of speaking about Jesus during his earthly life that did not loom prominently in the later church forms a classic example of this phenomenon.⁶¹ So, too, although Bornkamm's hypothesis of a group of young Christians needing encouragement is a plausible explanation for Matthew's apparent playing down of the disciples' failures, it is just as plausible that Matthew merely felt Mark's account too susceptible to misunderstanding or one-sided in its presentation and chose to paint a more balanced picture.

(4) Many redaction-critical studies build on the unjustified assumptions of more radical form criticism. Redaction criticism by itself is inherently a more constructive enterprise than form criticism. It gives one greater confidence in the Gospel writers to realize that the differences among them were deliberately introduced for rational, identifiable reasons – to stress one facet of Jesus' character and ministry instead of another – rather than being simply the unfortunate end product of an oral tradition that inevitably made mistakes in transmission. But that greater confidence evaporates if the redaction critic accepts the theory of an unreliable tradition and then assumes that the four Evangelists introduced further changes. Like the example of the man who found himself possessed by eight demons instead of one, the last state becomes worse than the first (Luke 11:24–26).

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60. Swinging the pendulum to the opposite extreme is Bauckham, *Gospels for All Christians*. To varying degrees, the contributors to this anthology so stress the likelihood of the Evangelists imagining their writings being quickly disseminated throughout the Christian church that they unduly minimize the equal likelihood of their having been written with one specific (or specific kind) of audience predominantly in mind. Just as one can accept the likelihood of the Q-hypothesis without committing to all of the speculative superstructures built on top of it (see above, pp. 44–45), one can accept the external and internal evidence that points to specific communities in view with each of the four Gospels without affirming more knowledge about their make-up or the Gospel writers' intentions than is warranted. Cf. Sim, 'Gospels for All Christians?', pp. 3–27; Mitchell, 'Patristic Counter-Evidence', pp. 36–79; and Bird, 'Bauckham's *The Gospel*', pp. 5–13.
61. Defending this point at length, in view of widespread insistence to the contrary, is Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Cf. esp. Lemcio, *Past of Jesus in the Gospels*.

(5) Some less sceptical scholars have attempted to alleviate this problem by arguing that the question of how a given story about Jesus was passed along by the tradition and then edited by the Evangelists is irrelevant to the question of its normativity for Christians today. Put another way, an alleged saying of Jesus need not be authentic for it to be authoritative. Since Christians traditionally have believed that God's Spirit inspired only the Gospel writers and not all those who may have preceded them in handing down Jesus' teaching, all that counts is the final form of the Gospels.⁶² Nevertheless, though well intentioned, this approach makes Christian belief unfalsifiable and therefore unjustifiable (cf. pp. 36–37). Had the first Christians adopted it, they would have had no rationale for excluding the apocryphal gospels from the canon: the very notion of a canon implies belief in the ability to separate truth from error. Christians do believe that the Evangelists are the inspired interpreters of the Jesus-tradition, but if their interpretations should distort or misrepresent what he did and said, then they must be rejected as not inspired after all rather than clung to as authoritative without any proper basis for such respect.

(6) Minor grammatical and syntactical differences between parallels are sometimes invested with deep theological significance. More balanced redaction criticism, however, explains many of these differences in the light of the distinctive styles of each author. Luke, probably a native Greek, writes much more artistically and fluently than Mark, whose prose is more awkward and more Semitic. Matthew's and John's styles fall somewhere in between, leading to inconclusive debates as to whether or not they reflect the type of writing that could be attributed to Jewish apostles of Christ. In any event, all four Gospels often alter their sources simply to clarify potentially ambiguous wording. The study of the ancient practice of *mimēsis* also proves illuminating here. It was often considered a compliment to the author of an earlier source to adopt his material, without anything like modern methods of documentation, but then a sign of one's own artistry and ability to vary the wording and style as appropriate for a new context without necessarily having profound theological motives behind the changes.⁶³

62. Proponents of this view often appear among the specialists of the discipline known as canon criticism, especially as practised by Childs. For NT documents, see his *New Testament Canon*. More generally, cf. L. T. Johnson, *Real Jesus*. For an evangelical endorsement of this approach to authority, see Stein, "'Criteria' for Authenticity", p. 229.

63. Knoppers, 'Synoptic Problem?' Capes (*Imitatio Christi?*) argues that the move from oral to written Gospel narratives reflect, in large part, the desire to provide Jesus'

(7) Closely related to this is the problem of distinctive vocabulary. Some redaction critics believe that a careful analysis of how often a given word or expression occurs in each of the Gospels can enable one to separate an Evangelist's diction from that of the tradition he inherited. On this basis they confidently assign virtually every word in every verse to either redaction or tradition. To be sure, a limited amount of this dissection seems possible. Luke, for example, concludes his quotation of Mark 2:17b, 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners', by adding the words 'to repentance' (Luke 5:32). Since the Greek words for 'repent' and 'repentance' occur fourteen times in Luke's Gospel and only three times in Mark, it is reasonable to assume that this is an important topic for Luke and that he has added the reference in 5:32 to explain more precisely what kind of call Jesus was extending to 'sinners'. This type of explanatory paraphrase accounts for a large portion of the minor differences between Gospel parallels, and to recognize particular words and themes as favourites of a given author can suggest that certain paraphrases were carefully planned. But many examples are not so clear cut. How often must a word or topic occur in a given Gospel and how rare must it be in that Gospel's sources for one to assign it with confidence to the Evangelist's redaction? Most studies of this nature drastically exaggerate the amount of material that can be so identified.⁶⁴

(8) Finally, and most significantly, redaction critics have regularly assumed that the material the Evangelists added or the changes they made to their sources cannot rest on historical tradition. The various redactional emphases of each Evangelist are then usually exaggerated by these scholars, so that distinctives turn into contradictions, while plausible harmonizations are seldom considered. This abuse of redaction criticism ignores several facts.

- (i) Despite frequent claims to the contrary, as we have already noted, the evidence remains strong that the Gospels were written by the authors to whom they are traditionally ascribed: apostles or close associates of

Footnote no. 63 (*cont.*)

followers with *mimēsis* by which they could imitate Jesus' life and obey his teachings.

64. For a classic example, see Lüdemann, *Jesus After 2000 Years*. More conservative scholars are not exempt from this overconfidence, however; a key work that succumbs is Gundry, *Matthew*. For a statistically sound approach to more cautious judgments, see Gaston, *Horae Synopticae Electronicae*.

apostles.⁶⁵ These men could therefore supplement the sources on which they drew with information from their own experiences and memories. Material occurring in only one Gospel is therefore not automatically without historical basis.

- (ii) A free paraphrase of a saying of Jesus can often reproduce its original meaning as faithfully as a literal translation.⁶⁶
- (iii) John claims that Jesus promised that the Spirit would teach his disciples ‘all things’, help them to remember what he had said to them (John 14:26) and ‘guide’ them ‘into all truth’ (John 16:13). This suggests that the Gospel writers believed they could acquire accurate historical information even apart from human sources.
- (iv) Above all, theology and history are not opposites. A historian can hold strong views about the significance of certain events and still write reliable history. In fact, partisan proponents of a given point of view are sometimes even more accurate than detached observers; consider, for example, the first impassioned accounts from Jewish sources of the Nazi holocaust that turned out to be more accurate than the reports of ‘objective’ news media.⁶⁷ Indeed, sometimes the very nature of an ideological agenda requires *more* historical accuracy rather than less. Jews, understandably committed to preventing atrocities against their people, have *more* reason to chronicle carefully past attempts at genocide. Christians, believing God to have acted uniquely in the person and ministry of Jesus for the salvation of the world, had to depict at least the main contours of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection

65. The defence of the traditional claims for authorship in D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp. 43–53, 81–84, 113–125, 252–283, remains persuasive. Cf. Carson and Moo, *Introduction to the New Testament*, ad loc.

66. The philosophy behind the production of modern Bible paraphrases and, to a more limited extent, a translation like the Good News Bible (Today’s English Version) or The New Living Translation, takes it as axiomatic that a freer rendering of the text is designed to *preserve* the original meaning, since it is more clearly understood. The form is changed but the content remains the same.

67. Thirty-seven years after I. Howard Marshall’s *Luke: Historian and Theologian* demonstrated this point persuasively, an astonishing number of scholars still perpetuate the dichotomy. S. Smith (‘Changing Face of Redaction Criticism’, p. 142) puts it correctly: ‘Redaction criticism, in fact, tells us nothing of whether or not the author thought he was writing history: it discloses only how he sought to use and modify the traditions available to him for particular theological effect.’

accurately in order to prove persuasive. And the more unique the events witnessed, the more crucial reliable testimony becomes.⁶⁸

In spite of these eight excesses, redaction criticism remains a valuable tool. Its abuse can be avoided and, when stripped of the excess baggage it tends to attract, it offers insights into the emphases of the Evangelists that make the differences among the Gospels understandable. Chapter 4 will note several specific applications of redaction criticism that actually help to clear up some of the more notorious discrepancies between parallels. Here a few general principles for discovering the key distinctives of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John may prove helpful. (1) Focus especially on transitional sentences or paragraphs that connect one section to the next. (2) Look for statements that summarize previous material, pointing out crucial concepts that are being stressed. (3) Note editorial asides and explanatory comments. (4) Examine changes to source material where they can be identified – what has been added or omitted, highlighted or played down. (5) Keep track of themes, language and vocabulary repeated frequently or that appear in climactic positions in the narrative. (6) Above all, search for clues as to why the stories have been arranged in the order they have, looking not just for chronological connections but also for topical groupings and collections of similar forms.⁶⁹

The results of such study pay rich dividends. Not only do the long-observed differences in perspective on Jesus become clearer (Matthew's Son of David, Mark's suffering servant, Luke's compassionate teacher and John's Word incarnate), but subtler differences emerge too. Luke is the Gospel most concerned with the salvation of the outcasts of society, John with portraying Christ's death as exaltation, and Mark with delicately balancing Christ's human and divine natures.⁷⁰ Eric Franklin offers a stirring account of the spiritual benefit

68. Cf. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 277–278, 493–508.

69. For these and similar criteria, see Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 243–272; Osborne, 'Redaction Criticism', pp. 135–139.

70. These statements reflect just a few of the issues discussed in the New Testament Profiles series, which include four of the best redaction-critical studies of individual Gospels available, all carried out under the restrictions I have noted above: France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*; R. P. Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian*; Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*; and Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter*. Good overviews of the state of the art with all four Gospels appear in Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, pp. 38–138; and Marsh and Moyise, *Jesus and the Gospels*, pp. 9–60.

of such an exercise: 'We approach the evangelists as preachers; we sit at their feet to hear their proclamation. And we approach them as pastors as we listen into, as we overhear their concerns for their contemporaries.' Again, 'the first questions we should be asking are, What is the Evangelist seeking to proclaim to his contemporaries through his use of this episode in the life of Jesus? How is he seeking to strengthen faith by way of it? What insights into belief in the Lord Jesus does it give?'⁷¹ Although Franklin fails to implement his approach to redaction criticism consistently, his objectives merit praise. Such goals can only help and not harm those who seek to interpret the Gospels as they were originally meant to be understood. But as a tool for calling into question the historical reliability of the Gospels, redaction criticism fails badly. For when one considers the number of different ways the story of Jesus might have been told, the striking feature that a careful comparison of the Synoptic Gospels discloses is how similar the three actually are. There are apparent inconsistencies, but the similarities far outweigh the differences. And of the differences that do appear, many simply reflect varying theological interpretations of the same historical events without calling into question the fundamental historicity of the events themselves.

The Gospels as midrash

If form criticism deals primarily with the Gospel traditions before they were written down, while redaction criticism analyses the Evangelists' own contributions to the tradition, midrash criticism cuts across both disciplines. Midrash criticism considers the relationship of the Gospels to various Old Testament passages to which they may refer. This discipline never established itself to the same degree as the others surveyed in this chapter, after a flurry of study in the 1970s and 1980s, and today it is often subsumed under the larger analysis of the use of the Old Testament in the New. Since the early 1990s, an even broader area of study known as 'intertextuality' has become even more popular. In it, the real or potential relationship between *any* two literary texts is explored. Important interpretative questions have been raised with which students of biblical hermeneutics must wrestle,⁷² but for a consideration of the historical reliability of the Gospels, we may limit our focus to the variety

71. *How the Critics Can Help*, p. 33.

72. For a succinct but helpful introduction, see Moyise, 'Intertextuality', pp. 14–41. Cf. Hatina, 'Intertextuality and Historical Criticism', pp. 28–43.

of questions that have been raised, at one time or another, under the heading of midrash criticism.⁷³

Uses of the term

Broadly speaking, the Hebrew word ‘midrash’ means ‘interpretation’. Most of its uses fall under one of two headings: either the nature or genre of an entire piece of writing or the exegetical or interpretative methods used within a given work.⁷⁴ As a genre, the term ‘midrash’ is used to refer to types of exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures. Examples under this heading in turn subdivide into three major categories: (1) the targums; (2) more elaborate ‘rewritten Scriptures’, like the late first-century Jewish historian Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities* or the *Biblical Antiquities* of approximately the same date mistakenly ascribed to Philo, which expand and embellish portions of Old Testament history with imaginary dialogue and legendary creations much like a historical novel; and (3) the earliest Jewish biblical commentaries, which proceed through a text explaining its meaning, suggesting applications, or discussing related Scriptures or teachings and stories of the rabbis that it calls to mind.

When midrash refers to methods of interpreting Scripture, one or more of the ancient lists of rules handed down by the rabbis is usually in mind. The slightly older contemporary of Jesus, Hillel, is credited with formulating seven

73. For an excellent evangelical overview, see Quarles, *Midrash Criticism*. One exception to this generalization is the work of D. R. MacDonald, esp. in his *Homeric Epics*, who argues that Mark contains numerous deliberate conceptual parallels to the ‘Scriptures’ of the ancient Greek world (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). Thus he finds various correspondences between Jesus and Odysseus, between the disciples and Odysseus’ crew, between the Jewish leaders who oppose Jesus and Penelope’s suitors, etc. He perceives parallels in the central role of the sea in both Mark and Homer, in the death of Christ and Odysseus’ exile, the journey to Hades of each, and Christ’s resurrection and Odysseus’ return. Some of these ‘parallels’ appear coincidental and some are fairly vague, while others prove more intriguing. But they scarcely line up often enough in the same sequence or with sufficient detail to suggest that Mark ‘invented’ history to create the parallelism. At most, he might have stylized or tailored certain texts to highlight correspondences, though even that seems doubtful. Cf. further Sandnes, ‘Imitatio Homeri?’, pp. 715–732.

74. For a brief survey of ‘Varieties and Tendencies of Midrash’, see the article so titled by Chilton in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 3, pp. 9–32. For more comprehensive overviews, see Neusner, *What Is Midrash?*; and Fishbane, *Midrashic Imagination*.

main rules, but by the middle of the second century these had been expanded into thirty-two. Many of the principles follow logic that would be readily accepted today: reasoning from what applies in a less important case to what will apply in a more important case, interpreting Scripture with Scripture (especially where common language or imagery appears), establishing a general principle on the basis of specific examples (or vice versa), or consulting the context of a passage for insight into its meaning. Other items are highly arbitrary: rearranging the letters in a word to make it say something different, drawing conclusions on the basis of the numerical value of the letters in a word (because in Hebrew letters were used for numbers), or allegorizing a passage to make its details stand for something other than what the text is obviously describing. In between are a number of ambiguous rules that could lead to seemingly unjustified interpretations but need not always do so: interpreting an earlier passage of Scripture by a later one, seeing a double meaning in a passage due to a play on words or pun, or viewing a prophecy that seemed to have a previous fulfilment as being fulfilled again in the present due to a striking recurrence of a pattern of religiously significant events.⁷⁵

Applications to the Gospels

The applicability of the term 'midrash' to the Gospels will clearly vary, therefore, depending on which definition is involved.

Midrash as a genre

In no sense are the Gospels as a whole paraphrases, elaborations or interpretations of the Old Testament. They are not concerned to narrate the sacred history of the Jews but to tell the story of contemporary events associated with the life of Jesus. In the process, however, they do refer to Scripture both explicitly and implicitly; so if their overall genre is not midrashic, perhaps certain portions are. Two sections replete with scriptural quotations and allusions are the stories of Jesus' infancy and his passion, especially in Matthew (chs. 1–2 and 21–27), and the teaching of Jesus, most notably his parables, in Luke 9:51 – 18:14. Not surprisingly, much of the material in these sections has

75. For an introduction to 'Jewish Hermeneutics in the First Century', see the chapter so entitled in Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, pp. 6–35. For a full list of the various compilations of rules, see Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash*, pp. 17–34. For a similar threefold division of these rules into (1) close reading of the text, (2) speculative discourse, and (3) a combination of 1 and 2, with extensive examples from the rabbinic literature, see Neusner, *Midrash in Context*.

repeatedly been equated with midrash, and the question has been raised whether the Old Testament passages might not have given birth to the narratives and teachings associated with them. In other words, the Gospel writers would not be recording actual historical events but imaginatively involving Jesus in fictitious narratives and teachings inspired by Old Testament texts and/or subsequent Jewish traditions related to those texts. Perhaps, for instance, Matthew did not know where Jesus was born (Matt. 2:6), but since he knew that Micah had prophesied that the coming shepherd of Israel would come from Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2), he created a story to make Jesus' history match up with prophecy. Similarly, if Jesus and his family never really had to flee into Egypt (Matt. 2:14–15), the idea for inventing such a story could have arisen from Hosea 11:1, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'⁷⁶ Or to take an example from the other end of Jesus' life, perhaps the figure of thirty silver pieces as the price for Judas' betrayal of Christ (Matt. 27:9) was not based on historical fact but was inspired by the reference to the same sum of money paid as a wage in Zechariah 11:12–13. Since each of these examples creates certain historical difficulties when taken as factual, one can understand why an approach that views them as a type of midrash appeals to many.⁷⁷

The fundamental flaw with this position emerges from a paradoxical observation. When ancient Jewish authors invented unhistorical narratives inspired by Old Testament texts, they generally quoted and interpreted Scripture quite literally. Since they were composing fiction they were free to tailor their creations

76. For a detailed discussion of various types of midrash seen by some in the infancy narratives of both Matthew and Luke and in the passion narratives of all four Gospels, see throughout R. E. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*; and idem, *Death of the Messiah*. Brown rejects the notion of midrash as a generic label for these passages in several places, but nevertheless views them as complex mixtures of fact and fiction. Aus (*Matthew 1–2*) prefers to speak of *haggadah* in these two chapters, but finds them equally filled with fiction, based on Jewish traditions about the birth of Moses. Crossan (*Cross That Spoke*) is particularly well known for viewing the passion narratives as 'prophecy historicized'.

77. For more detail on these specific texts and a critique of this view, see, respectively, France, 'Scripture, Tradition, and History', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 3, pp. 239–266; and Moo, 'Tradition and Old Testament', in *ibid.*, pp. 157–175, from which several comments in the next paragraph are also drawn. On the lack of exact historical corroboration of Herod's 'massacre of the innocents', see France, 'Herod and Children of Bethlehem', pp. 98–120. Rebutting Crossan is C. A. Evans, 'Passion of Jesus', pp. 159–165.

to the texts that generated them.⁷⁸ Precisely the opposite is the case for most of the Gospel passages in question. In many cases the Old Testament references are reworded or reapplied in ways that make it much more likely that the Gospel writers were trying to show how the Old Testament fitted the events of Jesus' life and not the other way around. Hosea 11:1, for example, is not a prophecy in its Old Testament context but a reference to the Exodus. And although thirty pieces of silver are mentioned by Zechariah, Matthew attributes the quotation to Jeremiah, presumably because the bulk of Matthew 27:9–10 is a composite of allusions to that earlier prophet (suggestions include Jer. 18:2–3, 32:7–9 and, perhaps most plausibly, 19:1–13). As R. T. France concludes, 'if the history were being created out of the text, there would be no need to adapt the text to fit the history'.⁷⁹ This of course raises the separate question of whether or not the Gospels have cited Scripture fairly, which will be taken up in a moment.

The case of the central chapters of Luke's Gospel is more subtle. Here there are few overt citations of the Old Testament, but several writers have argued that Luke's outline is dictated by Scripture. In a nutshell, they believe that the seemingly haphazard sequence of teachings in chapters 9–18 actually parallels a sequence of references in Deuteronomy.⁸⁰ A few of these parallels prove suggestive. The excuses offered for not attending the feast in the great banquet parable of Luke 14:16–24 resemble the exemptions from serving in Israel's army in Deuteronomy 20:5–8. Was the parable meant to emphasize that reasons for not going to war in Old Testament times were invalid when used to reject God's call to enlist with his 'kingdom troops'? Similarly, Deuteronomy 21:15–21 prescribes legislation for the inheritance due a firstborn son and the capital punishment deserved by a rebellious one, while Luke 15:11–32 virtually inverts these principles with the parable of the prodigal. Most of the alleged parallels, however, are much vaguer and less plausible. But even if this structure did underlie Luke's writing, it would not prove that

78. The shifts from historical event to imaginative interpretation were also self-conscious and transparent. See Milikowsky, 'Midrash as Fiction', pp. 117–127.

79. France, 'Jewish Historiography, Midrash, and Gospels', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 3, p. 109. Cf. Menken, 'Old Testament Quotations', p. 43; Witherington, *Matthew*, p. 41.

80. Thus, originally, C. F. Evans, 'Central Section of St Luke's Gospel', pp. 37–53; but elaborated in J. Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel*; and Goulder, *Evangelists' Calendar*. The lectionary hypothesis has largely been abandoned in current scholarship, but the indebtedness of Luke's central section to numerous prophetic themes from Deuteronomy remains. See esp. Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet*.

he invented the teachings of Jesus to mirror the Old Testament sequence, merely that he arranged them to fit it.⁸¹

Michael Goulder went one step further and hypothesized that the outlines of all three of the Synoptics were inspired by the Old Testament, specifically by the various sequences of passages selected for weekly reading in the Jewish synagogues.⁸² The probability that so many details from Jesus' life just happened to match all manner of Old Testament passages, most of them non-prophetic, is miniscule, so Goulder concluded that many of the Gospel stories were 'midrashically' invented. But this type of 'lectionary' hypothesis, previously proposed for parts of the Gospels and generally rejected, is extremely improbable for a number of reasons.⁸³ The two most important are that the parallels Goulder proposes are usually quite subtle and imprecise and that he consistently has to admit exceptions to the patterns he has postulated, thus undermining whatever credibility shorter sequences of parallels might begin to build up.⁸⁴

In fact, all the studies that equate the genre of parts of the Gospels with midrash and thereby conclude that they are not historical overestimate the amount of creative activity not only of the four Evangelists but also of the Jewish midrashists with whom they are being compared. The earliest targums only rarely insert any large-scale invention not found in Scripture, while the ancient commentaries arouse curiosity with the way they interpret and apply Scripture, not with the way they alter it. The only clear cases of significant embellishment of Old Testament history come from the 'rewritten Scriptures'. Yet even here the rewriting is not as drastic as some scholars allege. F. G. Downing's careful study of *Jewish Antiquities* concludes that Josephus rarely if ever invented his material outright; even the few narratives wholly unparalleled in the Old Testament canon probably stemmed from oral (though not necessarily historical) tradition.⁸⁵ Richard Bauckham's survey of the little-known work

81. For further critique of these and other outlines of Luke's 'travel narrative', and for an alternative approach, see Blomberg, 'Midrash, Chiasmus', in FRANCE and WENHAM, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 3, pp. 217–261.

82. Goulder, *Evangelists' Calendar*; cf. his earlier *Midrash and Lection in Matthew*.

83. See the excellent critique by Morris, 'Gospels and Jewish Lectionaries', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 3, pp. 129–156. More briefly, on Goulder's misuse of the concept of midrash, see P. S. Alexander, 'Midrash and the Gospels', pp. 1–18.

84. Even less plausible are the sweeping proposals of Brodie, in several works, which see one or more Gospels as following texts from the Elijah–Elisha cycle of 1–2 Kings. See esp. his *Crucial Bridge*.

85. Downing, 'Redaction Criticism', pp. 46–65.

of 'pseudo-Philo' makes much the same point: an analysis of *Biblical Antiquities* 'obliges us to recognize that writing "midrash" means using traditions', and 'it reopens the door to the possibility that an Evangelist's traditions, however "midrashic" his procedure in using them may be, could be historical in origin'.⁸⁶

One final hypothesis that sees midrash as the appropriate genre by which to identify at least one Gospel stands apart from all the rest, because its author wants at the same time to defend the complete infallibility of the Scriptures. The author is an American evangelical, Robert Gundry, whose commentary on Matthew elaborates this hypothesis at great length.⁸⁷ Gundry identifies the genre of Matthew as midrash, not as a commentary of any kind on the Old Testament but as a commentary on Mark and Q. In other words, he believes that Matthew has treated these two sources in the same way that midrashic texts, especially the 'rewritten Scriptures', treated the Old Testament. Gundry argues that this genre of writing was well known in the first century, so that Matthew's readers would have understood what he was doing and recognized his Gospel as something much like what today would be called a historical novel. Gundry also believes they would have known Mark and Q, or at least the oral traditions underlying them, so that they could readily pick out anything that Matthew had added or altered. They would have accepted the traditional material as factual history and Matthew's additions and alterations as edifying embellishment, just as the Jews separated pious legend from Old Testament history in their midrashic works. In short, this theory affirms that everything that Matthew intended to present as factual was accurate history; what was not factual was never meant to be taken as such, and so his narrative may still be called infallible.

To Gundry's credit he has devised an ingenious synthesis of positions usually believed to be incompatible with each other. He has rightly stressed that history and fiction are often formally indistinguishable apart from subtle clues that are not always noticed.⁸⁸ And he has correctly insisted that one interpret the Gospels in the light of the attitudes toward narrating history that prevailed

86. Bauckham, 'Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum of Pseudo-Philo', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 3, p. 67.

87. Gundry, *Matthew*. The original edition of his work, published in 1982, was subtitled *A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*. Cf. his defence and clarification of his views in his four short articles in *JETS* 26 (1983), pp. 41–56, 71–86, 95–100, 109–115, and in the preface to his second edition, pp. xi–xxx.

88. On this topic, see, e.g., Roberts (*When Is Something Fiction?*), who rightly stresses that 'if I tell someone something I know is factually untrue but I do not warn him of this, I am lying to him' (p. 21), but who goes on to note that such warnings may be

in first-century Judaism rather than in the twentieth-(and now twenty-first-) century Western world. Nevertheless, his hypothesis remains largely unpersuasive.⁸⁹ Gundry offers no solid evidence to support his claim that Matthew's church would have known the traditions behind Mark and Q sufficiently well and in a sufficiently fixed form to enable them to pick out his unhistorical additions. Indeed, the closer on the heels of Mark that Matthew was writing (and Gundry wants to date both at least as early as the mid-60s), the less time Matthew's church would have had to learn about Mark and to become as familiar with it as with the Old Testament.⁹⁰ More seriously, all the examples of midrashic rewriting of Scripture deal with what was already ancient, canonical history by the time of the first century. There is very little evidence that Jewish authors embellished contemporary history in the same way. For example, in the commentaries on Old Testament prophecy found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, as F. F. Bruce stresses, the 'one thing these commentators did not do was to try to "create" recent history out of the biblical texts. Recent events and the current situation provided them with their data.' If these did not exactly match what Scripture seemed to prophesy, it was the biblical text 'that was adapted, not the data which formed the raw material of the interpretation'.⁹¹

Midrash as a method of interpretation

Many of the methods of citing and explaining Scripture that the Gospel

Footnote no. 88 (*cont.*)

limited to a prefatory remark, a type of title, the context in which the work is set, or certain 'fantastic' details in the narrative. For a survey of additional studies that, among other things, establish criteria for trying to sift historical from fictitious narratives of different kinds, see Osborne, 'Historical Narrative and Truth', pp. 677–688.

89. For article-length reviews, see Carson, 'Gundry on Matthew', pp. 71–91; Payne, 'Midrash and History in the Gospels', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 3, pp. 177–215; Moo, 'Matthew and Midrash', pp. 31–39, with a rejoinder to Gundry's reply in pp. 57–70; and Cunningham and Bock, 'Is Matthew Midrash?', pp. 157–180.
90. Gundry insists (see esp. his 'On Interpreting Matthew's Editorial Comments', pp. 319–328) that his position does not depend on Matthew's community knowing other forms of the Gospel tradition, although he thinks it likely that they did. But to relinquish this supporting argument is to abandon the one aspect of his position that could make it somewhat plausible.
91. Bruce, 'Biblical Exposition at Qumran', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 3, p. 87.

writers shared with the early rabbis are widely accepted today as legitimate. For instance, Jesus regularly appealed to arguments ‘from the lesser to the greater’, and not just when he was quoting Scripture (e.g. Matt. 7:11, ‘If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!’). Again, recognizing a kind of midrash known in rabbinic circles as the proem (a brief homily) behind certain Gospel passages can actually strengthen the case for seeing them as authentic unities rather than composite collections of tradition and redaction. Luke 10:25–37 aptly illustrates one type of proem, called *yelammedenu rabbenu* (let our master teach us), which involves a dialogue including a question and quotation(s) from Scripture (vv. 25–27; cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18), a second Scriptural quotation (v. 28; cf. Lev. 18:5), exposition often by means of a parable linked to the initial texts by catchwords (vv. 29–36 with verbal links via ‘neighbour’ and ‘do’), and a concluding allusion to the second quotation (vv. 37).⁹²

Texts in which the Evangelists (or Jesus) do not seem to be ‘playing fair’ with the Old Testament create greater problems. Several factors besides simple paraphrase may account for seemingly inaccurate quotations of scriptures. The Hebrew manuscripts used for most modern translations of the Old Testament represent remarkably accurate transcripts of what was originally written. Portions of the Hebrew Bible found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, about a thousand years older than previously known manuscripts (c. 100 BC versus c. AD 900), have substantially confirmed the quality of the traditional Hebrew text. Yet at the same time they have revealed variant readings in some instances that support the accuracy of the ancient Greek and Aramaic versions (the Septuagint and the targums) in places where they were formerly thought to have rendered the original Hebrew unfairly.⁹³ It is likely that on a few occasions a New Testament writer’s quotation reflects an accurate translation of just such a variant Hebrew text. In many cases, however, a New Testament

92. E. E. Ellis, ‘How the New Testament Uses’, pp. 205–206; contra most critics who find any or all of vv. 25–29 and 36–37 as secondary additions. Out of many possible additional examples, cf. Kimball, ‘Jesus’ Exposition of Scripture’, pp. 179–202; and D. Gibson, ‘Eating Is Believing?’, pp. 5–15. For an example of how theories of midrash can be used quite differently, to support the composite origin and largely unhistorical nature of Gospel texts, see, e.g., Olson, ‘Matthew 22:1–14 as Midrash’, pp. 435–453.

93. For a clear summary of the various possibilities, with examples, see Silva, ‘New Testament Use’, pp. 147–165.

writer may simply quote a current, popular version of the Old Testament like the Septuagint or a targum when the point he is making does not depend on the distinctive form of that popular version or when that version gives a valid interpretation of the original.⁹⁴ Or he may just be offering a free rendition of the text, as was the custom of the day.⁹⁵

Perhaps the most perplexing of all are those passages that accurately cite Scripture but do not seem to interpret it properly. Matthew's use of Hosea 11:1 ('Out of Egypt I called my son'), which seems to turn a straightforward historical statement about the exodus into a prophecy of Jesus' flight from Herod, has already been noted. Is this simply a midrashic pun on the word 'son', arbitrarily reading a meaning that the word can have elsewhere in the Old Testament (i.e. Messiah) into Hosea's passage where it clearly refers to Israel? Is it the case that Matthew believed 'that the message of Christ is so central to the Old Testament that its words – from any context – can be used to prefigure Jesus and events in His life and mission'?⁹⁶ Similar problems recur throughout the New Testament.⁹⁷

Traditionally, Christians have divided the New Testament passages involving the prophetic interpretation of Old Testament texts into two categories: literal and 'typological' fulfilment. Typology comes from the Greek word for 'type' or 'pattern' and was a recognized means of analysing current events in both Jewish and Graeco-Roman circles prior to the dawn of Christianity. France's definition is representative:

there is a consistency in God's dealings with men. Thus his acts in the Old Testament

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94. Luke seems frequently to have taken this tack in his use of the Septuagint. See Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern*.
95. Cf. C. D. Stanley ('Social Environment', pp. 18–27), who concludes, 'the bulk of the adaptations that can be identified in the New Testament have little effect on the meaning of the original text, and those that do can normally be explained as the result of a sincere attempt to understand the meaning of a particular passage within the context of the author's own culture and/or community' (p. 27).
96. Jackson, 'Foretelling the Coming of Jesus', p. 13.
97. Bock ('Evangelicals', pp. 209–223, 306–319) helpfully discusses a number of these and categorizes evangelical attempts to deal with them. A remarkably comprehensive catalogue of allegedly midrashic uses of the Old Testament in the New appears in Diez-Macho, 'Derás y exégesis del Nuevo Testamento', pp. 37–89. For a full treatment of *all* New Testament uses of the Old, see Carson and Beale, *Commentary on the New Testament*.

will present a pattern which can be seen to be repeated in the New Testament events; these may therefore be interpreted by reference to the pattern displayed in the Old Testament. New Testament typology is thus essentially the tracing of the constant principles of God's working in history, revealing 'a recurring rhythm in past history which is taken up more fully and perfectly in the Gospel events'.⁹⁸

When the Gospel writers use typology, then, they are often not claiming to be interpreting the meaning of the Old Testament passages cited but rather showing how contemporary events are falling into a pattern so reminiscent of what God did in the past that they can explain the present only in terms of God's acting again.⁹⁹

Thus when Matthew says that Hosea 11:1 was fulfilled by the holy family's sojourn in Egypt, he is calling attention to the striking coincidence that just as Israel had to be protected and delivered from Egypt in Moses' day, so now God's Messiah had to be sheltered in that foreign land until he could return safely to his home. In Walter Kaiser's words, 'both Israel and the infant Jesus were the objects of God's love and deliverance in the face of an oppressor'.¹⁰⁰ Such a parallel seems hardly coincidental; it must point to something religiously significant. If someone objects that this approach does not describe a true 'fulfilment' of Scripture, the proper reply is that the Hebrew and Greek words for 'fulfil' had a broader range of meanings than their modern English counterpart. Brevard Childs offers this definition: 'A word is fulfilled when it

98. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, p. 39; quoting, in the last sentence, Lampe, *Essays on Typology*, p. 27. Cf. Moo, *Old Testament in Gospel Passion Narratives*, p. 31. For a thorough survey of the historical and exegetical meanings of this term, see Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*.

99. In these cases, "'fulfillment" seems better understood in paradigmatic terms: as Yahweh had acted in the past, so he would act again'. Thus Watts, 'Immanuel', p. 113.

100. Kaiser, *Uses of the Old Testament in the New*, pp. 51–52. Kaiser, however, rejects the notion of typology not grounded in the Old Testament author's intention, because he does not see how it could have had any apologetic value. But to the Jewish mind of the first century, arguing for the presence of God's saving activity on the basis of recurring patterns in history would have proved very persuasive, and there is no good reason why modern exegetes should not accept such an approach as well. Cf. Howard ('Use of Hosea 11:1', pp. 314–328), who prefers to speak of 'analogical correspondence' to avoid the concept of 'prefiguring' that he believes often attaches itself to typology.

is filled full to form a whole.¹⁰¹ Or as Colin Brown explains, ‘the OT passages are not treated as mere predictions but as anticipations’. A passage will anticipate ‘an event of a similar kind but ultimately more significant in God’s purposes for the salvation of mankind’.¹⁰² In one sense all the Old Testament is self-consciously incomplete, looking forward to the time when God would save his people once and for all. Thus Jesus can speak of his fulfilling all Scripture (Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27), as a whole, without implying that every individual sentence in the Old Testament was meant to describe some facet of the Messiah’s ministry.

Contemporary study of midrash does not seem to offer any more adequate explanation for the difficult interpretations of the Old Testament by the New than this more traditional appeal to typology, and it may actually cover up the fact that the kind of biblical interpretation found in the Gospels is relatively rare in other ancient Jewish literature.¹⁰³ Moreover, appeals to midrash too readily offer an ‘easy way out’ by short-circuiting detailed Old Testament exegesis. Many passages that at first glance seem to be treating the Hebrew Scriptures unfairly turn out after closer scrutiny to be appealing to the larger context in which the specific Old Testament quotation appears or to terms that could refer to more than one character or event at the same time: Israel’s ‘shepherd’, the ‘suffering servant’ or Abraham’s promised ‘seed’. And while it is important to tackle the difficult passages,¹⁰⁴ one must not lose sight of the fact that a sizable majority of the uses of Scripture in the Gospels are quite straightforward and intelligible.¹⁰⁵

Are the Gospels midrash? Do they contain or employ midrash? Clearly, the answer that must emerge from this study is that it depends on how one defines

101. Childs, ‘Prophecy and Fulfillment’, p. 267.

102. Editor’s note to Schippers, ‘*plēroō*’, *NIDNTT*, vol. 1, p. 737. For a more detailed unpacking with respect to the Gospel that cites the Old Testament the most (Matthew), see Blomberg, ‘Interpreting Old Testament Prophetic Literature’, pp. 17–33.

103. Goppelt, *Typos*, p. 200.

104. For a remarkably broad range of coverage of the Gospels’ uses of the Old Testament, see Evans and Stegner, *Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*. Cf. also the relevant chapters in S. E. Porter, *Hearing the Old Testament*.

105. On both of these points, see esp. Longenecker, *Exegesis*, esp. pp. 36–62, 117–139; and, in a much more persuasive work than his more recent commentary, Gundry, *Use of the Old Testament*, esp. pp. 205–234. For a comprehensive demonstration of this point, see Carson and Beale, *Commentary on the New Testament*.

the term. No entire Gospel is a commentary on any portion of earlier Scripture, but small sections seem to be. No Gospel very closely resembles the ancient Jewish works specifically called midrash, but midrashic methods of interpretation seem to appear from time to time within the Evangelists' narratives. More commonly, what some have explained by appealing to midrash is better understood in terms of typology. A more helpful question is whether or not the Gospels' use of the Old Testament, or their use of sources like Mark and Q, in any way damages their credibility as reliable history. When phrased in this fashion, one can answer with confidence that they have emerged unscathed.

Literary criticism

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a self-conscious shift in many scholarly circles from historical to literary methods for analysing Scripture. A flood of studies representing a variety of literary perspectives continues to inundate Gospels scholarship. Most of this literature purports not to address questions of the historicity of the biblical texts at all but rather to focus only on the finished form of a text. Literary criticism, therefore, is one discipline in which participants from many different theological and ideological positions can come together, bracket their historical convictions or conclusions, and discuss the text simply as it stands.¹⁰⁶

The three most prevalent subdisciplines of literary criticism today are narrative criticism, deconstruction and reader-response criticism. Narrative critics analyse such elements of a passage as its characters, structure, plot development, themes and motifs, symbolism, figures of speech, point of view and so on, just as students of 'the Bible as literature' have done for a long time.¹⁰⁷ Deconstructionists revel in trying to demonstrate how all language, including inscripturated texts, ultimately proves unstable, contradicting itself and undermining all attempts at univocal or unambiguous communication at some point.¹⁰⁸ Reader-response critics explore the meaning created by readers of

106. For the broadest overview of methods applied to the Gospels, see S. D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels*.

107. Perhaps the best introduction is Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* Cf. also Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*. From the older 'Bible as literature' perspective, see esp. the numerous works of Leland Ryken, and esp. *Words of Life*.

108. For a brief introduction, see esp. Adam, *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* pp. 27–43. For thorough, more technical overviews with detailed applications to

texts, recognizing that everyone interprets a passage in the light of a complex cluster of presuppositions, social locations and biases, some conscious, others perhaps even unconscious, and illustrating how varied the interpretations of texts can be, depending on the given reader.¹⁰⁹

At first glance, it would appear that such disciplines have no contribution to make to the debate over the historical reliability of any written document. But the more narrative criticism demonstrates that seemingly historical texts contain elements that regularly appear in more fictitious genres, the more one begins to wonder if one has misinterpreted the intentions of the author in his or her writing. The more deconstructionists highlight failed or subverted attempts at communication, the more a person can start to doubt whether *any* form of history writing can disclose 'the way it really was'. And the more one recognizes the large role that readers play in the interpretation of texts, the more one suspects that the four Evangelists may have brought so much of themselves to their portrayals of Jesus that objective historical truth becomes unattainable.

Narrative criticism

Narrative criticism is the most common of these three forms of literary analysis. It can readily overlap with discussions of literary genre and form. We shall see below (pp. 298–303) that proposals that find the Gospels in their entirety or large swathes of individual Gospels as unhistorical in genre prove less persuasive than the alternatives. But there is already one form within the Gospels that is universally agreed to be fictitious, namely the parable. Through parables, Jesus teaches theological truths in historical garb; that is, in story form. No-one ever bothers to argue about whether there ever *was* a man who hired labourers for his vineyard at all times of the day and then paid those who had worked only one hour as much as those who had worked twelve (Matt. 20:1–16). In fact, it is highly improbable that any Jewish landowner in Jesus' day would have done so. Rather, it is recognized that the point of the parable is not to describe something that happened but symbolically to demonstrate

Footnote no. 108 (*cont.*)

the Synoptics and John, cf. S. D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, and Counet, *John, A Postmodern Gospel*, respectively. For a treatment of all four Gospels plus Paul, cf. Seeley, *Deconstructing the New Testament*.

109. See esp. Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star*; cf. Resseguie, 'Reader-Response Criticism', pp. 307–324. The key pioneer of reader-response criticism in literary criticism more generally was Fish, *Is There a Text?*

characteristics of the kingdom of God.¹¹⁰ Is it not at least conceivable, then, that an entire Gospel is in some sense ‘parabolic’, revealing the presence of the kingdom by means of a powerful story that communicates God’s intentions for human relationships, completely apart from the question of whether or not the events in that story really occurred?

The fairest reply to this question would seem to be to agree that it is conceivable but highly improbable. Parables typically begin with introductions that make it clear what kinds of stories are about to follow: ‘He told a parable’, ‘The kingdom of God is like’, ‘To what shall I compare it?’, ‘Which of you if . . .?’ or ‘There was a man who . . .’. Later Jewish literature discloses hundreds of rabbinic parables with numerous similar introductions, many of the same kinds of characters and details, approximately the same length, and frequent limited allegorical interpretation.¹¹¹ Notwithstanding important differences, most notably that rabbinic parables normally elucidate Torah rather than God’s kingdom, the parables of Jesus display enough indicators of their genre to show that they are short, fictitious, stories symbolic of spiritual truths. No similar generic features attach themselves to the Gospels overall. What is more, nothing in Jesus’ teaching requires that the events of a specific parable ever actually happened. But the Christian message from earliest days onward has been that God acted uniquely in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth (in his teaching and ministry and climactically in his death and resurrection) such that the main contours of the Gospels’ outlines of the life of Christ need to be true, or the gospel makes no sense and Christian discipleship proves futile.

As it turns out, narrative criticism has regularly demonstrated the literary unity of passages that source, form or redaction criticism often parcelled out into competing stages of the tradition. Traditional forms of historical criticism, for example, frequently broke Jesus’ Farewell Discourse in John (chs. 14–16) into at least two separate messages (14:1–31; 15:1–16:33) compiled during different stages of the tradition (see also pp. 236–237). But Wayne Brouwer has highlighted how all three chapters together probably form a fairly detailed chiasmic structure, suggesting that the discourse was a unity from the outset. Of course, one may argue that John made it *all* up, but the conceptual parallels in the Synoptic Gospels to individual verses and short

110. For full details on methodology, see Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*. Cf. idem, *Preaching the Parables*.

111. For a sampling of over 100 of the oldest of these, see McArthur and Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables*.

sections scattered throughout the discourse suggest a traditional origin for core details. Narrative criticism then builds on that foundation, in this case adding support for the idea that something like all three chapters originated at the same time.¹¹²

Or to cite an example from the parables again, many scholars have argued that the second section of the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:25–32, about the older brother) could not be part of what Jesus originally spoke since it complicates the plot and distracts our attention from the main point, already complete with verse 24, about God's love for sinners. On the other hand, Mary Tolbert demonstrates that verses 11–24 and verses 25–32 are actually quite similar in structure with each 'half' dividing into four subsections alternating between narrated and direct speech, with verbal and conceptual parallels pairing each subsection. Thus she concludes that this kind of analysis 'clearly shows the authenticity of the elder son episode: It is neither an interpolation nor an awkward addendum. It is a necessary and important part of the total configuration of the parable.'¹¹³

Narrative criticism can also explain seemingly incongruous features of a text that go against our sense of what good, reliable historical reporting should involve. Why, for example, does a full 'half' of Mark's Gospel (8:31 – 16:8) narrate the events of just the last few months of Jesus' life, with chapters 11–16 entirely devoted to eight days: from 'Palm Sunday' to the Sunday of the resurrection? For those who would be tempted to use these observations to call into question Mark's historiography, it is worth noting that other Graeco-Roman sources often focused disproportionately on the events leading up to a notable person's death because of the belief that how a person died was a key pointer to his or her identity and significance. Christianity had all the more reason for highlighting these events so intensively with its conviction that Jesus' death atoned for the sins of the world and that his resurrection vindicated his claims to be the divine Messiah. But the literary concept of 'narrative time' also plays an important role here. Writers in many cultures 'slow down' their narration of the most important events in their stories precisely to call attention to those events as central. The 'thriller' that climaxes with the hero trying to defuse the bomb about to explode in 60 seconds may take 10 minutes of real time on the film to portray the suspense surrounding his or her quest, whereas, earlier in the show, years of story time may pass by in a matter of a few minutes. The same is true among writers of both fact and fiction in the ancient Mediterranean world.

112. Brouwer, *Literary Development of John 13–17*. Cf. Kellum, *Unity of the Farewell Discourse*.

113. Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables*, p. 101.

Deconstructionism

In twentieth-century literary criticism, the focus on the finished form of a text apart from the consideration of the historical circumstances that led to its production naturally led to a second kind of ahistorical analysis of texts, which was known as structuralism. Focusing on the ‘surface structures’ of a given literary work overlapped considerably with the analysis of structure in narrative criticism (cf. particularly the example of the prodigal son, above, p. 90). But structuralists tended to be far more interested in a text’s ‘deep structures’: the underlying and more fundamental features that form the basis of all narratives. These include the functions, motives and interactions between the main characters and objects in a narrative, and, most notably, the types of oppositions and their resolutions that develop as the text unfolds. In the 1970s and 1980s, a vocal minority of scholars applied structuralism to the New Testament and particularly to its narrative portions, but few interpretative gains resulted that could not have been achieved by more traditional methods, while the technical terminology and processes required to master the discipline put off all but the most stalwart of heart. The discipline impinged only a little on questions of historicity even in its heyday, and today it is all but defunct.¹¹⁴

As its name suggests, however, ‘poststructuralism’ emerged as a conscious response to and reaction against narrative-critical and structuralist methods.¹¹⁵ From a focus on the history behind a text, to a close analysis of texts themselves, interpreters in poststructuralist modes next turned to the readers ‘in front of’ a text. Scholars alleged that they dare not try to determine the *authorial* intent of texts, at least with documents from long ago and far away, because the mental states of those long dead authors remain irrecoverable. The quest for *textual* meaning proves equally elusive, because texts merely contain clusters of arbitrary symbols that communicate nothing apart from readers who can decode them. Thus the goal of interpretation devolved to an analysis of the contribution of readers to the process. The two main subdivisions of poststructuralism came to be known as ‘deconstruction(ism)’ and ‘reader-response criticism’.

By far the most eccentric movement in the literary world of recent years, deconstruction is most closely associated with the recently deceased French philosopher and proponent of Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction is

114. The key New Testament scholar who worked hardest to promote structuralism was Daniel Patte. See esp. his *What Is Structural Exegesis?*; and idem, *Structural Exegesis*.

115. Cf. Greenwood, ‘Poststructuralism and Biblical Studies’, in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 3, pp. 263–288; and Rutledge, ‘Faithful Reading’, pp. 270–287.

almost impossible to define in a sentence, but T. K. Seung makes a commendable attempt: the process of ‘generating conflicting meanings from the same text, and playing those meanings against each other’.¹¹⁶ Dominic Crossan illustrates a kind of deconstruction applied to the Gospels when he argues that, although they highlight Jesus’ teaching in parables *about* God, they advocate belief in Jesus *as* ‘the Parable of God’: God’s own self-communication. The texts actually undermine the perspectives they assert.¹¹⁷ Or again, with the parable of the prodigal son, Crossan discovers an allegory about interpretations of the world. The father stands for reality, the older brother for realism in interpretation, and the prodigal for the one who abandons the search for realism. Thus the inversion of the two sons’ roles at the end of the parable proves that ‘he who finds the meaning loses it, and he who loses it finds it!’¹¹⁸ Or with the parable of the hidden treasure (Matt. 13:44), Crossan concludes that its theme of abandoning everything for the sake of the kingdom ultimately means abandoning the parable and then abandoning abandonment!¹¹⁹

Deconstruction, like milder forms of poststructuralism, does present a humbling and necessary corrective to those readers of the Bible who think that their interpretations, usually coinciding with the theological tradition or denomination to which they belong, encapsulate all the truth all the time! Some forms of interpretation that call themselves deconstruction remain comparatively cautious about claiming that *all* communication is undermined.¹²⁰ But pure deconstruction typically leads to the claim that one can *never* be confident that his or her interpretations are valid with any high degree of probability. If no objective meaning is recoverable, then no reliable history is recoverable, because readers can never be sure whether or not they have misunderstood the Gospels by thinking that they were supplying historical information when in fact they were not.¹²¹

It is telling to compare the results of attempts to apply a full-blown postmodernist philosophy to secular historiography. Ernst Breisach recounts and analyses the enterprise, noting how even the most thoroughgoing

116. Seung, *Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, p. 271.

117. Crossan, *Dark Interval*.

118. Idem, *Cliffs of Fall*, p. 101.

119. Idem, *Finding Is the First Act*.

120. And thus may have some salutary points to make in the interpretative process. See Briggs, ‘Gnats, Camels and Aporias’, pp. 17–32.

121. Good critiques appear in S. Walker, ‘Challenging Deconstruction’, pp. 239–248; and Bartholomew, ‘Babel and Derrida’, pp. 305–328.

deconstructionists were unable to avoid proposing their own metanarratives about the recoverability and meaning of history.¹²² While the confidence of modernism's belief in the attainment of objectivity has been rightly chastened in numerous respects, postmodernism in many subdisciplines of historiography has hardly triumphed and can be seen to be already on the wane. Attempts to deny any ability to recover the past and say true things about it simply do not correspond to the way in which historians actually operate. The most ideologically committed historians in fact *most* need to be able to say certain objectively true things about history in order to commend their ideologies persuasively.¹²³

Thus David Fischer's quarter-century old critique of consistently relativistic historiography remains applicable for its contemporary, thoroughgoing post-modernist counterpart: (1) It confuses the way knowledge is acquired, which is subjective, with the validity of that knowledge, which is objective. (2) It assumes that incomplete knowledge implies false knowledge. (3) It overlooks the similarities between scientific and historical methods that allow both to achieve a degree of objectivity. (4) It asks for exemption for its own work. Otherwise, to be consistent, the person claiming that no attempt to write history can ever be fully reliable would have to admit that he or she has made a statement about history that cannot be fully reliable. (5) It uses 'subjectivity' as a meaningless term, because without the existence of objective truth there is nothing to which subjective claims can be subject.¹²⁴ To condense these five flaws into one, complete relativism confuses facts with their interpretations. Of course, finite and fallen humans, including historians, will be unable to avoid *some* confusion of the two, but they should never revel in this fact but seek to dispel as much of the disorder as possible. Substantial progress to this end can, in fact, be achieved.¹²⁵ Maurice Mandelbaum's classic philosophical discussion of the issue remains accurate, concluding that, 'the truth of a historical work consists in the truth of its statements, not in the fact that the author judged as he did'.¹²⁶ No matter how much statements and judgments

122. Breisach, *On the Future of History*, p. 198.

123. For these last three points, see Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*.

124. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, pp. 42–43, n. 4. Cf. Beckwith, 'History and Miracles', p. 91.

125. See esp. Gaddis, *Landscape of History*. Cf. Le Goff, *History and Memory*, esp. pp. 106–115.

126. Mandelbaum, *Problem of Historical Knowledge*, p. 183. Cf. idem, *Anatomy of Historical Knowledge*, pp. 145–194; Elton, *Return to Essentials*, pp. 53–70.

overlap, they must be kept as separate as possible, because without any statements of fact there is nothing against which to judge interpretations.¹²⁷

Reader-response criticism

Reader-response criticism refers to a loosely structured movement especially indebted to the American literary critic, Stanley Fish. Most of its advocates reject authorial intention as the key to interpretation and assert that ‘meaning is a product of the interaction between text and reader’.¹²⁸ The constraints on this subjectivity stem primarily from ‘interpretive communities’ (groups of readers who share traditional methods, conventions and value judgments in analysing certain texts) and not from any unalterable message the text fossilizes. Reader-response critics may be viewed as one kind of inconsistent deconstructionist. If the corollary consistent with the belief that every communicative act ultimately undermines its attempt to communicate is that deconstructionism itself deconstructs, then the only solution is to argue that human beings *can* share meaning with one another if (but only if) they belong to sufficiently similar interpretative communities. Thus there can be truth for me and truth for my community but not truth for all people in all times and places. As one who is an evangelical Christian (it would be alleged), I read the Gospels and ‘see’ that the authors must be making claims about things that happened in early first-century *history* in Israel, because that is how my interpretative community has taught me to read these texts. But an ancient pagan, conditioned to thinking of the sacred by means of countless myths and legends, would read the same stories, look for the religious lessons enshrined in them and not necessarily assume that these things really happened. Without any ‘metanarrative’ or overarching criteria for adjudicating between these readings, both interpretations can claim equal legitimacy.

Among numerous problems with these conclusions is their inability to explain many interpretative conversions. How is it that numerous readers of texts down through the centuries have *changed* their thinking on issues of fundamental value and meaning in their lives by reading those very texts? How is it that I came to my views on the reliability of the Gospels *not* because of the interpretative community in which I was raised but because of careful and prolonged study of the texts and scholarly viewpoints directly contrary to much

127. Cf. also Renier, *History*, p. 50; Danto, *Analytic Philosophy of History*, pp. 27–111; M. White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, pp. 3–4.

128. Resseguie, ‘Reader-Response Criticism’, p. 322. Cf. Fish, *Is There a Text? p. 3 et passim*.

of what I had been taught in my church as a teenager and in my college as a religion major? It *is* important to appreciate the amount of subjectivity and pre-understanding all readers and listeners bring to the process of interpreting acts of human communication. But unless a speaker or author can retain the right to correct someone's interpretation by saying 'but that's not what I meant' or 'that's not even consistent with what I meant', all human communication will quickly break down. There must be ways of labelling the methods and criteria of certain interpretative communities as better (or more correct, or more appropriate) than others, in each human speech act, in order to decide which of two or more mutually exclusive interpretations is to be adopted. Similarly, reader-response critics are quick to exclude what they deem to be immoral readings, even though epistemologically they have no grounds for doing so. But that is precisely what a theistic world view brings to the table: the conviction that one God created all people with enough shared cognitive and affective traits, even in their sinful state, so that meaning and morality can, at least to a significant degree, be ascertained.¹²⁹

Reader-response criticism does properly point out, however, that an author's intention in writing something may often be either irrecoverable or unachieved. Less radical practitioners suggest a more holistic model by which meaning *does* reside in a text, and interpretation seeks to appropriate textual clues to the intentions of the author with respect to a given audience.¹³⁰ In this case certain constraints are placed upon interpreters as they go about their work. Robert Fowler, for example, suggests that Mark has created the story of the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30–44) on the model of the feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1–10) and arranged the two accounts in his Gospel into a sequence that would highlight the irony of the disciples' failure to understand how Jesus could provide food for the multitudes (Mark 8:4).¹³¹ Though this may not be the best solution to the question of why Mark has two separate narratives about strikingly similar feeding miracles (see below, pp. 189–190), it does reveal careful attention to possible meanings inherent

129. See esp. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?* Cf. also Noble, 'Hermeneutics and Post-Modernism', *RelStud* 30 (1994), pp. 419–436; *RelStud* 31 (1995), pp. 1–22; Poirier, 'Some Detracting Considerations', pp. 250–263; J. Barton, 'Thinking about Reader-Response Criticism', pp. 147–151.

130. Thus, e.g., N. R. Petersen, 'Reader in the Gospel', pp. 38–51. Cf. Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions*, pp. 93–125. For a full-orbed biblical hermeneutic from this perspective, see Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*.

131. Fowler, *Leaves and Fishes*.

within the text itself and not just in the minds of its interpreters. With this type of reader-response criticism, historians need not fear unemployment. While the appropriation of literary methods has raised important questions about the interpretation of texts, questions about their historical reliability and intentions may still play a significant role in Gospel criticism.

Other methods

As we approach the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, New Testament studies is as fragmented as it ever has been. New methods proliferate and it is possible to specialize in so narrow a subfield as to be all but oblivious to other major developments in the guild. Social-scientific criticisms abound, analysing texts, especially narrative ones like the Gospels, from psychological, anthropological and especially sociological perspectives.¹³² Sometimes such analysis just forms a subset of historical criticism and can be used to understand the cultural background of a passage better. Sometimes the social sciences are mined to transfer theories developed in other contexts to the New Testament cultures in ways that may or may not legitimately apply.¹³³ Most often, social-scientific criticism simply illuminates the interaction among individuals and groups that we encounter on the pages of the Gospels, and thus does not impinge on debates about their historical reliability. But at times it can be used reductionistically to deny all possibilities of the supernatural (on which, see below, pp. 105–108), at which point it is functioning outside the bounds of what social science can properly adjudicate.¹³⁴

Various advocacy movements have developed methodologies that function as subsets of either literary or social-scientific criticism or both. Liberationist, feminist, postcolonial, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered, African-American, and other forms of minority cultural criticisms all compete for a place at the interpretative table.¹³⁵ Often they resemble reader-response methods, in that they consciously read the text through the eyes of particular social location with the explicit aim of liberating one or more groups of people believed to be

132. For introductions, see Elliott, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?*; Kille, *Psychological Biblical Criticism*.

133. For examples of each, see Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 78–87, and the literature there cited.

134. Yamauchi, 'Sociology, Scripture and the Supernatural', pp. 169–192.

135. For useful anthologies that introduce a good cross-section of these methods, see esp. S. E. Porter, *Handbook*; J. B. Green, *Hearing the New Testament*; and Segovia and Tolbert, *Readings from This Place*.

oppressed. At times, they may argue that the biblical narratives are actually more supportive of the group(s) with which they identify than interpreters have typically recognized. More often than not, they acknowledge an 'oppressive' strand to the text(s), but look for the 'redemptive' portions that cut against the oppressive grains, thus, de facto, creating a canon within the canon. In so doing, they often take on the role of social-scientific critic as well. Again, for the most part, their work does not bear directly on issues of historical reliability. But it can do so; for example, in instances in which the historical Jesus is seen as a fully fledged egalitarian, then less than fully egalitarian texts become viewed as the later repatriarchalizing overlay of the Gospel writers (cf., e.g., Luke 7:36–50 with Mark 7:24–30 par.). But, to respond to this particular example, interpreters of both the 'left' and the 'right' are coming increasingly to recognize that Jesus was not a crypto-egalitarian nineteen hundred years ahead of his time, even if remarkably countercultural *for his day*, with respect to gender roles.¹³⁶ How normative one deems Jesus' model to be, then, determines whether one is classified as left wing or right wing. But the historicity of the text remains unaffected.

Still other new methods (rhetorical criticism, discourse analysis, canon criticism and the like) have even less to do with historical trustworthiness, except that they can at times demonstrate the coherence of texts sometimes deemed incoherent. But it is time to bring this survey to an end, draw some conclusions, and apply each of the approaches we have discussed to a specific Gospel text as an illustration.

Conclusion and case study

Three of the methods surveyed (form, redaction and midrash criticism) regularly claim that the Gospels are a mixture of fact and fiction, of reliable history and imaginative embellishment. In each case this claim is unjustified, but the methods offer valuable exegetical insights when stripped of their negative biases against the historical reliability of the Gospel tradition. The fourth main section of this chapter surveyed methods used primarily in interpreting the *meaning* of the Gospels rather than in assessing their historical accuracy. Each of these, however, has at times impinged on questions of

136. Cf., e.g., liberal works like Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus*; and Kitzberger, *Transformative Encounters*; with conservative ones like Osborne, 'Women in Jesus' Ministry', pp. 259–291; Wilkins, 'Women', pp. 91–112; and Elliott, 'Jesus Was Not an Egalitarian', pp. 75–91.

historicity, since it can be argued that the meaning of part or all of the Gospels is that they are not to be taken as history. It is undeniable that this argument applies in at least one case, that of the parables, but it is unlikely to apply elsewhere. At the very least the main outline of the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection must be historical or the claims of Christianity become incomprehensible. The very distinctiveness of the Judaeo-Christian tradition over against its pagan counterparts lay in its belief in one omnipotent God acting in observable events in history, and the distinctiveness of Christianity over against Judaism centred on the belief that such divine action came to a decisive climax with the person and work of Jesus. Sceptics down through the ages argued that those beliefs were not true, but seldom did they maintain that those beliefs were not what Scripture was claiming. That the latter notion has proliferated in recent times may be due to the uneasy conscience of modern scholars who have broken with their traditional Christian heritage but who hope to salvage something of it that scholars from other backgrounds might accept. However well intentioned, it seems likely that such 'mediation' is doomed to failure through lack of sufficient evidence and logic.

Each of the new methods for Gospel study does help at times to explain why the Gospel parallels differ in the ways they do. The parable of the wicked tenants, which appears in all three Synoptics (see pp. 100–102), conveniently illustrates some of the ways each of these methods can be employed to defend the historical accuracy of the Gospel accounts rather than to attack it. There can be no doubt that Matthew, Mark and Luke are recounting the identical parable here, even though there are significant differences between their versions of it. In each of the three Gospels this passage occurs as part of Jesus' teaching in the temple during the final week before his crucifixion. In each Gospel Jesus has just finished responding to the question about his authority to cleanse the temple, and in each he goes on to address the question about paying taxes, although Matthew adds an additional parable both before and after this one. Many of the differences among the parallels are insignificant: the Gospels do not claim to supply a highly literal translation of Jesus' words. Besides having been translated into Greek, Jesus' teachings have been freely paraphrased throughout the Gospels, as a glance at any synopsis reveals. Nor is it hard to see in this instance that the essence of the parable has been retained intact in each version; few of the differences qualify as 'apparent contradictions'. Those that do so have plausible explanations, but a mere harmonization of the data does not explain why the parable was told so differently in each case. The new methods for Gospel study suggest some possible explanations that point to rational reasons for the divergences; the variation is not

arbitrary. Of course some suggestions can only be tentative, and often quite different explanations are also conceivable.¹³⁷

Two features of Luke's text make good sense in the light of form criticism. First, his version at the outset excises all description of the vineyard. This is probably due to the tendency of oral tradition to omit unnecessary or incidental details.¹³⁸ Second, his account streamlines and organizes the sending of the various servants so that only three appear, the fate of each is clearly described, and they form a sequence of increasing severity, capped by the murder of the son. This pattern clearly reflects the tendencies of popular storytelling to use groups of three characters or episodes to build to a climax.¹³⁹

Balancing these contributions of the oral tradition are a number of features most probably due to the Evangelists; here redaction criticism enters. Luke introduces an element of uncertainty into Mark's version of the landlord's decision. Instead of an unqualified 'they will respect my son', he writes, 'it may be they will respect him'. Luke was no doubt trying to avoid a possible misunderstanding of Mark's version when the tenants did not respect the landlord's son. Because the landlord's relationship with his tenants resembles God's behaviour towards his people, Luke wanted to make sure that no-one misinterpreted the parable by thinking that God did not realize what would happen when he sent *his* son.¹⁴⁰ After Jesus' closing quotation from Scripture, Matthew introduced an even more obvious theologically motivated addition with his unparalleled statement about the kingdom of God being given to a new people. Unless one improperly assumes that Matthew had no access to any other information about the teaching of Jesus besides Mark's Gospel, there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of this addition. But why did only Matthew include it? A reasonable explanation would be that, as the Evangelist most interested in the offer of the gospel to the Jews, he was most concerned to stress the need for Israel's leaders to repent lest they fall from God's favour entirely.¹⁴¹ This motivation probably also explains why only

137. The best study of this parable in its three versions (as well as an interesting parallel in the so-called Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*) remains Snodgrass, *Parable of the Wicked Tenants*. The most detailed now by far, but idiosyncratic in a number of its conclusions, is Kloppenborg, *Tenants in the Vineyard*.

138. Klauck, *Allegorie und Allegorese*, p. 292.

139. Kelber, *The Oral and The Written Gospel*, p. 59.

140. Carlston, *Parables of the Triple Tradition*, p. 79. But the change could also have originated in the oral tradition due to the same felt need.

141. Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, pp. 357–359, 373–374.

Matthew preserved the self-indicting response of the crowd after Jesus asked what they thought the landlord would do to the wicked tenants. One can easily harmonize this response with Mark's version that has Jesus answer his own question and with Luke's that has the crowd respond to Jesus' answer with a shocked 'God forbid!' It is absurd to imagine everyone in the crowd replying in unison with the identical words, like a trained choir, and completely realistic to suppose Jesus should then state the response he endorsed, no doubt shouted out by one of his supporters and in turn eliciting cries of reproof from his opponents.¹⁴² But the reason why none of the Synoptists chose to tell the whole story becomes clear only by studying their varying theological emphases, as shown in the table below.¹⁴³

<i>Matthew 21:33–46</i>	<i>Mark 12:1–12</i>	<i>Luke 20:9–19</i>
<p>‘Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.</p> <p>‘The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other</p>	<p>Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: ‘A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent</p>	<p>He went on to tell the people this parable: ‘A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent</p>

142. Cf. Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 3, p. 18: ‘There is no contradiction if we examine the sense more closely. There is no doubt that they [the Jewish leaders] would have agreed with Christ over the penalty which fell to such wicked servants, but when they saw that the charge and sentence were laid against themselves, they cried “God forbid!”’ Cf. Baum, ‘Oral Poetry und synoptische Frage’, pp. 17–34.

143. The texts are taken from the TNIV. The bracketed portion of Matthew's version is not found in some ancient manuscripts.

<p>servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said.</p> <p>'But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance." So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.</p> <p>"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"</p> <p>'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,' they replied, 'and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.'</p> <p>Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures:</p> <p>"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this,</p>	<p>another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.</p> <p>'He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, "They will respect my son."</p> <p>'But the tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.</p> <p>'What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this passage of Scripture:</p> <p>"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes"?"</p>	<p>still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.</p> <p>"Then the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him."</p> <p>'But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. "This is the heir," they said. "Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.</p> <p>'What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.'</p> <p>When the people heard this, they said, 'God forbid!'</p> <p>Jesus looked directly at them and asked, 'Then what is the meaning of that which is written:</p> <p>"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone"?'</p> <p>'Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to</p>
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<p>and it is marvelous in our eyes”?</p> <p>“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. [Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.]’</p> <p>When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.</p>	<p>Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.</p>	<p>pieces, but anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.’</p> <p>The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.</p>
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The references to Scripture in the opening and closing of this passage alert one to the possible presence of midrash. The description of the vineyard comes from Isaiah 5:1–2 and the saying about the cornerstone cites Psalm 118:22. The parable elaborates Isaiah’s equation of the vineyard with Israel (5:7) and links up with the final quotation by a play on words: the Hebrew and Aramaic for ‘stone’ (*eben*) and ‘son’ (*bēn*) are very similar. The parable and its context therefore comprise a proem midrash,¹⁴⁴ making it unlikely that the reference to the psalm was a later addition, as is often alleged. In this case the appearance of midrash does not resolve an apparent contradiction between parallels but supports the authenticity of a feature of the passage common to all versions, by challenging the popular argument that the final verses were not integrally linked with the parable.

Narrative criticism labels this account a tragic parable. It climaxes in a scene of judgment, so that its most central function is to warn the leaders of God’s

144. E. E. Ellis, ‘New Directions in Form Criticism’, pp. 313–314.

people in any age who disobey and rebel against him of their coming punishment. Although it is more complex than many of the parables attributed to Jesus in the canonical Gospels, it shares an overall structure with about two-thirds of them: a master figure judges between good and bad subordinates, as the plot surprises its listeners or readers with its characterization of which subordinates prove exemplary and which do not.¹⁴⁵ This shared structure supports the authenticity of at least a solid core of the passage against those who would deem it inauthentic due to the allegedly unusual proliferation of allegorical detail.

The poststructuralist emphasis on the varying responses of different readers dovetails nicely with the harmonization of the divergent reactions of the crowd to Jesus' parable. Everyone does not react in the same way to a well-told story, and it is unrealistic to label the Gospels as contradictory because they report different reactions. As for social-scientific perspectives, it is interesting to note that the types of social customs and interaction presupposed throughout the parable closely mirror the contractual arrangements of the day. The behaviour of the master, quite strange by modern standards in permitting and indulging in so much violence, actually coincides with the ruthless behaviour of many wealthy landowners in first-century Palestine.¹⁴⁶ The sociology of the day illuminates the psychology of the individual. This realism makes the parable more intelligible and more believable as an authentic teaching of Jesus.

The thrust of this survey of new methods for Gospel study is clear. The challenges they have posed to the historical reliability of the Gospels all fail to overthrow the traditional confidence in that reliability which older commentators more consistently displayed. In fact, all the methods can be used, though sometimes in quite modified form, to strengthen that confidence. If the debate about the historicity of the Gospels is to advance any further, it must not be on the basis of new methods of study but on the actual details of the texts themselves. This is the issue that chapters 4 and 5 take up. But first there is one other quite different question of method that must be addressed.

145. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp. 247–251.

146. Snodgrass, *Parable of the Wicked Tenants*, pp. 31–40.

3. MIRACLES

Six large jars of water suddenly appear filled with wine. A man walks across a lake, apparently defying the law of gravity. Five thousand men, plus an unknown number of women and children, satisfy their hunger from a quantity of food originally numbering five loaves of bread and two fish and finish with enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets. This is part of the world of the miracles of Jesus described in the New Testament Gospels, to say nothing of numerous healings, exorcisms and even resurrection from death. Who today can believe in such stories? Even if the survey of Gospel criticism in previous chapters has uncovered no convincing reasons for rejecting the reliability of the narratives of the life of Jesus, surely, many would argue, the line must be drawn here. There is an intuitive sense with which even the most devout believer must share the tension that the sceptic feels when it comes to the credibility of miracle stories. Moreover, even the person open to the possibility of miracles does not believe every strange tale of the supernatural. Thus an examination of the problem of identifying genuine miracles must follow a discussion of their credibility.

The problem of credibility

The reasons for rejecting the Gospel miracles ultimately revolve around three

issues. Broadly speaking, these may be called the scientific, the philosophical and the historical objections.

The scientific objection

Although Rudolf Bultmann was a theologian, many of his scientific colleagues would have agreed with his famous pronouncements of a half-century ago that ‘man’s knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world’. Instead, ‘the modern conception of human nature as a self-subsistent unity immune from the interference of supernatural powers’ must take its place.¹ In short, the scientific objection to the credibility of miracles is that the discovery of the natural, physical laws by which the universe operates has proved them impossible. Those who hold this view sometimes go on to explain that people used to believe in miracles because they had only a primitive scientific understanding. The Christian doctrines of the virgin birth and resurrection, for example, could spring from just such a pre-scientific milieu. Only a moment’s thought is required, however, to realize that people of every age have known that two human parents are needed for conception and that death is irreversible!² Others argue, more plausibly that, while people in New Testament times knew full well that the types of miracles described in the Gospels were highly extraordinary, their openness to the supernatural led them to believe in what science has now proved impossible. Still others advocate a ‘reverent agnosticism’ to miracles, especially the resurrection, as the best approach for New Testament scholars and scientists alike.³

Interestingly enough, many scientists today would not feel the force of this objection as strongly as they might have in the 1930s. Physical science has

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1. Bultmann, ‘New Testament and Mythology’, pp. 4, 7. Cf. the remarkable candour today of Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* (in which he still considered himself a minimalist Christian); and idem, *Resurrection of Christ* (in which he has become a fully fledged atheist and naturalist). In the scientific world, see esp. Hawking, *Brief History of Time*.
 2. After a survey of scepticism in the ancient Mediterranean world to magic and/or miracle, Downing (‘Magic and Scepticism’, p. 99) concludes, ‘the level of belief – or suspension of disbelief – seems to have been not much different from what we find today for belief in alternative medicines, belief in ley-lines, belief in visitors from outer space, or belief in the free market economy’. Presumably, he is reflecting the typical British perspective, especially on the last of these items!
 3. Thus Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection*, p. 98.

undergone a revolution of massive proportions in which belief in the inviolability of the laws of Newtonian mechanics has given way to quantum theory, in which physical 'laws' are recognized as only 'provisional descriptions of observed regularities in nature'.⁴ Heisenberg's 'principle of indeterminacy' illustrates the radical nature of this scientific upheaval. Physicists are unable to know at the same time both the position and momentum of a subatomic particle, making it impossible to rule out a given configuration of particles. Any physical occurrence could thus theoretically happen at some time by sheer chance, however slim the probability of that occurrence. When first presented with this revolution in physics, some Christians rushed to point out that the scientific door was once again open for the biblical miracles. But the unpredictable combinations of subatomic activity have not overthrown the principles of how the larger objects function that these particles make up. Gravity, for example, still prevents a person from walking on water!⁵

Most defenders of miracles today, therefore, do not deny the validity of the regularities of nature. Instead, they deny that a miracle must be a *violation* of such 'laws'. Despite all the marvellous advances of physics, no-one has yet proved, if God as traditionally conceived by Jews and Christians exists, why he might not occasionally suspend or transcend the otherwise fixed regularities of nature. No physical principles need be violated if a new causal agent is introduced. Norman Geisler, a leading American Christian apologist, puts it this way: 'belief in miracles does not destroy the *integrity* of scientific methodology, only its *sovereignty*. It says in effect that science does not have sovereign claim to explain all events as natural, but only those that are regular, repeatable, and/or predictable.'⁶ There is an important analogy

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4. Lucas, 'Miracles and Natural Laws', p. 9. Cf. Berry, 'Divine Action', pp. 717–727. On the varying degrees of uncertainty attaching to all scientific paradigms, see esp. T. S. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. On the hermeneutical character of science, see e.g., Duce, *Reading the Mind of God*.
 5. Though theoretically there could be exceptions; see Arenz, 'Interaction between the Bible and Science', pp. 1797–1803. For a clear discussion of the revolution in modern physics and its implications for Christianity, see Russell, *Cross-Currents*, pp. 198–224; for the past and future dependence of science on theism more generally, cf. Koons, 'Science and Theism', pp. 72–90.
 6. Geisler, *Miracles and Modern Thought*, p. 58. The revised edition of this book (idem, *Miracles and the Modern Mind*, p. 52) makes basically the same points but is not as memorably worded. So also Nichols, 'Miracles in Science and Theology', p. 703. More generally, cf. Cover, 'Miracles and Christian Theism', pp. 345–374.

here with human behaviour, since persons, even with their finite powers, by freely choosing to start or end various actions, regularly bring about new events that otherwise would not have occurred by natural forces alone. If persons can change the physical world, how much more ought God to be able to do so!

This approach however presupposes that some kind of omnipotent personal agent exists (or at least an extremely powerful agent not always bound by natural law). Miracles follow logically if theism is true but not if deism or atheism is. Traditionally, believers have argued for God's existence by means of various philosophical 'proofs', but many today, theologians included, believe that all such logic has been shown to be faulty.⁷ Some feel that to try to prove that God exists is to deny faith its proper place as the foundation of religion,⁸ though it is not obvious why anyone should continue to believe a given doctrine if all the evidence contradicted it. This is not the place to digress into a discussion of the debate, except to note that not everyone has abandoned hope of formulating more compelling versions of some of the traditional arguments for God's existence. A promising approach is the one taken by William Craig, who expresses his argument quite simply: (1) Everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence, (2) the universe began to exist, therefore (3) the universe has a cause of its existence, which can also be shown to be personal, since it must be the result of someone's free choice to create. Of the two premises, the controversial one is the second; perhaps the universe has always existed? But Craig draws on the work of ancient Arabic philosophers and mathematicians to argue that this would imply an actual infinite succession of moments in time past, which is empirically, though not theoretically, impossible. More simply, time by definition must have had a beginning: it is logically nonsensical to say that it always existed.⁹

Less abstractly, there is widespread agreement among scientists today that the universe in fact has been both expanding and moving towards maximum entropy (running down or decaying) ever since it came into being with a 'big bang' billions of years ago. This is a concept that could be harmonized with

7. Representative of evangelicals who take this approach is Davis, *God, Reason, and Theistic Proofs*.

8. See esp. Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God "Properly Basic"?' pp. 189–202. Plantinga believes that certain propositions about God are 'basic' (givens that cannot be demonstrated) but not 'groundless' (without warrant).

9. Craig, *Kalam Cosmological Argument*; idem, *Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz*.

belief in God as the Creator.¹⁰ So too do some recent non-theistic scientists' about-face in maintaining that this is the only universe, that time started at its commencement and that the universe will eternally expand.¹¹ Or consider the recent reversal of opinion as to which direction gravity flows in black holes. In fact, scientific conviction changes frequently and abruptly on topics not readily or comprehensively testable, leading Arthur Gibson to remark, only somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that 'those who wish to adopt science as a foundation for stipulating what is empirically possible would do well to suspend judgment for a few million years, and see which way the universe goes!'¹²

In fact, physical science today seems more open to the possibility of God than it has been for generations. The intelligent design movement, in which structures of 'irreducible complexity' point to a Creator behind numerous biochemical features of the universe (most notably blood clotting, cilia, the human immune system, material transportation within cells, and the synthesis of nucleotides [the building blocks of DNA]) has commanded the support of an ever-increasing number of scientists, and not just Christian.¹³ On many university campuses, professors of physics are noticeably more willing to believe in miracles than biblical scholars or members of departments of religious studies!¹⁴ As Peter Medawar's celebrated work *The Limits of Science* demonstrated in the early 1980s, the notion that science has proved the supernatural impossible must be abandoned.¹⁵

The philosophical objection

To admit the possibility of miracles like those found in the Gospels is a far cry from acknowledging their probability. The classic philosophical objection to miracles stems from the eighteenth-century Scotsman, David Hume, in his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, section 10.¹⁶ Hume claimed that the

10. See Craig's section in his debate with Quentin Smith in their *Theism, Atheism*, cf. Schroeder, *Genesis and the Big Bang*.

11. See esp. Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers*.

12. A. Gibson, 'Logic of the Resurrection', p. 177.

13. See esp. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box*. Cf. Dembski, *Design Inference*; idem, *Signs of Intelligence*.

14. Davis, 'Miracle at Cana', pp. 425–426. My experience of lecturing at several dozen Colleges and universities over the last twenty years has consistently confirmed this generalization. Cf. also Polkinghorne, *Faith of a Physicist*.

15. This conclusion proves all the more significant, because Medawar still denies God's existence (not on scientific grounds, but due to the problem of evil).

16. The newest edition is that edited by Beauchamp (2006). For similar, modern perspectives, see Flew, *David Hume*, esp. pp. 69–89; and M. Martin, *Case against*

probability would always be greater for a natural than for a supernatural explanation of any apparently miraculous event. To substantiate this claim, he offered four lines of support: (1) No alleged miracle has ever been supported with the testimony of a sufficiently large number of witnesses who could not have been either deceived or deceivers. (2) People in general crave the miraculous and believe fables more readily than they ought. (3) 'Miracles' occur only among barbarous peoples. (4) Miracle stories occur in all religions and thereby cancel each other out since they support irreconcilable doctrines.¹⁷

Ever since they were published Hume's arguments have found critics and supporters. The most convincing responses from the defenders of miracles include the following: Claim 1, even if true, does not prove that *no* alleged miracle will ever have adequate testimony, and in fact a good case can be made for affirming that the witnesses of the Gospel miracles do offer adequate testimony. Claim 2 probably is true, but all it means is that testimony about miracles must be examined with extra caution and suspicion before it is accepted. Claims 3 and 4 are demonstrably false in the absolute form in which Hume has stated them. Many highly educated Westerners today believe in miracles, and no religion stands or falls with a claim about the resurrection of its founder in the way that Christianity does.¹⁸

Hume, however, went further. Even if all four of his arguments should prove false, Hume alleged that the weight of probability would still favour a non-miraculous explanation of every extraordinary phenomenon, simply because that is how the vast majority of events in the world, both ordinary and extraordinary, are explained. In short, the uniform testimony of human experience is against admitting a miraculous explanation for some wondrous occurrence. For example, one should never accept the claim that Jesus raised Lazarus from his tomb after his death four days earlier, because if X stands for the number of people that have died in the history of the world *without being* raised (a very large number!), then the odds are X to 1 (very poor odds!) against Lazarus having died and *being* raised.

Christianity, esp. pp. 73–104. Flew, however, has recently abandoned his earlier alignment with Hume and converted to theism (or at least deism), largely on the basis of the evidence of intelligent design!

17. For this summary and the response to Hume below, see Craig, 'Problem of Miracles', in Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, pp. 17–19, 22–27, 37–43. Cf. also Davis, 'Miracle at Cana', pp. 430–436; Swinburne, *Concept of Miracle*, and esp. Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*.
18. On this latter point, see esp. N. Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions*.

This line of reasoning, however, proves too much. If historians applied it consistently to their examination of human testimony, they would rule out everything unique or unusual that ever occurred, including things generally held to be non-miraculous. This was recognized at least as long ago as 1819, when Richard Whately, in his *Historical Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte*, applied Hume's method to a study of the life of Napoleon, a unique individual in many ways. Whately demonstrated by it that one has no reason to believe that most of the accounts of his life are true, a conclusion that is patently absurd. It is possible to avoid much of this absurdity by applying Hume's principles only to allegedly miraculous events, and not to all unusual events. This is the approach most of his modern defenders have adopted. But current debate tends to focus more on the historical objection than on the philosophical objection.

The historical objection

The rise of the so-called 'historical-critical method' of studying the Scriptures (see all the various disciplines from source criticism onward surveyed in chapters 1 and 2) predated the work of the late nineteenth-century German historian, Ernst Troeltsch, by more than a century, but it was he who gave the method its most objective criteria. Most relevant for a study of the miracles is his principle of analogy. In essence, Troeltsch declared that the historian has no right to accept as historical fact the account of a past event for which he has no analogy in the present. For example, one would not believe an ancient story about warfare in which an army massacres thousands of opposing soldiers in battle without suffering a single casualty, because one knows from modern experience that conventional warfare inevitably inflicts substantial losses on both sides. So too the historian who has never experienced miracles of the kind attributed to Jesus, or who after thorough investigation of the world as it exists in his age has no knowledge of such events ever occurring, may not accept that such miracles could ever have happened.¹⁹

There are at least two possible ways of replying to Troeltsch (and to Hume, to the extent that he anticipated Troeltsch here). One is to deny the validity of his principle; the other is to deny that no-one today experiences miracles. Probably both approaches are valid. To begin with the second, it is difficult to

19. Many of Troeltsch's key works have never been translated into English. Of those that have, see esp. his 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology', esp. pp. 13–14.

claim that miracles occurred only in 'Bible times'.²⁰ This question will arise again (see below, pp. 122, 129), but for now it is worth simply noting that there is a widespread awareness that much in our world today is 'paranormal' – uncanny events that cannot be explained by natural causes so far discovered.²¹ And, as in the Bible, not all the supernatural involves good actions; much supports the notion of a demonic realm as well. But even if all contemporary 'miracles' could be explained on other grounds, Troeltsch's first point seems equally questionable. Using a frequently cited illustration, how could a 'historian' from ancient days who had lived all his life in the tropics, and who had no knowledge of anyone who had travelled to more temperate climates, ever come to believe in the existence of ice?²² To paraphrase the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, who has led a movement in his homeland back to at least a limited acceptance of the miraculous, it is not the lack of analogy that suggests something is unhistorical but only the presence of an analogy to something already known to be unhistorical.²³ For example, the reason many people, including Christians who believe in the biblical miracles, dismiss most UFO sightings out of hand is not because unidentified flying objects have been proven not to exist, but because the sightings usually resemble other ones that have turned out to be air balloons, the 'northern lights', shooting stars, or the like. The same logic should be applied to the Gospel miracles.

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20. The view that tends to characterize 'cessationist' circles today is not that God does not work miracles any longer, but that today's miracles are not examples of what Paul called 'the gift(s)' of miracles. For a representative articulation, see Gaffin, 'Cessationist View', pp. 23–64. The other contributors to the volume deny cessationism.
21. See, e.g., the remarkable collections of apparently true stories of non-religious 'miracles' in Ashe, *Miracle*; and Houston, *Reported Miracles*.
22. For one of the most balanced and penetrating critiques of Troeltsch, see Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, pp. 92–115. Hume himself anticipated this objection and tried to deal with it by arguing that the person who had never seen water freeze could not rule out the possibility of ice, since he had never been in a place with the conditions necessary to obtain it (*Enquiries*, sec. 10.1, n. 2). But the same argument can apply to miracles; one who has never been in a position to experience God's direct intervention into the affairs of the world cannot rule out the possibility that he might so intervene. A more technical and more purely descriptive overview of Troeltsch's historiography appears in Drescher, *Ernst Troeltsch*, pp. 291–307.
23. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 48–49. Cf. now idem, 'Concept of Miracle', pp. 759–762.

Thus neither the scientific, nor the philosophical (nor even the historical) obstacles to miracles prevent one from believing at least some miracle stories.²⁴ But why, then, the sceptic often asks, do believers not accept every story of an alleged miracle that someone claims to have experienced? And if the answer comes back, as in the example just discussed, that many miracle stories resemble demonstrably fictitious narratives, then the sceptic looks for parallels to the Gospel miracles in other writings not accepted as recounting historical fact. In short, if the upshot of this section has been to show that miracles may be credible, the next question must be to decide if they are identifiable. More specifically, can one identify the miracles in the Gospels as genuine, especially in the light of similar stories told about other revered men of old? Should not Pannenberg's methodology lead us to reject the Gospels' miracles because of their similarities to other mythical or legendary stories?

The problem of identification

Christians have traditionally believed that the miracle stories in the Bible relate supernatural events that really happened, while at the same time they reject most or all of the similar stories told in other religious literature from the ancient world. To see if this attitude can be justified as far as the Gospels are concerned, at least two separate sets of questions need to be examined. First, what are the 'parallels' to the miracles of Jesus in the Mediterranean world of his day, and how significant are they? Second, what is the evidence for the reliability of the Gospel miracle stories, apart from the problem of alleged parallels, and how strong is that evidence?

The question of parallels

Sceptics who believe Jesus worked few or no miracles must explain how he soon came to be portrayed as a spectacular miracle-worker. Their explanations usually assume that the early church clothed Jesus in the garb of other religious figures and movements of the day in order to exalt him and commend him to others. Four main types of parallels are identified.

(1) Some point to the apocryphal gospels and acts, which contain many incredible stories about Jesus and his followers not found in the New Testament. They assume that the processes that led to the creation of these

24. For further discussion, see the comprehensive study of C. Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind*. In more popular form, cf. his *That You May Believe*.

later legends already began during the formation of the New Testament. (2) Others find closer parallels in Greek religion and mythology, in which ancient heroes over time became transformed into ‘divine men’, complete with a repertoire of miraculous deeds to authenticate them. (3) Still others identify the first-century world of magic and exorcism, not too different from what today might be called the ‘occult’, as the place to find an explanation for the traditions about Jesus. (4) Finally, some see parallels among the legends of the rabbis and other Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day, a few of which involve some remarkable miracles. Each of these approaches therefore deserves closer scrutiny.

Miracles in the New Testament apocrypha

These are the ‘parallels’ least often cited. In the second and third centuries, numerous legends grew up around the infancy and childhood of Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection, and the subsequent ministries of the apostles. Often these involved bizarre events: Mary’s hymen remaining unbroken even after Jesus’ birth (*Protevangelium of James* 19.3 – 20.1), all the Roman statues bowing down to Christ during his trial before Pilate (*Acts of Pilate* 5–6), or John effectively commanding the bedbugs to sleep peacefully in a corner of his room so that he might rest at ease (*Acts of John* 60–61)! Occasionally, there will be notable similarity between a miracle in the apocrypha and one in the canonical Gospels; for example, the boy Jesus withering up another child who interfered with his play (*Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 3), reminiscent of the canonical accounts of the withered fig tree (Mark 11:12–14, 20–21 par.). But given the gap of a century or more between these accounts, if one influenced the other it is far more likely that the New Testament influenced the apocrypha. Many other prodigies abound in this literature, but none can be shown to be early enough to have inspired the four Evangelists.²⁵

The character of most of the apocryphal miracles, and indeed of the apocrypha more generally (see pp. 272–279), in most instances differs so markedly from that of the canonical Gospels that it is hard to believe the same processes led to the formation of both. The apocrypha seem to reflect belief in a God who works miracles ‘on demand’, thereby compelling people to believe in Christianity. They often tell of wonders worked for vengeful, trivial or heretical

25. On the comparatively small number of miracles in the Nag Hammadi literature, see van Canghai, ‘Miracles évangéliques – miracles apocryphes’, pp. 2277–2298.

reasons, in a fashion hard to reconcile with the spirit of the Gospels.²⁶ Most important of all, they almost exclusively deal with the ‘gaps’ in the New Testament record. They imaginatively fill the undocumented portions of the ministries of Jesus and his followers with spectacular deeds, but for the most part avoid rewriting the canonical accounts.²⁷ When one considers the *carte blanche* provided by John 20:30 and 21:25, which point out the vast number of unrecorded events in Jesus’ adult ministry, the silence of the apocrypha speaks volumes.²⁸ Their failure to narrate further miracles from this period in Jesus’ life suggests that their authors recognized the inviolability of the scriptural accounts, and perhaps that many of the apocrypha were not even intended to be read as serious history.

The major exception is the so-called *Gospel of Peter* (see pp. 274–275). Much of this narrative is understated and frequently parallels the canonical Gospels. Nevertheless, it seems to have stemmed from a heretical branch of Christianity known as docetism. Docetism (from the Greek word *dokeō* for ‘seem’) believed that although Jesus was fully God, he only seemed to be human, in contrast with the New Testament Gospels in which Jesus’ human nature is undeniable. David Wright very carefully sifts the evidence and concludes that the testimony of the *Gospel of Peter* must be rejected as largely unreliable. Its description of the resurrection (see p. 274) forces one who would argue for its authenticity ‘to champion a case burdened by improbability’.²⁹ Dominic Crossan nevertheless tries to reconstruct a shorter, underlying form of the text, which he calls the Cross Gospel, and argues that it is a more primitive and accurate version of the crucifixion than anything in the canon.³⁰ But almost no-one in the scholarly world has followed him on this, and there is no actual evidence for the document predating the mid-to-late second century.

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26. It is possible that some of these emerged from the felt need to have Jesus ‘outdo’ the pagan miracle workers of the day with respect to their kinds of portents. See Riemer, ‘Miracle Stories’, pp. 32–47.
27. Klauck (*Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction*, p. 223) approvingly cites (and translates) Walter Bauer’s summary of the relevant motives: ‘a pious yearning to know more, a naïve curiosity, delight in colourful pictures and folktales’.
28. For several of the above points, cf. Achtemeier, ‘Jesus and the Disciples’, pp. 149–186.
29. D. F. Wright (‘Apologetic and Apocalyptic’, pp. 209–224) is less sure that the entire Gospel can be called docetic but is insistent that it cannot predate the second century, given its distinctive theological emphases.
30. Crossan, *Cross That Spoke*, esp. pp. 16–30.

Numerous distinctives in Peter, moreover, parallel the later redactional stages of Matthew's, Luke's or John's passion narratives, while several passages read most naturally as confluents of information from two, three or four of the canonical Gospels.³¹ So it is highly improbable that even a significant core of this apocryphal Gospel predated the completion of any of the canonical texts.

Greek heroes

Ancient Greek mythology overflows with stories that tell of gods and humans performing wonders quite similar to those found in the New Testament.³² Four of the most famous examples may be considered here. Alexander the Great is said to have been born of a virgin and later in his life to have accepted accolades as a god (e.g. Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 2.3–6; 27.8–11). The patron 'saint' of physicians, Asclepius, was believed to perform miraculous healings of many kinds and even to raise the dead (e.g. Ovid, *Fasti* 6.743–762). The god Dionysus once a year for the festival in his honour at his temple in the province of Elis allegedly caused wine to appear in empty water cauldrons (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 6.26.1–2). Most striking of all, a wandering first-century philosopher named Apollonius, from Tyana in Cappadocia, showed great wisdom as a child, performed healings as an adult, correctly predicted the future, exorcised demons, appeared to his followers after he died, and ascended bodily into heaven.³³ Or at least so says his biographer, Philostratus, writing in the early part of the third century. One of the most striking parallels to a miracle from the life of Jesus is found in *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 4.45 (cf. Luke 7:11–17):

A girl had died just in the hour of her marriage, and the bridegroom was following her bier lamenting as was natural his marriage left unfulfilled, and the whole of Rome was mourning with him, for the maiden belonged to a consular family. Apollonius then witnessing their grief, said: 'Put down the bier, for I will stay the tears that you are shedding for this maiden.' And withal he asked what was her name. The crowd

31. See Kirk, 'Examining Priorities', pp. 572–595; J. B. Green, 'Gospel of Peter', pp. 293–301; R. E. Brown, '*Gospel of Peter*', pp. 321–343.

32. For a list and discussion of some of the more obscure parallels, see Blackburn, "'Miracle-Working THEIOI ANDRES'", in Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, pp. 185–218.

33. For the English translations of the most important miracle stories in Philostratus' biography of Apollonius, see C. A. Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries*, pp. 245–250. For a detailed analysis of the entire collection of miracles, cf. Padilla, '*Vida de Apolonio de Tiana*'.

accordingly thought that he was about to deliver such an oration as is commonly delivered as much to grace the funeral as to stir up lamentation; but he did nothing of the kind, but merely touching her and whispering in secret some spell over her, at once woke up the maiden from her seeming death; and the girl spoke out loud, and returned to her father's house . . .³⁴

Of course virtually nobody believes that Apollonius really did this and other prodigies attributed to him. Instead, he is seen as a wise philosopher who may have been able to bring about a few remarkable healings but for the most part has been the 'victim' of his followers, who sought to turn him into a god. It is little wonder that many accuse Christianity of treating Jesus in the same way!

On the other hand, the majority of the miracles in Greek religion bear no resemblance to those of Jesus: humans talking with the animals and birds, and even transforming themselves into other creatures, charming rocks and trees with their music, appearing and disappearing, or appearing in two places at the same time, travelling the world without eating, or sending their souls on journeys while their bodies remained at home. Nevertheless, there are enough stories that resemble the Gospel miracles in some way to convince some scholars that the first Christians turned Jesus into a god much in the same way as the Greeks created divine men out of ancient heroes.³⁵

The evidence looks impressive when it is all lumped together, but taken piece by piece a different picture emerges. The life of Alexander the Great was elaborated and embellished for a period of more than 1,000 years; the earliest sources portray him as quite different from the mythological figure into which later legends transformed him. Alexander's most reliable ancient (second-century) biographer, Arrian of Nicomedia, says nothing of his 'virgin birth', so-called because his father Philip supposedly saw a snake curled up next to his wife the night before Alexander's conception and was

34. *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, pp. 457–459.

35. Many of the most important works adopting this point of view have never been translated from German, but two exceptions offering convenient summaries are H. D. Betz, 'Jesus as Divine Man', pp. 114–133 (supporting the view); and Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, pp. 265–276 (giving a critique of the view). More recently, and applying the portrayals of divine men to what she believes is the pre-Markan version of the miracles, see A. Y. Collins, 'Rulers, Divine Men', pp. 207–227.

warned in a dream to ‘seal her womb’ because a child was to be miraculously born.³⁶ Almost all the other so-called parallels to the virginal conception in the ancient Mediterranean world involved normal human sexual intercourse; it was just believed that a god had come to a woman in the form of a man. And the women were seldom virgins!³⁷ The accounts in Matthew and Luke are completely different, making it clear that no human intercourse of any kind was involved. Mary, Jesus’ mother, was simply ‘found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit’ (Matt. 1:18), just as the angel Gabriel had discreetly prophesied, ‘the Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you’ (Luke 1:35). Mithraism, an oft-cited competitor with Christianity for the allegiance of those living in the ancient Roman Empire, depicts the god Mithras born out of a rock! J. Gresham Machen observed decades ago that ‘it is difficult to see how any parallel with the Christian story could possibly be found there’.³⁸ And none of the other so-called parallels involved stories circulating already during the lives of the people, on those occasions when those said to be virgin born *were* real humans, as well as immediately afterwards (cf. both John 8:41 and Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.32), leading to their being stigmatized rather than honoured by those who disbelieved the stories of their origins. What follower of Jesus would have invented an account that led to Jesus being scorned as a *mamzer* (bastard) throughout his life as well as after his death?³⁹ More generally, and differing from the development of myth and legend elsewhere in the Graeco-Roman world, in the Gospels there is no source or source-critical layer anywhere that is free from claims of Jesus being involved with the miraculous.

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36. Plutarch also lived and wrote in the first two centuries of the Christian era, but he relates this legend with some scepticism, an attitude not retained in the later tradition. A good introduction to the development of legends about Alexander is found in Fox, *Search for Alexander*, pp. 33–46.
37. Still invaluable is the chapter entitled ‘The Theory of Pagan Derivation’, in Machen, *Virgin Birth of Christ*, pp. 317–379. Davies and Allison (*Matthew*, vol. 1, pp. 214–216), briefly survey both Jewish and Hellenistic ‘parallels’, concluding that none of them accounts for the stories we find in Matthew and Luke.
38. Machen, *Virgin Birth of Christ*, p. 344.
39. Chilton, ‘Jésus, le *mamzer*’, pp. 222–227; ‘Recovering Jesus’ *Mamzerut*’, pp. 84–110. On the historicity of the virginal conception, more generally, see also Cranfield, ‘Some Reflections’, pp. 177–189; and Buckwalter, ‘Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ’, pp. 3–14.

In the case of Asclepius, there is much debate as to whether he even existed as a real man. If he did, he was almost certainly a primitive physician and not just a miraculous healer, since his temple ‘priests’ later combined both medicine and superstition in their treatment of patients. Where miracles did occur, they might often be accounted for by what today would be called psychosomatic processes.⁴⁰ As for Dionysus, he was almost certainly an imported god of Eastern mythology from the very beginning of his appearance in Greece. In the instance of the fountains flowing with wine, even some ancient writers questioned the truth of the claim, while others explained it by believing that the priests secretly entered the temple by night to substitute liquids and deceive the masses.⁴¹

The parallels with Apollonius cannot be dismissed as quickly. But unlike the previous examples, the story that Philostratus relates arose only after Jesus’ life. If anyone modelled their ‘biography’ after someone else’s, it would have to be Philostratus, who imitated the Gospel writers and not vice versa. Few accept this theory, though, leaving the most likely conclusion that the two are entirely independent of each other.⁴² In the case of the resurrection story quoted above, even its author was never quite sure if the girl was entirely dead or just comatose. The beginning of the quotation above is more literally translated, ‘A girl had seemed to die’ (*tethnanai edokei*; cf. the phrase ‘seeming death’ later in the passage), and Philostratus goes on in the same paragraph to write of Apollonius that

whether he detected some spark of life in her, which those who were nursing her had not noticed, – for it was said that although it was raining at the time, a vapour went up from her face – or whether life was really extinct, and he restored it by the warmth

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40. See, e.g., W. K. C. Guthrie, *Greeks and Their Gods*, pp. 247–253. Wolmarans (‘Asclepius of Epidaurus’, pp. 117–127) compares and contrasts a number of the Asclepian miracle stories with those in the Gospels, although he appears to overestimate the similarities and overly play down the differences.
41. The most recent of a whole series of studies, mostly in German, debating the relationship between the Dionysus myths and the Cana miracle is Wick, ‘Jesus gegen Dionysos?’, pp. 179–198. Wick argues that the entire Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus as a superior alternative to Dionysus. The most thoroughgoing refutation of the alleged dependence of the Gospels on the Dionysiac myths remains Noetzel, *Christus und Dionysos*.
42. Cf. Koskenniemi, ‘Apollonius of Tyana’, pp. 455–467. For a brief, readable and convincing summary of what the true Apollonius was most probably like, see B. F. Harris, ‘Apollonius of Tyana’, pp. 189–199.

of his touch, is a mysterious problem which neither I myself nor those who were present could decide.

Murray Harris believes that Philostratus has portrayed Apollonius 'as a beneficent exorcist driving out an evil spirit by whispering into the victim's ear or over the victim's body a magical spell that included her name'. Harris adds that the differences between Luke and Philostratus 'are so numerous and substantial . . . that any theory of their interdependence or their dependence on a common tradition may be discounted'.⁴³

To sum up, scholars are far more convinced today than when the first edition of this book appeared in 1987 that no clear stereotype of a 'divine man' predated the second century AD.⁴⁴ Among those called 'divine men' during the time of or before the writing of the Gospels, no consistent pattern of miracle-working activity emerges, and close parallels with specific events in Jesus' life are rare. When the patterns become more consistent and the parallels closer, several generations have already elapsed since the life of Christ, so that the Evangelists cannot be accused of moulding their stories to fit a stereotyped form of Greek 'divinisation'.⁴⁵ It is likely, however, that many of the Graeco-Roman heroes were involved in some genuinely extraordinary events: probably a combination of what today could be explained scientifically with a few truly paranormal phenomena, and probably a little fraud or deception as well. What is more, similarities between Jesus and others in his day do not always mean that the supernatural in the Gospels can be dismissed, since there may have been genuine supernatural activity elsewhere. Significantly, this is the approach consistently taken by Christian apologists in the first centuries of the church's history.⁴⁶

Magic and exorcism

In the last century, over a thousand 'magical papyri' have come to light, which

43. M. J. Harris, 'Dead Restored to Life', in Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, p. 303.

44. See esp. Blackburn, *Theios Aner*. Holladay (*Theios Aner in Hellenistic Judaism*, p. 235) points out that, contrary to what one might expect, the influence of Greek thought in the Jewish world actually made Jews less, rather than more, open to any attempt to turn the heroes of their past (e.g. Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon) into godlike figures.

45. Cf. Kingsbury, 'Divine Man', pp. 243–257.

46. Remus, *Pagan-Christian Conflict*. This approach is also well defended by Clark, 'Miracles in the World Religions', pp. 209–213.

contain instructions for spells and incantations used in the Greek-speaking communities of pre-Christian Egypt.⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, certain scholars would conclude that Jesus' miracles, and especially his exorcisms, had some connection with the ancient practices of magic. Of course, this is hardly a new allegation. Mark 3:20–30 illustrates how some of the Jewish leaders attributed Jesus' power to cast out demons to an alliance with the prince of the demons, Beelzebul. And in the first centuries of church history, the predominant non-Christian explanation of Jesus' unusual powers accused him of some kind of sorcery.⁴⁸ Indeed, fear of the evil powers in the unseen world may well be one comparatively neglected factor in the Jewish leaders' more general opposition to Jesus and to his arrest and execution.⁴⁹

Modern scholarship has usually not been quite as blunt as Jewish contemporaries who accused him of demonization. But John Hull saw Jesus as employing magical techniques, in which 'superhuman, supernatural entities are linked by invisible bonds of sympathy to visible and material things'. This linkage enables the skilful magician 'to swing the enormous forces of the universe in the desired direction'.⁵⁰ Hull went on to link this use of intermediate means most closely with exorcism: 'There does not seem to be a single reference in pre-Christian or first-century literature to the expulsion of demons troubling the mind or causing disease that is not associated with magic. This then was the sort of figure the demon-mastering Christ would appear to be.'⁵¹

Morton Smith went even further and, like the ancient pagans who interpreted 'eating flesh' and 'drinking blood' as meaning that Christians practised cannibalism, linked the Lord's Supper with some occultic ritual whose true meaning has been largely suppressed. Smith also claimed to believe in the authenticity of an eighteenth-century manuscript he allegedly discovered, purporting to be the work of the first-century Christian Clement, which hints at secret, nightly, and possibly homosexual relationships between Jesus and Mark.⁵² Finally, Otto Böcher, who, like Hull, linked exorcism with magic,

47. The standard collection in English is H. D. Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*.

48. The Jews gave this as a rationale for his execution (see *b. Sanhedrin* 43a), while a second-century theologian, Origen, had to defend Christianity against a similar charge by the pagan philosopher Celsus (*Against Celsus* 1.38).

49. Welch, 'Factor of Fear in the Trial of Jesus', pp. 284–312; idem, 'Miracles, *Maleficium*, and *Maiestas*', pp. 349–383.

50. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic*, pp. 37–38.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.

52. M. Smith, *Secret Gospel*; see also his *Jesus the Magician*.

proceeded to interpret virtually all the biblical miracles as exorcisms. Thus he noted how the Gospels use the same word 'rebuke' for describing Jesus casting out a demon (Mark 1:25), healing a fever (Luke 4:39) and stilling a storm (Mark 4:39). Böcher believed that Jesus' contemporaries attributed virtually all sickness and natural calamity to demonic influence.⁵³

Few scholars have fully endorsed the extreme positions of Smith and Böcher. Smith himself, in order to defend his hypothesis, had to argue that the present form of the Gospels represents an attempt to 'cover up' the truth about Jesus, and yet he claimed to believe that fragments of a book he had supposedly discovered, which has now been shown almost certainly to be a hoax that Smith himself perpetrated, had better preserved the truth (see pp. 276–278)!⁵⁴ Edwin Yamauchi convincingly refuted Böcher's equation of all diseases with the demonic by demonstrating that throughout the ancient Middle East illnesses were attributed to many different causes and were often dealt with in surprisingly advanced, 'scientific' ways.⁵⁵ In the Gospels the clearest example that would seem to support Böcher is the story of the epileptic (Matt. 17:15),⁵⁶ who is viewed as demon possessed and is therefore exorcized. Yet this is the only place in the Gospels where references to disease and demon possession appear in the same passage, so it is more probable that in this solitary instance the possession was causing the sickness. This of course raises the larger question of how one should interpret the exorcism stories and their apparent link with magic that Hull pointed out.

More recently, research into the concept of the 'evil eye' and the 'good eye' in ancient Mediterranean thought has suggested more plausible links (or at least links that might have been perceived in some people's eyes) between Jesus and magic. A powerful 'spirit-person' was often believed to be able to do good or evil of various kinds simply through an intense stare at another person or object.⁵⁷

53. Böcher, *Neue Testament*.

54. Even early on, reviews of Smith were sharply critical even by many who were also sceptical of the Gospel miracle stories. See esp. Kee, *Miracle*, pp. 211–212, n. 69.

55. Yamauchi, 'Magic or Miracle?', in Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, pp. 89–183.

56. Contra the AV and Phillips's translation, which call him a 'lunatic(k)'. The symptoms described closely parallel those of a grand mal seizure: premonition, unconsciousness, muscular rigidity, jerking, limpness and recovery. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 129–130.

57. See, e.g. Kern-Ulmer, 'Power of the Evil Eye', pp. 344–353. For pre-Christian antecedents, cf. Elliott, 'Evil Eye in the First Testament', pp. 147–159.

Given the number of times Jesus looked intently before he healed or exorcized people (Mark 3:5/Luke 6:10; Mark 5:32; cf. Matt. 9:22; Mark 7:34; Luke 13:12; Luke 17:14; John 5:6; John 9:1) and given that exorcism in particular comprised part of spiritual warfare, one could understand how he could be understood as participating in ‘magic’ of some kind. But, in fact, in a sizable majority of the healing/exorcism accounts in the four Gospels, no reference to Jesus looking or seeing anything appears. In several of the cases where it does, it appears merely to mean that he observed the situation. Indeed, a better case for good- and evil-eye background can be made for some of Jesus’ *teaching* than for his miracle-working (see, e.g. Matt. 6:22–23/Luke 11:34; Matt. 20:15).⁵⁸

For most Westerners today, moreover, with the exception of some charismatic Christians, the danger is not that they see all sickness as demonic but that they see none of it that way. For them, the scientific, philosophical and historical objections to belief in miracles, treated earlier in this chapter, apply equally strongly to belief in Satan and his demons. But in addition to the responses to those objections given above, it is important to add here that contemporary experience is making it more and more difficult to deny the reality of demon possession, even in Western society today. Anyone who has not studied a serious, factual account of the frightening resurgence of the practice and results of occult and Satanic rituals in many corners of today’s otherwise highly rationalistic and technological culture should do so before trying to dismiss demons as the outmoded invention of primitive people.⁵⁹

Some of the parallels between Jesus’ exorcisms and healings and those of others in his day are admittedly noteworthy (e.g. Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 4.20; *b. Pesabim* 112b; Josephus, *Antiquities* 8.46–49). Features found elsewhere in ancient accounts of exorcism that are also apparent in the Gospels include (1) the attempt to discover the demon’s name in order to gain mastery over him (Mark 5:9), (2) the use of touch or the laying on of hands (Matt. 9:29; Mark 6:5; Luke 4:40) and (3) the application of spittle (Mark 7:33; 8:23; John 9:6). On the other hand, the differences far outweigh the similarities. Point 1 occurs only once in the four main exorcisms that Mark recounts, while 2 and 3 *never* occur in exorcisms but only in healings and were often practised as legitimate, therapeutic treatment.⁶⁰ When Jesus does touch people as part of the healing process, or,

58. Bridges and Wheeler, ‘Evil Eye’, pp. 69–79; Fiensy, ‘Importance’, pp. 75–88; Elliott, ‘Matthew 20:1–15’, pp. 52–65.

59. See, e.g. Peck, *Glimpses of the Devil*; Finlay, *Demons*; and several of the chapters in A. N. S. Lane, *Unseen World*. For a global perspective, cf. Noreau et al., *Deliver Us from Evil*.

60. Yamauchi, ‘Magic or Miracle?’, pp. 135–140.

more dramatically, when they reach out to him as if a mere touch of his clothing could cure them (e.g. Mark 5:28–30), he makes it clear that it is the people's faith and not any magical methods that saves them (cf. Mark 5:34). Jesus' healing others with a mere touch of his hands separates the earliest Christian miracle stories from almost all other pre-Christian accounts of miraculous healing.⁶¹

Furthermore, certain common exorcistic practices never occur in the Gospel accounts of either sick or demon-possessed people. Jesus uses none of the elaborate spells or incantations, often involving the careful repetition of nonsense syllables, so prevalent in his day. He does not alter the tone of his voice, he does not appeal to any authority outside himself (even Christian exorcism differed in this respect in that it specifically invoked the name of Jesus), and he does not even pray to God before commanding the demons to come out. Finally, no magical objects appear, in sharp contrast to the array of paraphernalia listed by Graham Twelftree for Jewish and Greek 'parallels': incense, rings, a bowl of water, amulets, palm-tree prickles, wood chips, ashes, pitch, cummin, dog's hair, thread, trumpets, olive branches, and marjoram.⁶² Neither does Jesus adopt the common practice of identifying himself with a deity known to the demon to intimidate him, nor do Christ's exorcisms occur apart from a moral context: calling the individual to a changed lifestyle and allegiance.⁶³ And not only are the New Testament exorcisms different from other accounts of Jesus' contemporaries; they also vary among themselves in subtle ways that suggest that they are not wholesale inventions of later Christians.⁶⁴ Jesus was most certainly an exorcist, but not, in any typical sense of the term, a magician.⁶⁵

61. Lalleman, 'Healing by a Mere Touch', pp. 355–361.

62. Twelftree, 'EI DE . . . EGŌ EKBALLŌ TA DAIMONIA . . .?', in Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, p. 383. For a book-length treatment of the historicity and meaning of Jesus' exorcisms, see idem, *Jesus the Exorcist*.

63. For both of these points, see Peek, 'Early Galilean Ministry and Miracles', p. 284.

64. See, e.g., Chilton's study 'Exorcism and History: Mark 1:21–28', in Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, pp. 253–271.

65. Some definitions of magic are so broad as to make Jesus a magician, but they risk rendering him indistinguishable from, say, an eccentric business executive! Thus Aune ('Magic in Early Christianity', p. 1539), defines magical wonders as those that 'occur within a context of social deviance in which widely accepted but generally unattainable goals highly valued . . . are thought to be accomplished for particular individuals through the application of generally successful management techniques'. More helpful are several of the contributions to Labahn and Peerboite, *A Kind of Magic*.

An older era of scholarship often distinguished magic from miracle by contrasting the manipulative with the supplicative. Demanding that God or the gods respond to prayer or some ritual reflected ‘magic’, petitioning the divine without insisting on one’s way could lead to a ‘miracle’. With these categories it would be hard to know where to place Jesus, because his authoritative commands seemingly left no room for ‘failure’, yet he was not addressing God at all or enacting any rituals. More recent study leads to a more helpful taxonomy. As Andy Reimer summarizes:

When an individual performs an extraordinary event which is understood to be a mediation of some sort of divine power, it will be classed a miracle if it is not performed for some personal advantage by the miracle-worker, it is a particularly powerful display of mediated divine power, it is not overtly undermining the acceptable social and political structures of a given community, and/or it can be understood to occur within an established religious framework. On the other hand, it will be classed as magic if it is performed for the personal advantage of the intermediary, it is carried out in such a way as to suggest a manipulation of divine beings, it is overtly undermining acceptable social and political structures within a given community, and/or it is understood to be an act of religious deviance.⁶⁶

These definitions enable us to see how Jesus’ opponents could focus on his working outside the established circles of Jewish institutions and authority and thus charge him with sorcery, while his followers could highlight the good that was accomplished and the spirit in which Jesus operated and refute the charge.⁶⁷ Had not Jesus himself explained that ‘by their fruit you will recognize them’ (Matt. 7:16)?

Charismatic Judaism

As a resurgence of interest in Jesus’ Jewish roots has swept over New Testament studies as a whole since the late 1970s or so, it is only natural that the search for parallels to Jesus’ miracle-working activity should shift from the pagan to the Jewish world. Of course, the apocryphal Gospels, stories of

66. Reimer, *Miracle and Magic*, p. 250.

67. Indeed, the toned-down legacy of ‘Jesus the magician’ today would appear to be ‘Jesus the Spirit-person’ who is possessed by God and a conduit for God’s spiritual power to flow through him to the world, including in the working of certain kinds of unusual actions once deemed miraculous. See, e.g., Davies, *Jesus the Healer*; and Borg, *Meeting Jesus*.

divine men, and accounts of magic and exorcism had Jewish counterparts, and not a few scholars apply more than one of the three categories to Jesus' miracles. But most of the 'parallels' examined so far appeared in circles dominated by Greek thought, more prevalent outside the land of Israel than inside. Today most scholars recognize that valid parallels to Jesus' life and ministry, if they are to be found at all, will more likely come from a Palestinian environment, so that the lives of key first-century Judean and Galilean leaders are being examined with greater care.

The Jewish scholar Geza Vermes, perhaps more than anyone else, has propounded the view that Jesus can be likened to what he calls 'charismatic' Jewish teachers of the first century. These were figures who, like Jesus, wandered about gathering followers, relatively independent of the more established sects of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots. Two who are especially linked with miracle-working are Honi the Rain-maker and Rabbi Hanina ben-Dosa. The former was said to have been able to pray for rain and receive it after the fashion of Elijah in the Old Testament. The latter has a whole series of miracles attributed to him: surviving a poisonous snakebite unharmed, healing the sick from a distance simply by the fluency of his prayer to God, having bread appear in his wife's oven when they had run out, enabling a lamp to burn on vinegar rather than oil when his daughter accidentally poured in the wrong liquid, and miraculously extending the beams on a neighbour's house when they turned out to be too short to support it adequately!⁶⁸

On the one hand, it is refreshing to see scholars, especially Jewish ones, appreciating the distinctively Jewish milieu from which Jesus emerged. The more correspondences that occur between the Gospel portrait of Jesus and the known facts of first-century Palestinian Judaism, the more convincingly it can be argued that the Gospels are accurate. On the other hand, it is doubtful, at least in the case of the miracles, that the parallels are any closer here than with the previous cases examined. A. E. Harvey's analysis, from his 1980 Bampton Lectures in Oxford, is so incisive and carefully worded that it deserves extended citation:

The most common miracle attributed to holy men of his [Jesus'] time and culture was that of procuring rainfall: an important and welcome feat in a country absolutely dependent on seasonal rain. But this is something never credited to Jesus. Again Jewish

68. For complete details, see W. S. Green, 'Palestinian Holy Men', pp. 619–647. More succinctly and recently, cf. Avery-Peck, 'Galilean Charismatic and Rabbinic Piety', pp. 152–162. The seminal work of Geza Vermes was *Jesus the Jew*, pp. 69–78.

miracle-workers certainly succeeded in curing diseases, but there is a notable absence of reports of the curing of any kind of lameness or paralysis . . . Above all, Jesus is credited with three instances of a very notable miracle indeed: that of raising a dead person to life. The frequently alleged parallels to this are highly questionable. The Jewish tradition knows of no actual instances of such a feat: it merely suggests that a rabbi of exceptional holiness might in theory be capable of it . . . Stories of miraculous deeds are mainly confined to a small group of men whom it has been customary to call ‘charismatics’ and whom the rabbinic sources themselves call, significantly, ‘men of deed’. These men – Honi the Rain-maker and Hanina ben Dosa are the only two of whom we have any detailed knowledge – have a very clear frame of reference for their miraculous feats. They were men of prayer, and the degree of intimacy which they gained with their heavenly father afforded them an almost physical guarantee that their prayers would be answered . . . There is a notable humorousness – almost a flippancy – about the way they were narrated which suggests that these ‘deeds’ were by no means regarded as the most significant thing about them.⁶⁹

Eric Eve’s recent, comprehensive survey of extra-biblical Jewish miracle stories from pre-Christian and early Christian times comes to very similar conclusions.⁷⁰

The picture in the Jewish sources differs noticeably from that of the Gospels, which usually depict Jesus relying entirely on his own authority, without praying to God before working a miracle. The audible prayer before the raising of Lazarus includes the explanation that it is only for the benefit of the crowd (John 11:42). The Gospels also place the miracles in the centre and not at the periphery of his ministry, and they describe his wonderful deeds as signs of the kingdom of God that was arriving. It seems fair to accept Harvey’s conclusions about the apparent parallels between Jesus’ miracles and those of his contemporaries: ‘The style of the “Charismatic” is not the one chosen by Jesus . . . We have come to the remarkable conclusion that the miraculous activity of Jesus conforms to no known pattern.’⁷¹ The fact that these observations come from a scholar who is still sceptical of the accuracy of at

69. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, pp. 100, 104.

70. Eve, *Jewish Context of Jesus’ Miracles*. Eve refers explicitly and favourably to Harvey’s study on p. 270. Eve’s treatment of charismatic holy men spans pp. 272–295. The closest Jewish parallels in fact turn out to be the biblical ones, esp. Elijah and Elisha, and, to a lesser extent, Moses – supporting the picture of Jesus as a prophet, and more than a prophet.

71. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, pp. 107, 113.

least certain parts of the Gospels makes those observations all the more impressive.

The question of reliability

General considerations

The uniqueness of Jesus' miracles, when compared with the various extra-biblical stories sometimes viewed as parallels, and combined with their intelligibility in an early first-century Palestinian Jewish context, creates a powerful argument for their authenticity by the double similarity and dissimilarity criterion (see pp. 311–312). The closest parallels to Jesus' miracles in fact appear in the Old Testament, especially with the miracles of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 17 – 2 Kgs 8), and later in the New Testament, especially with the ministries of Peter and Paul (see throughout Acts). Thus there is primarily continuity between Jesus and the Jewish Scriptures and between Jesus and the movement that outlived him, but primarily discontinuity between his miracles and the other Jewish or Graeco-Roman miracle stories of the day. This uniqueness extends in the majority of cases to the simplicity and directness of Jesus' style, the immediacy with which his power takes effect, and the restrained nature of the narratives that understate the sensational. All these features fit well with the motives attributed to Jesus' miracle-working activity. Jesus is concerned both to reward and to stimulate faith, as well as being moved by sheer compassion for people's needs, even when he has to defy Pharisaic tradition en route.⁷²

Even more significant, though, is the relationship between his miracles and his teachings. When Jesus came to the synagogue in his home town, Nazareth, at the start of his Galilean ministry, he astounded his friends and family by his exposition of Isaiah 61:1, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release for the captives and recovery of sight for the blind'. What stunned the congregation was Jesus' declaration, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:18, 21).⁷³ In the light of this claim that Jesus himself was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, it is easy to lose sight of a secondary but very

72. Particularly helpful in treating the authenticity and the meaning of the miracles, overall as well as text by text, is Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*. Cf. also Latourelle, *Miracles of Jesus*.

73. On the authenticity of these verses, see Chilton, 'Announcement in Nazara', France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2, pp. 147–172. For a detailed study of their significance, see Prior, *Jesus as Liberator*.

important feature of the quotation: Jesus' preaching and healing are bound up inseparably with each other (cf. also Matt. 4:23; 9:35). The same combination recurs when the imprisoned John the Baptist sends disciples to Jesus to see if he really is the promised Messiah. Jesus replies, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor' (Matt. 11:4b-5). Jesus' marvellous deeds are thus more than acts of mercy, and more than pointers to his divine origin, for as already noted his enemies could allege that the supernatural source of his power was the devil rather than God. Instead, they are primarily signs and indications of the fact that the Messianic age for which the Jews had so long been waiting, the time of the new covenant and the era of the kingdom of God inaugurated on earth, had now arrived in the person and ministry of Jesus. Signs and indications, however, do not add up to proof. Just as Jesus' teaching could remain obscure to those who were not given the secrets of the kingdom, so also even his own disciples could witness the feedings of five thousand and four thousand and still complain shortly afterwards that they had no bread. Jesus responds (Mark 8:17-18) by quoting the same prophecy (Isa. 6:9) that he did when they failed to grasp his parables (Mark 4:11-12).⁷⁴ This cryptic nature further sets Jesus' miracles apart from most of the others we have examined.

In all these ways, then, the accounts of Jesus' miracles differ from the other miracle stories of the ancient Mediterranean world. Moreover, if one accepts Jesus' teaching about his ushering in the kingdom of God, then one ought to accept the reality of his miracles. The two go hand in hand, since Jesus uses the miracles to authenticate his teaching. And it is fair to say that modern scholarship, even of the most sceptical variety, has agreed that if anything in the Gospels is reliable it is the teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God.⁷⁵ It is also important to recall that in the Gospels no section of any size is free from the miraculous. It is impossible, despite the optimism of nineteenth-century liberalism, to strip away layers of tradition and lay bare an account of a Jesus who never worked miracles. Not only are the miracles found in all four Gospels, in all four 'sources' (Mark, Q, M and L) and in numerous literary forms, but they are also referred to in other sections of the New Testament (cf., e.g., Acts 10:38; 1 Cor. 15:4-8; Heb. 2:4; 2 Pet. 1:17-18), the testimony of the first-century

74. On the link between the miracles, the kingdom and the Messiah, see esp. Seccombe, *King of God's Kingdom*, pp. 277-318.

75. The literature on this topic is vast; for good detailed studies, see esp. Chilton, *Pure Kingdom*; and Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*.

Jewish historian Josephus, and the compilation of Jewish oral traditions known as the Talmud.⁷⁶ The theological emphases of the Evangelists themselves, often focusing on the disciples' response, can mute the original Christological focus (e.g. 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!' [Mark 4:41 pars.]), making the latter more likely authentic. These miracles also include Aramaic words transliterated into Greek (e.g. *Talitha koum* in Mark 5:41) and embarrassing details (such as Jesus' question 'Who touched my clothes?' in Mark 5:30) not likely invented by later Christians. John Meier, whose multi-volume work on the historical Jesus still in progress already exceeds all other recent counterparts in detail and even-handedness, in a five-hundred-page analysis of the miracle stories in the canonical Gospels concludes:

Viewed globally, the tradition of Jesus' miracles is more firmly supported by the criteria of historicity than are a number of other well-known and often readily accepted traditions about his life and ministry . . . Put dramatically but with not too much exaggeration: if the miracle tradition from Jesus' public ministry were to be rejected *in toto* as unhistorical, so should every other Gospel tradition about him.⁷⁷

Evidence for the general reliability of the Gospel portrait of Jesus as a miracle-worker does not, however, prove the authenticity of every individual miracle. The form of the miracle stories varies, so further analysis requires differentiation of various categories of miracles. The healings and exorcisms need little additional treatment; the latter have already been discussed, and the former are now seldom questioned, even by fairly sceptical scholars. Too many medical miracles continue today among religious people who believe that God can supernaturally heal people for even the most die-hard secularist to dismiss all of them as fraudulent; though, contrary to some Christians' expectations, God does not work miracles 'on demand' as an automatic reward for

76. On Josephus, see *Jewish Antiquities* 18.3.3. Parts of this famous passage about Jesus have often been suspected as coming from later Christian scribes, but the reference to his alleged ability to work miracles is usually not one of them. Graham Twelftree ('Jesus in Jewish Traditions', p. 304) finds this portion authentic but cautions against a simple equation of Josephus' term 'surprising feats' or 'paradoxes' with 'miracles'. On the Talmud see below, pp. 252–254. Other possible, but by no means certain, references to Jesus' miracles in ancient and medieval Jewish history are discussed in van der Loos, *Miracles of Jesus*, pp. 160–170.

77. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 630. Cf. C. A. Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries*, pp. 214–243.

faith (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7–10). But if Gospel criticism less frequently challenges the authenticity of the healing and exorcism narratives, it still debates their interpretation. Some will attribute unexplained healings to the power of suggestion, which science and medicine may one day better understand and control. Similarly, demon possession is often redefined along the line of ‘any altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit’,⁷⁸ without necessarily accepting that people who think they are demon possessed really are. But, whatever the explanation, the facts remain. People are cured of sickness and freed by exorcism of what they believe is spirit possession, apart from any demonstrable, natural causes. To assume that Jesus, or any other religious leader past or present, had similar power does not defy reason in the least. The presence of such power does not by itself determine the nature of its source; Christians have consistently affirmed the existence of both the divine and the demonic. One must examine the purpose of the ‘miracles’ in question and the types of religious claims made by the people involved.⁷⁹

Nature miracles

The growing willingness of many scholars to accept at least some of Jesus’ miracles seldom extends to the stories in which he demonstrates his power over forces in the natural world.⁸⁰ Here there seem to be no modern counterparts to which one can appeal. Yet there is also a growing recognition that, when secondary emphases of the Gospel writers are laid to one side, the main point of these miracles in every instance involves the powerful arrival of the kingdom of God.⁸¹ The miracles are dramatic demonstrations of God’s reign,

78. Crapanzano, ‘Introduction’, in Crapanzano and Garrison, *Case Studies in Spirit Possession*, p. 7.

79. Ferguson, *Demonology*, p. 114. Many modern religions and sects offer initiates ‘scientific’ methods for developing the power of mind over matter for positive ends. The potentially destructive long-term physical effects, like their more overtly religious claims, are kept well hidden. Of many possible examples, see the striking autobiography by my personal friend and student (Beekman, *Enticed by the Light*).

80. For conclusive documentation of this fact, see G. Maier’s survey, ‘Zur neutestamentlichen Wunderexegese’, in Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, pp. 49–87. Among many more recent examples that could be listed, see Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 303–353; and Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 281–315.

81. For more detail on this and the rest of this section, see Blomberg, ‘Miracles as Parables’, in Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, pp. 327–359. Cf. esp. Baum, ‘Heilungswunder Jesu’, pp. 5–15.

with imagery often very similar to that found in the parables. By the same principle that applies to the stories of Jesus' healings, one ought logically to accept that any accounts that fit in so well with the undeniably authentic portion of his teaching stand a good chance of being reliable history themselves. A few illustrations may clarify.

At first glance, the story of Jesus' cursing the fig tree (Mark 11:12–14, 20–25) seems more worthy of apocryphal writings than of Scripture, especially when Mark specifically states that it was not the season for figs (v. 14). When one realizes, however, that Jesus' action derives from his belief that the kingdom of God was in the process of arriving, then the passage makes more sense. The fig tree was a well-known symbol for Israel in the Old Testament (cf., e.g., Jer. 24:1–10; Mic. 7:1–6; Hos. 9:10), and Jesus had already told a parable about a fig tree in danger of being cut down, clearly symbolizing the peril in which the Jewish nation placed herself by rejecting her Messiah (Luke 13:6–9). Jesus, like many of the Old Testament prophets before him, was dramatizing his message with an object lesson or 'enacted parable'. Just as he withered a fig tree that bore no fruit, so also God would take away the privileges of Israel if she did not repent and turn to her appointed Saviour.⁸²

A similar symbolic explanation makes sense of the water turned into wine. In a story otherwise bereft of explanatory detail, John's reference to the six stone jars 'used by the Jews for ceremonial washing' (John 2:6) stands out. When one recalls the parable of Jesus that compares his teaching and ministry to new wine and wineskins (Mark 2:22), this reference no longer seems as puzzling. The water represents the old ways of Judaism; the wine, the new covenant relationship established by Christ, a relationship he would make explicit in the Last Supper when he identified the cup of wine with his blood soon to be shed.⁸³

It is unclear what amount of the symbolism in these two incidents was obvious to those who first witnessed the miracles, but awareness of it clearly predated the Evangelists' redaction, since their emphases lie elsewhere: faith in the context of prayer and forgiveness more generally (Mark 11:24–25); and Jesus' glory, the disciples' belief and Mary's relationship with her son (John 2:4–5, 11). As with the parables, some of what Jesus originally intended by his miracles may have remained obscure to his disciples until after they reflected on them further (cf. Mark 4:11–12 with 8:17–18).

82. Cf., e.g., France, *Gospel of Mark*, pp. 439–441.

83. Cf., e.g., Kruse, *Gospel according to John*, pp. 91–96.

Similar symbolism can be found, to one extent or another, in the stilling of the storm, the feedings of the multitudes, the walking on the water and the miraculous catches of fish. Jesus provides food in abundance and masters the wind and the waves, because God's kingdom was to bring an overflowing harvest and complete protection from danger. This symbolism has led some scholars to suppose that the nature miracles were invented by someone in the early church on the basis of the parallels with the parables, or with similar stories in Old Testament or extra-biblical sources. But a detailed examination of each alleged parallel renders this assumption unfounded. As already noted, the closest parallels are with some of the Old Testament miracles associated with Elijah and Elisha. And unless it is doubted that those miracles occurred, such parallelism can only enhance the case for the truth of the Gospel stories. Unfortunately, Old Testament critics often tend to be even more sceptical about the supernatural than their New Testament counterparts. The critical problem with the miracles of Elijah and Elisha has traditionally centred on their apparently arbitrary and frivolous nature; the classic example is Elisha making a sunken axe-head float on the river! Leah Bronner, though, has shown that all these miracles could have originated in conscious opposition to similar claims by the worshippers of the Canaanite god Baal. Thus in the case of the floating axe-head, Elisha is demonstrating his power over the river, as he does elsewhere in parting the waters of the Jordan, and showing that it is Yahweh and not Baal who rules the waves.⁸⁴

A similar problem occurs in connection with one apparent miracle so far unmentioned. In Matthew 17:27, after explaining to Peter that the sons of the king are exempt from paying tax, Jesus concludes, 'But so that we may not cause offence, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.' This apparent miracle differs from the others in the Gospels in several ways. It is the only one Jesus works, at least in part, to benefit himself. It is the only one in which he is not relieving some acute, human need. The next closest example would be the miracle at Cana, but running out of wine at a wedding was at least an acute social embarrassment.

84. Bronner, *Stories of Elijah and Elisha*. Bronner does not believe all the stories to be authentic, for other reasons, but her work has dealt with the most serious problem involved. The high cost of iron among the majority poor and the fact that the axe was borrowed may well also show that 'Elisha . . . wields the power of Yahweh for the poor' (J. C. Long, Jr., *1 & 2 Kings*, p. 333).

Richard Bauckham diminishes the force of these observations by arguing that the miracle is designed to teach the lesson ‘that God does not exact taxation from his people’, but provides for them, ‘as a father provides for his children’.⁸⁵ Bauckham also speculates that Jesus and his followers at this particular time might have been almost penniless. Moreover, as F. F. Bruce points out, the fish known as the *musht* was apparently attracted to foreign objects in the Sea of Galilee, so that the miracle would not have consisted of Peter’s finding the coin in the fish’s mouth but in Jesus’ knowing in advance that it would be there.⁸⁶

Another distinctive of Matthew 17:27, however, might prove even more important in helping to understand what Jesus meant. Unlike all the other miracles in the Gospels, this one is never *narrated*. In other words, Matthew never says that Jesus actually did anything unusual; all he describes is a somewhat cryptic command. He may mean to imply that Peter went and did as he was told and found the coin in the fish’s mouth, though Matthew never actually says this. In view of Peter’s consistent tendency to misunderstand Jesus, one should be cautious about assuming too much. In verses 25–26, Jesus has just been speaking to Peter in a metaphor about a king and his sons, so it would be quite natural if Jesus did not intend verse 27 to be taken literally either. Perhaps he is using a dramatic figure of speech to make the point that Bauckham says he is making, without actually expecting Peter to act upon it. Something very similar happens in Luke 22:35–38: Jesus asks the disciples a ‘yes–no’ question (cf. Matt. 17:25), follows it up with a command (regarding preparation for battle) and they misunderstand by interpreting it literally.⁸⁷ Peter persists in this misunderstanding when he cuts off Malchus’ ear in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 18:10). But whether the verse be literal or figurative, Bauckham’s work has at least shown that it need not be seen as out of step with what Jesus teaches elsewhere. Jesus’ unique method for paying the tax financially inconveniences no-one. In the context of a narrative that

85. Bauckham, ‘Coin in the Fish’s Mouth’, in Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, p. 224.

86. Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, p. 73.

87. Assuming the correctness of the view that takes Jesus’ concluding ‘It is enough’ as an outburst of exasperation. For more on the possibly metaphorical nature of Matt. 17:27, and on the parabolic nature of the actual miracle stories, see Blomberg, ‘New Testament Miracles and Higher Criticism’, pp. 425–438. On this specific verse, cf. more briefly, France, *Gospel according to Matthew*, pp. 268–269; N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, pp. 25.

suggests that Jesus and the disciples should be free from taxation, the ‘miracle’, if it is even that, may also point to God’s sovereignty and compassion for his people.⁸⁸

Reanimations

Just as some would equate apparently miraculous healings with the power of mind over matter and apparent demon-possession with psychological malaise, so one might suggest a natural explanation for the reanimation narratives in the Gospels.⁸⁹ For example, one could cite numerous incidents in modern hospitals in which people have been resuscitated a considerable time after their vital signs ceased (often called ‘near-death’ experiences). Such ‘parallels’ might just explain a Gospel reanimation account like that of Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:21–24, 35–43), who had died only moments before Jesus’ arrival (though the crowds’ astonishment scarcely suggests a mere resuscitation),⁹⁰ but they afford no help in making credible the story of Lazarus’ revivification after four days in the grave (John 11:17). Not surprisingly, most scholars seek instead to explain these stories as some kind of fiction.

More helpful is the study by Murray Harris, who points out a number of often overlooked details that would not have been likely to appear in a fictitious narrative. In the case of the reanimation of the widow of Nain’s son (Luke 7:11–17), it is interesting that Jesus speaks to the mother before approaching the bier. This corresponds exactly to the custom in Galilee (the province in which Nain is located), at least as attested in the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 153a).⁹¹ There the women in Galilean funeral processions are said to have

88. Given the previous references to fish in Matthew (7:10; 14:17, 19; 15:36), the Evangelist’s audience would link fish ‘with God’s compassionate and powerful actions in overcoming limiting circumstances, in supplying human need, and in displaying God’s sovereignty’ (Carter, ‘Paying the Tax to Rome’, p. 27). Carter thinks the story is being used after AD 70 and applied to Rome rather than before 70 with the Jewish temple tax in Jerusalem, as in the original account, but this specific point remains the same either way.

89. The term ‘resurrection’ will be reserved for an awakening to a life that does *not* involve subsequent death. ‘Reanimation’ will be used interchangeably with ‘resuscitation’ and ‘revivification’ for the revival of a corpse when there is no reason to assume the person did not die again later.

90. On arguments for the historicity of this passage, see Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, pp. 305–307.

walked in front of the casket, while in the better-known province of Judea, they walked behind it. It would have been quite easy for the foreigner Luke to have erred on this detail unless he was relying on accurate historical sources. Similarly, a writer inventing this story might well have depicted joy rather than awe as the initial reaction to the miracle, would probably have chosen a more significant city than Nain for its occurrence, and could easily have given more details about what happened to the young man after his life was restored. Harris concludes, ‘As an account of the instantaneous reanimation of a corpse, the pericope is remarkably restrained and unadorned; sensational detail is conspicuously absent. Such extraordinary sobriety of diction points to its authenticity.’⁹²

The same kind of detail coupled with restraint characterizes even as spectacular a story as the raising of Lazarus. Although the overall passage is lengthy (John 11:1–44), the vast majority involves Jesus’ interaction with others prior to the miracle itself. The actual details surrounding the reanimation all show detailed knowledge of local custom: the presence of the townspeople, the kinds of mourners, the design of the tomb, and the wrapping of the grave clothes. Writers of fiction would not likely have had Jesus appear heartless by deliberately delaying his departure for Bethany for two days (v. 6), or have both Martha and Mary appear to rebuke Jesus for his tardiness (vv. 21, 32), or portray him with the strong emotions of weeping and anger (vv. 35–38), both easily misconstrued in this context as a sign of human weakness. The absence of this miracle from the Synoptics is guaranteed once Mark made the choice (followed by both Matthew and Luke) to narrate only one trip of the adult Jesus to Jerusalem, just before his death. Because John 11, like much of John 5–11, narrates events that occurred on other trips to Jerusalem, its contents do not appear in the other three Gospels. The four days that Lazarus has been dead makes the reanimation quantitatively but not qualitatively different from the reawakening of Jairus’ daughter and the Nain widow’s son in the Synoptics.⁹³ Other objections to the historicity of this passage typically involve issues that affect all parts of John’s Gospel (on which, see ch. 5 in this book). Rudolf

91. A distinction between Galilean and Judean custom of this nature has a *prima facie* probability of dating back to the first century, since from early in the second century and onwards the Jews were largely dispersed from Palestine.

92. M. J. Harris, ‘Dead Restored to Life’, p. 299.

93. For all these and related points, see, in more detail, Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, pp. 164–172.

Schnackenburg, whose three-volume commentary on John is one of the most comprehensive and sanest critical works on the Fourth Gospel, admits that John's account must be based on a historical core of material about 'an extraordinary event in Bethany'.⁹⁴

Ultimately, though, one's view of the trustworthiness of the reanimation narratives will almost always hinge on one's view of the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus himself. If his resurrection is believable, then the reanimations pose no problem. If his resurrection is not credible, then there is probably not enough positive evidence to support the authenticity of the reanimation stories on their own. This leads to a discussion of the last major topic of this chapter, the resurrection of Jesus.

The resurrection

As might be expected, the amount of scholarly discussion of the resurrection of Jesus far surpasses the quantity devoted to any other miracle in the Bible. N. T. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003) far surpasses any other work in its erudition and comprehensive treatment of the issues involved.⁹⁵ Here we can just touch on some of the most crucial issues regularly debated within the academic world, while also summarizing some of the age-old arguments for the resurrection's credibility that still seem valid.⁹⁶

Testimony of the Gospels

Today comparatively few scholars opt for the alternatives to belief in the resurrection that have been most commonly offered down through the ages, and that still surface more often in popular literature. These include the swoon theory, according to which Jesus did not quite die on the cross, but revived in the tomb, managed to escape, and appeared to his disciples before expiring shortly thereafter;⁹⁷ the original counterclaim of the Jewish authorities that

94. Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St John*, vol.2, p. 345. Cf. also Latourelle, *Miracles of Jesus*, pp. 229–238; Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, pp. 308–310; and (much more cautiously) Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, pp. 798–832.

95. Briefer and much more popular in level, but still persuasive, is Habermas and Licona, *Case for the Resurrection*. See also Ladd, *I Believe*.

96. For an excellent philosophical defence, see Davis, *Risen Indeed*.

97. One exception in the early 1980s was Derrett, *Anastasis of Jesus*. Derrett's hypothesis succeeds, however, only by accepting the extreme higher-critical scepticism regarding many of the details of the Gospel accounts when it supports his theory and yet rejecting the same critics' conclusions when they contradict his theory.

Jesus' disciples stole the body (Matt. 28:13); the notion that Jesus' followers went to the wrong tomb and thus found it empty; and the idea that all the witnesses of the resurrection experienced some kind of mass hallucination.⁹⁸ Such 'explanations' require more faith for one to believe in them than does the supernatural explanation that Jesus did in fact rise bodily from the grave.⁹⁹

Instead, the most common approach today to the Gospel accounts of Christ's resurrection is to treat them as at least partially legendary.¹⁰⁰ The three main reasons for this assessment have been as follows.

(1) The accounts resemble the myths in other ancient religions about gods who died and rose again: often on an annual basis in conjunction with the coming of winter and spring, respectively, but also in the Gnostic writings, where a heavenly redeemer comes to earth to save humanity, and in various other forms of fictitious literature of the day.

(2) If Mark was the earliest of the Gospels to be written, then it is striking that he has by far the shortest account of all four and never narrates an actual resurrection appearance of Jesus (Mark 16:1–8). Verses 9–20, as printed in most English translations, do not appear in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts now available, thus leaving the original text with only the young man promising a resurrection appearance in Galilee (v. 7). Matthew, Luke and John can then be seen as imaginative expansions of what was originally a very brief and enigmatic narrative about some women's Easter morning confusion.

(3) Even if one wants to take everything in the Gospels at face value, the different writers simply contradict each other too often to be believable. Mark speaks of a young man who greeted the women at the tomb, Luke of two men, Matthew of an angel, and John of two angels. Mark's and Matthew's Jesus appears only in Galilee; Luke's, only in Jerusalem. No two Gospels' lists of the women who went to the tomb are the same, nor do they agree on whether it was still dark or already after dawn. Other less glaring differences also appear.

98. But 'contagious' hallucination *is* precisely the gist of Gerd Lüdemann's numerous books on the resurrection, though he prefers to use the language of subjective visions. See esp. with Özen his *What Really Happened to Jesus? On the Implausibility of this kind of hypothesis*, see J. J. Johnson, 'Were the Resurrection Appearances Hallucinations?', pp. 227–238.

99. See, e.g., the summary of and refutation of each in Ladd, *I Believe*, pp. 132–142.

100. For a wide-ranging overview of current thought on the resurrection, see esp. Davis, Kendall and O'Collins, *Resurrection*. Cf. also Stewart, *Resurrection of Jesus*. This volume actually contains chapters by seven other contributors as well as Crossan and Wright.

All three of these reasons for scholarly scepticism, however, have often been addressed by defenders of the resurrection's historicity. In the case of the alleged mythical parallels, on the one hand the evidence suggests that the Gnostic redeemer myth does not predate the writing of the Gospels and that other alleged parallels are not that close or numerous.¹⁰¹ The same problems bedevil attempts to derive Christian beliefs from Mithraism. An ancient offshoot of Persian Zoroastrianism, Mithras-worshippers regularly depicted their god as a bull-slayer. The bull's blood was said to give life to the cult's members, and, as in other mystery religions, there were various ritual initiations, often involving washing in water, and cult meals, in this case with bread and water. But Christianity's Jewish backgrounds and the much closer parallels with Jewish baptisms and Passover meals more than adequately account for the birth of the Christian sacraments. Not until the second, third and fourth centuries AD do any noteworthy parallels emerge, such as the celebration of the god's birthday on December 25. And this came about only because the Roman holiday of Saturnalia, not combined with Mithras worship until the second or third century, proved to be a convenient day off work for Christians to worship Jesus and to be left alone to do so. Moreover, the Mithras cult was exclusivist (open only to men), militaristic (involving codes of honour and purity regulations to prepare men for war) and closely dependent on Roman imperial support for survival. Claims that Christianity or its picture of Jesus was born out of Mithraism reflect almost no historical understanding of chronology, lines of influence, or true similarities and dissimilarities between the two religions.¹⁰²

A cluster of novelistic writings that may be as old as the middle or late first century, most notably Chariton's *Callirhoe*, suddenly begin to use resurrection language for revivification or restoration to health after close brushes with death or 'mortifying' emotional experiences. But no actual bodily resurrections to life on this earth after fully fledged death are ever narrated. It is just possible that the Christian story of Jesus had already begun to influence pagan language.¹⁰³ None of the ancient myths and stories of dying and rising gods refers to real human individuals known to have lived among the very people

101. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*. Kesich (*First Day of the New Creation*, pp. 38–47) highlights the distinctives of Jesus' resurrection over against those of the so-called mystery religions.

102. See further Finegan, *Myth and Mystery*, pp. 203–212; Tripolitis, *Religions*, pp. 47–57; and Nash, *Gospel and the Greeks*, pp. 133–138.

103. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, pp. 121–143.

narrating the stories within their living memory. Instead, they are closely tied to the annual death and birth of seasonal vegetation.¹⁰⁴ As N. T. Wright explains, ‘the multifarious and sophisticated cults enacted the god’s death and resurrection as a *metaphor*, whose concrete referent was the cycle of seed-time and harvest, of human reproduction and practices’. The entire New Testament, moreover, sets itself against any view that equates God and nature or sees the need for annual or repeated atonement (see esp. Heb. 9:26). Wright continues:

Sometimes, as in Egypt, the myths and rituals included funerary practices: the aspiration of the dead was to become united with Osiris. But the new life they might thereby experience was not a return to the life of the present world. Nobody actually expected the mummies to get up, walk about and assume normal living; nobody in that world would have wanted such a thing, either.¹⁰⁵

Rather, as Wright has exhaustively demonstrated, when people from Jewish backgrounds spoke of resurrection, they envisioned what Daniel 12:2 describes: a bodily return to new life, once and for ever, at the end of the age.¹⁰⁶ Luke and John, in particular, stress Jesus’ *bodily* resurrection, with their insistence on his ability to be touched (with flesh and bones) and to eat (Luke 24:37–43; John 20:26–28; 21:12–14; cf. 1 John 1:1–3). Yet no pre-Christian Jew anticipated the resurrection of one person, even the Messiah, in advance of the general resurrection. Greeks and Romans often believed in the apotheosis (divinization) of great humans, most notably the emperors, after their deaths, but this belief did not lead to claims of having seen these persons alive again in bodily form fellowshipping with them.¹⁰⁷ Pheme Perkins, who by no means supports the authenticity of all the Gospel data, nevertheless stresses that ‘given the marginal status of resurrection and immortality in Judaism as well as paganism . . . it may well be that Christianity has created a hope and expectation rather than responded to a widely held pattern of belief or practice’.¹⁰⁸

104. For both of these last two points, see in detail Mettinger, *Riddle of the Resurrection*.

105. N. T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 80–81. C. S. Lewis’s simplified discussion (*Miracles*, pp. 136–140) remains quite helpful here too.

106. N. T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 85–206. Cf. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*; Bauckham, ‘Life, Death, and the Afterlife’, pp. 80–95.

107. Thus rendering implausible the suggestion that the Gospels’ resurrection accounts reflect such apotheosis, contra, e.g., Cotter, ‘Greco-Roman Apotheosis Traditions’, pp. 127–153.

108. Perkins, *Resurrection*, pp. 62–63.

As for Mark's highly abbreviated version of the climax of the Gospel, redaction critics have repeatedly argued that Mark's emphasis on the fear of God and the misunderstanding of the disciples probably explains his decision to end the story where he does, rather than any lack of knowledge about the later details of the resurrection. Mark is writing to Christians who would not likely have come to faith in the first place had they not heard the story of the resurrection. So he can assume knowledge of it and deliberately cut it short to call attention with riveting abruptness to the women's initial fear and failure, knowing full well, and knowing that his audience knew well, the story of how they later overcame their fear and spread the word. Most probably, Mark wants to encourage beleaguered Christians in Rome shortly before or during the Neronian persecution in the 60s that they, too, can overcome any failure they may have experienced or that they may fear and that it remains their task to spread the gospel too.¹⁰⁹

Finally, it is remarkable to observe how often the alleged contradictions among the Gospels are cited without a discussion of the many proposed solutions that can fit them together in a very plausible and natural manner. John Wenham devoted an entire book to a harmonization of the accounts and few of his proposals are entirely new.¹¹⁰ There is scarcely room to summarize all his main points, but in the case of the sample 'contradictions' mentioned above, one can offer the following brief replies: (1) angels generally appear in Scripture as men, and if one of the two was the primary spokesman, it would not be surprising if sometimes only he were mentioned;¹¹¹ (2) it is likely that Jesus appeared to the eleven in Jerusalem, then later in Galilee when they had gone home after the Passover, and then once again in Jerusalem upon their return in preparation for the feast of Pentecost;¹¹² (3) if Salome is both the 'mother of James and John' and the sister of Mary, Jesus' mother, there is no

109. Cf. Dowd, *Reading Mark*, pp. 168–171.

110. J. W. Wenham, *Easter Enigma*; cf. more briefly, M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal*, pp. 69–71; and Ladd, *I Believe*, pp. 91–93.

111. N. T. Wright (*Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 613) points out how Luke 24:12 can describe Peter going to the tomb, without mentioning any companions, and then in v. 24 have the Emmaus road travellers refer back to 'some of our number' who went to the tomb to find it as the women had told them. Wright concludes that 'if Luke can say that there was one person, and then later that there was more than one, the numerical differences between the different accounts of the women and the angels cannot be regarded as serious historical problems'.

112. Moule, 'Post-Resurrection Appearances', pp. 58–61.

irreconcilable problem with the lists of women;¹¹³ and (4) it is fair to describe the world as still rather dark at the first glimpse of morning daylight.¹¹⁴ The apparent discord among the Gospels can be alleviated, but it must be admitted that any reconstruction of the events is speculative. At the same time, the very presence of limited divergence in otherwise parallel narratives can itself testify to their reliability. As N. T. Wright clarifies:

The surface inconsistencies between Mark 16.1–8 and its parallels, of which so much is made by those eager to see the accounts as careless fiction, is in fact a strong point in favour of their early character. The later we imagine them being written up, let alone edited, the more likely it would be that inconsistencies would be ironed out. The stories exhibit, as has been said repeatedly over the last hundred years or more, exactly that surface tension which we associate, not with tales artfully told by people eager to sustain a fiction and therefore anxious to make everything look right, but with the hurried, puzzled accounts of those who have seen with their own eyes something which took them horribly by surprise and with which they have not yet fully come to terms.¹¹⁵

In short, it simply will not do to ascribe the majority of the resurrection narratives to the pious imagination of the early church.

In fact, many scholars recognize this, and current debate often focuses instead on the question of what the early church *meant* by its accounts of the resurrection. Even if one argues that the stories are largely reliable in what they recount, the question remains of how they should be understood. How literal an interpretation is appropriate? Must the imagery imply a bodily resurrection or does it merely depict dramatically what took place on an invisible, spiritual plane? Might it be simply a powerful metaphor for a new, politically subversive way of living, given the hegemony of the Roman Empire in Jesus' day?¹¹⁶

The most common views of the resurrection that attempt to answer these questions can be grouped together into four categories.¹¹⁷

113. Cf. Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, pp. 726–727.

114. Cf. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, p. 1885.

115. N. T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 612. Osborne (*Resurrection Narratives*) illustrates how the theological diversity of the Gospel parallels can be fully appreciated even when one believes that all the historical data can be harmonized.

116. See esp. Crossan's chapters in Stewart, *Resurrection Debate*.

117. For articles that survey the contemporary landscape and that respond to Wright's tome from numerous perspectives, along with a response by Wright to his respondents, see the entire fascicle of *JSHJ* 3.2 (2005).

(1) Some follow in the footsteps of the first ‘demythologizers’ (those form critics who sought to identify and reinterpret ‘mythical’ elements in Scripture) and reduce the resurrection stories to nothing more than graphic presentations of the conviction in the hearts of Jesus’ followers that his cause did not die with him on the cross. For example, Willi Marxsen, one of Bultmann’s most famous students, viewed the resurrection as the way to describe how ‘someone discovers in a miraculous way that Jesus evokes faith even after his death’.¹¹⁸ But if this were so, it would be hard to see why the disciples came to refer to this event as a resurrection at all; they could simply have referred to Jesus being exalted or glorified, as the rest of the New Testament does, without using language that more naturally implies an empty tomb and a living body.¹¹⁹ Nor does it explain why they began to worship and celebrate the resurrection on a Sunday, the first day of the week, which they called the Lord’s Day (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10), when Judaism had already instituted the Sabbath (seventh day = Saturday) as the eternally inviolable day of rest (Exod. 20:8–11), and thus the natural time for worship. Only something of spectacular significance objectively datable to one particular Sunday could have prompted the change.¹²⁰

(2) A slightly less sceptical approach suggests that the disciples must have had some extraordinary experience but views it as entirely subjective, not an event that an impartial observer could have experienced as well. One influential proponent of this position, Rudolf Pesch, takes a surprisingly positive stance on the reliability of the Gospels concerning how Jesus prepared his disciples for his death. After all, Pesch argues that Jesus repeatedly predicted his crucifixion and resurrection, so a vision of some kind confirming his followers’ hope that he would return to life is exactly that for which they had been

118. Marxsen, *Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 138. Habermas (‘Late Twentieth-Century Resurgence’, p. 186) calls this the classic example of the ‘naturalistic subjective’ theory and supplies numerous more recent illustrations as well (pp. 187–190).

119. Kesich, *Creation*, p. 81. Crossan, in his chapters in Stewart, *Resurrection Debate*, takes ‘resurrection’ as a metaphor for the continuing presence of Jesus in the new form of living modelled by the communities of his followers. But then why not use language like Paul did when he spoke of being ‘present in spirit’ even when physically absent (1 Cor. 5:3)? Where are the ancient texts that show ‘resurrection’ being used with the meaning Crossan wants to attribute to it?

120. M. J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory*, pp. 151–152.

psychologically prepared.¹²¹ But although it may be true that the disciples ought to have been expecting Christ's resurrection, the Gospels tell us that in fact they were not. Far from it, John describes them crouching behind locked doors, defeated in spirit, and fearful that their lives would be the next in jeopardy (John 20:19), an embarrassing admission probably not invented by the later church. Furthermore, the impact of a crucifixion on a group of devout Jews was not quickly overcome; according to the Old Testament, one who died such a death was cursed by God (Deut. 21:23).¹²² The sceptical reaction of all who first heard the women's report and the fact that the appearances were spread out over a period of forty days pose further problems for one who would explain these stories as subjective visions in the minds of those psychologically prepared to receive them. Wright's conclusions merit extensive citation:

The early Christians did not invent the empty tomb and the 'meetings' or 'sightings' of the risen Jesus in order to explain a faith they already had. They developed that faith because of the occurrence, and convergence, of these two phenomena. Nobody was expecting this kind of thing; no kind of conversion-experience would have generated such ideas; nobody would have invented it, no matter how guilty (or how forgiven) they felt, no matter how many hours they pored over the scriptures. To suggest otherwise is to stop doing history and to enter into a fantasy world of our own, a new cognitive dissonance in which the relentless modernist, desperately worried that the post-Enlightenment worldview seems in imminent danger of collapse, devises strategies for shoring it up nevertheless. In terms of the kind of proof which historians normally accept, the case we have presented that the tomb-plus-appearances combination is what generated early Christian belief, is as watertight as one is likely to find.¹²³

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121. A detailed discussion and critique of Pesch's hypothesis, which has been developed in stages in several, sometimes inaccessible, German sources, appears in Winden, *Wie kam und wie kommt?* In this same category would appear the theory that the disciples experienced Jesus in altered states of consciousness, as for Pilch, 'Appearances of the Risen Jesus', pp. 52–60.
122. The Roman use of crucifixion as a form of execution led to the conclusion among Jews that the posture of the victim and the use of a cross-shaped piece of wood sufficiently resembled hanging on a tree that the same text from the Torah would apply.
123. N. T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 707. Cf. Dudrey, 'What the Writers', pp. 55–78. The foolishness of the crucifixion (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18 – 2:5) was the exact opposite of the myth that writers of fiction needed to produce to impress either Jews or pagans in their world.

Neither of these first two approaches requires that Jesus' tomb ever really was found empty, and they emphasize the fact that the Gospels never *stress* the claim that it was. But another significant number of scholars recognize that the evidence for Jesus' tomb being empty is virtually irrefutable. Much of this evidence has been concisely summarized by William Craig in a series of studies;¹²⁴ only a few of the highlights may be touched on here. To begin with, the Gospels never actually describe the resurrection itself, a surprising omission if the story of the empty tomb were being fabricated. The apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* (9.35 – 10.42) provides by stark contrast an example of how early Christian fiction reads, as it tells how the guards at the tomb saw two angels, whose heads touched the clouds, descend from heaven, enter the tomb, and emerge supporting a third man whose head rose above the clouds, while the vision of a cross followed them and a voice spoke from heaven! While virtually all Christian literature in the second and third centuries emphatically stressed the bodily nature of Jesus' resurrection, Gnostic literature proved consistently docetic: believing firmly in Christ's deity but denying his humanity. Whether or not the *Gospel of Peter* be deemed Gnostic, it certainly appears docetic and thus aberrant and contradictory to mainstream early Christian thought.¹²⁵

Second, the part of Mark 16 that does describe the discovery that Jesus' body was missing, however brief, would not likely have been an invention, since its main characters are women, in a rather bewildered state no less, whose testimony in the ancient world was considered largely unreliable.¹²⁶ Third, the Jewish authorities, who had every reason to want to refute Christianity, could never produce the body of Jesus inside *or* outside a tomb. Fourth, there is no evidence that early Christians ever venerated any tomb of Jesus, as was the

124. Craig, 'Bodily Resurrection of Jesus', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1, pp. 47–74; idem, 'Empty Tomb of Jesus', in *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 173–200 (a slightly expanded version of which appears as 'The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus', *NTS* 31 [1985], pp. 39–67); and idem, 'Guard at the Tomb', pp. 273–281. Putting all the strands of his historical and exegetical apologetic for the resurrection is idem, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*.

125. See the thorough survey in N. T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 480–552, 592–596.

126. *Ibid.*, pp. 607–608. Indeed, all *four* Gospels stress women as the first witnesses to the resurrection, a feature that embarrassed certain segments of the early church, and which they therefore tried to play down. See esp. Setzer, 'Excellent Women', pp. 259–272.

custom among mourners at the graves of other revered leaders in the ancient Mediterranean world and as has been the case with founders of religions in countless parts of the world over the millennia.¹²⁷ Finally, the various ‘spiritual resurrection’ hypotheses require that what actually happened to Jesus was increasingly misunderstood by more and more people the more time elapsed and the gospel spread. Were Jesus a Greek, born in Athens, where immortality of the soul rather than resurrection of the body dominated in terms of hope for the afterlife, and a century later his message had spread to Jewish Israel, this theory might prove credible. But given that the stories of Jesus began in Israel, at first exclusively among Jews who anticipated bodily resurrection, and then only later spread to Greece, the theory becomes utterly unbelievable.¹²⁸

In spite of this evidence, there are still at least two options left.

(3) On the one hand, many will admit that some kind of objective resurrection occurred (Jesus really did come back to life and leave the tomb), but they will assert that it defied description and would not necessarily have been recordable had, say, videotaping equipment been available. It was in some way linked inseparably with the faith of those who already believed in Jesus. Explanations of this position, however, are seldom entirely clear. Eduard Schweizer, for example, typifies this ambiguity at the end of an otherwise lucid article on ‘Resurrection – Fact or Illusion?’ Having earlier affirmed that the empty tomb is ‘one of the most reliable pieces of information about the historical course of events that we possess’, he concludes that the ‘resurrection is certainly no illusion’. Yet immediately he adds, ‘it is no fact either in the sense of an event that could be proved objectively without our getting involved. It is a living reality that starts at the moment in which God’s life-power enters the life of mortals.’¹²⁹ Clearly, Schweizer wants to distance himself from those who see

127. For these last two and related points, cf. M. J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory*, pp. 107–112.

128. Cf. N. T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 606. For ancient pagan (esp. Graeco-Roman) beliefs, see pp. 32–84. Cf. also Yamauchi, ‘Life, Death, and the Afterlife’, pp. 21–50; and Bolt, ‘Life, Death, and the Afterlife’, pp. 51–79.

129. ‘Resurrection – Fact or Illusion?’, pp. 148, 157. Cf. the similar ambiguity in Perkins, *Resurrection*, p. 393: ‘Certainly the removal of a body from the world might be considered an event . . . that is in principle open to public witness. But . . . the identity of the body of Jesus with the crucified in the New Testament narratives performs a different function from that of providing information about Jesus’ physical remains.’ Surely this is a false dichotomy.

the event as all in the disciples' minds, but he seems to imply that an unbeliever present would not have seen and heard what the disciples did. In the New Testament, however, Jesus did not just appear to those who already believed in him, and who might have wanted to mistake a vision, however objective and non-self-induced, for something more tangible, as is often argued. Even if one brackets the example of Paul, to whom Jesus appeared only after the ascension, there is still the case of Jesus' brother James, who apparently did not become a believer during Christ's earthly ministry and yet led the church in Jerusalem not many years after his death (cf. John 7:5 with Acts 15:13). What triggered his conversion unless it was his experience of the risen Lord to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians 15:7? And if one replies by assuming that James was psychologically en route to becoming a disciple, there is the counterexample of Thomas, already a disciple, who would not believe until he had received empirical proof of the resurrection (John 20:25).

(4) A final position, therefore, remains the most adequate, and it is the one that most Christians throughout the church's history have affirmed in their creeds and confessions of faith as fundamental doctrine. Jesus rose bodily from the grave in a way that anyone present for his appearances could have perceived, even if that perception could not be described in comprehensive detail. The fact that he appeared only to those whom God chose for witnesses and not to all the people (Acts 10:41) does not contradict this. Rather, it suggests that Jesus was selective about when and where he would reveal himself, not that different people present when he did appear experienced contradictory sensations.¹³⁰ As already noted, Jesus went out of his way to demonstrate that his resurrected body was tangible (Luke 24:39; John 20:27). Harris argues that Jesus' resurrected state was essentially 'one of invisibility and therefore immateriality',¹³¹ but it is hard to see why the latter necessarily follows from the former. Scripture simply does not describe the precise nature of Christ's body prior to his ascension while he was not with the disciples.¹³²

130. Cf. M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal*, pp. 46–50. Paul's own experience on the Damascus road does not necessarily prove what the pre-ascension appearances were like (*ibid.*, pp. 55–56).

131. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

132. An intriguing artefact, traditionally believed by Roman Catholics to be the burial cloth of Jesus himself, is the Shroud of Turin, kept in a chapel behind the main cathedral in that city. The linen cloth appears to have on it what looks like a photographic negative image of the front and back of a male human body that was scourged and crucified. Despite periodic scientific testing, no examination has been

The strongest argument for this fourth view of Jesus' resurrection is that it fits best with the Jewish pictures of the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, which consistently involve real bodies. If anything, they are sometimes even more 'physical' than in the Gospel stories, undoubtedly due to the graphic vision in Ezekiel 37 of flesh and sinews reattaching themselves to dry, lifeless bones. The objection that these parallels do not support the historicity of the Gospel accounts, since they involve the resurrection of corpses without the creation of entirely new bodies overlooks just how 'earthly' Christ's resurrection body was, with the scars of his suffering still visible (John 20:27). To be sure, it was more than the reanimation of his former body, but it was not less.¹³³

Testimony of Paul

For the other miracles of Jesus, only the testimony of the four Gospels is available for consultation, but a study of the resurrection must also consider what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15. Here one is on much firmer historical ground, according to the critical consensus. Almost no-one doubts that Paul wrote this letter or that he was telling the truth when he 'delivered' to the Corinthians the list of witnesses of the resurrection in verses 3–7 as one he had 'received' from Christians who preceded him. The Greek words for 'deliver' (*paradidōmi*) and 'receive' (*paralambanomai*) in this context are often used as fairly technical terms for the transmission of tradition. Almost certainly such information would have been related to Paul by the disciples in Damascus (c. AD 33) or in Jerusalem during his first visit there after becoming a Christian (c. AD 35). Regardless of one's attitude towards the Gospels' testimony, therefore, it is

able to explain how these images were produced. In 1988, however, three independent laboratory tests at the University of Arizona, Oxford University and Switzerland's Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, applying radiocarbon dating to small samples of the Shroud, all resulted in a thirteenth or fourteenth century date for the cloth, with at least a 95% level of confidence. Short of still further tests with different results, and despite the enigmas that still surround the Shroud, there is no reason any longer to appeal to it as support for the crucifixion or resurrection of Jesus (M. J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory*, pp. 125–128).

133. On the other hand, Jesus had not yet ascended to his Father to complete the process of glorification, which explains why he told Mary Magdalene to stop clinging to him (John 20:17). As a result, it makes good sense to see the scars as vestiges of the old age preserved for recognition purposes, but not necessarily part of Christ's perfectly glorified body in the eternal state.

extremely difficult to deny that here at least is accurate information. Thus even the renowned atheist historian Gerd Lüdemann acknowledges that within one to two years after his death the *belief* that Jesus had been raised from the dead was so widespread and central to Christian practice that it formed part of basic catechetical instruction. This is no late evolutionary development of Christian faith decades after the real facts were forgotten.¹³⁴ The question then becomes not ‘Is Paul recounting reliable history?’ but ‘What exactly does he mean?’ The problem is complicated by the rest of 1 Corinthians 15, which contains Paul’s own reflections on the certainty and significance both of Jesus’ resurrection and of the coming resurrection of all the dead.

Critical scholarship on Paul’s understanding of the resurrection has tended in the last half-century to follow the proposals of Hans Grass. Grass admitted that Paul speaks here of a bodily resurrection but he denied that it was a physical body.¹³⁵ After all, Paul explicitly states in 1 Corinthians 15:44 that one’s life in this world is in a ‘physical body’, whereas at the resurrection it will be in a ‘spiritual body’. As a result, Grass adopted the subjective-vision hypothesis. As Craig explains, ‘because the body is spiritual, the appearances of Christ were in the form of heavenly visions caused by God in the minds of those chosen to receive them’.¹³⁶ ‘Physical’, however, is not the best or usual way of translating the Greek word found in verse 44 (*psychikos*). For Paul it regularly means ‘natural’; that is, simply pertaining to this world, though often implying ‘unregenerate’ (see esp. 1 Cor. 2:14). When Paul contrasts the bodies of this life with those to come, he is most probably using the word ‘spiritual’ (*pneumatikos*) to mean ‘supernatural’, or even ‘regenerated’ in the sense of ‘made new’, rather than denying them some kind of objective, tangible existence.¹³⁷

Grass, and those who have followed him, offer two other main reasons for rejecting a physical resurrection body. First, Paul goes on in 1 Corinthians 15:50 to proclaim that ‘flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God’. Second, by adding his own experience of the risen Christ to the list of appearances back in 15:8, Paul suggests that he had the same type of experience as did the others who saw Jesus alive again. Yet Acts 9:7 makes it clear that Paul’s

134. Lüdemann with Özen, *What Really Happened to Jesus?* p. 15.

135. Grass, *Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte*.

136. Craig, ‘Resurrection’, p. 47. The next three paragraphs are also heavily indebted to Craig’s discussion in his various writings on the topic. Cf. also Gundry, *Old Is Better*, pp. 178–187.

137. Cf. Thielton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 1275–1281; MacGregor, ‘1 Corinthians 15:3b–6a, 7’, esp. pp. 232–234.

companions did not see the vision that Paul did, although they heard a noise, so Paul's experience was not entirely objective. Neither of these objections proves very weighty.

First, 'flesh and blood' was a standard Semitic idiom for 'frail, mortal existence'; if Paul were denying the physical nature of the resurrection body, he would more probably have used the common idiom 'flesh and bones'.¹³⁸ Second, simply listing those people to whom Jesus appeared does not imply an identical experience on the part of everyone on the list. The Gospels themselves prove that it is hard to group all of Jesus' appearances into one uniform category: at times he could eat, drink and be touched, while at other times he seemed to be able to vanish and materialize again without explanation. What is more significant is that when Paul has an entirely subjective experience, or one about the nature of which he is uncertain, he indicates precisely that (cf. 2 Cor. 12:1–4, describing his visit to the 'third heaven'; and Acts 16:9; 18:9; 22:17, in which he receives visions from the Lord regarding his travel itinerary).¹³⁹

Not only does Grass's approach to 1 Corinthians 15 thus fail, but two additional details in verse 4 point positively to an objective, bodily resurrection of Jesus. The first detail is the reference to Christ's burial. When this occurs in a sequence of co-ordinate clauses all beginning with the word 'that' ('that [he] died . . . that he was buried, that he was raised . . . that he appeared') with no other details given as to why it should be mentioned at all, the natural implication is that just as a burial requires a physical body so also the resurrection that follows involves a physical body (cf. Rom. 6:4 and Col. 2:13). The discovery of an empty tomb does not prove what happened to its occupant, but if he is then seen elsewhere, the presumption is that it is his body and not just his spirit that has risen. So also a reference to a resurrection appearance does not by itself determine how objective that experience was; but if it is preceded by reference to a burial, the presumption is that a body has been involved both inside and outside the grave.

The second detail is the phrase 'on the third day'. Since no-one saw Jesus leave the tomb, why did his followers claim this happened on Sunday morning unless, again, something objective had convinced them that only at this time was the tomb really empty? As Wenham explains, 'if Paul was thinking of spiritual survival in spite of bodily death . . . Jesus could be said to have survived death from the moment of expiry'.¹⁴⁰ Many have tried to argue that 'on the

138. Cf. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 798–799.

139. Cf. M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal*, p. 48.

140. J. W. Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, p. 53.

third day' is not to be interpreted literally but stands rather as a figurative way of saying 'at God's appointed time'. Theologically significant events frequently happen 'on the third day' in Scripture: for example, Abraham's would-be offering of Isaac (Gen. 22:4), God's giving of the Law (Exod. 19:16), Hezekiah's miraculous healing (2 Kgs 20:8) and, most significantly, the prophecy of Israel's restoration (Hos. 6:2). Yet if the significance of this phrase is only theological and not also chronological, one is again left without an explanation as to why Christians began to gather to worship together on the first day of the week (the 'third day' after Friday, by inclusive reckoning) in honour of the resurrection, despite all the inconvenience and misunderstanding this caused, rather than continuing their customary practice as Jews of celebrating the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week.¹⁴¹

Conclusion

If the resurrection of Jesus really happened, then none of the Gospel miracles is in principle incredible. This is not because God can do anything supernatural, no matter how eccentric or arbitrary. Christian belief in God's omnipotence does not include ascribing to him the power to do that which is logically contradictory (e.g. making the legendary stone so big that he can't move it!) or that which is against his nature (e.g. doing evil). But it is precisely in this way that the Gospel miracles differ from so many of their counterparts in other religious and philosophical traditions: they all fit together in a consistent pattern, revealing Jesus as sent by his Father to usher in the kingdom of God and make known God's will and ways on earth. This revelation in turn meshes with the main details of the rest of Christ's teaching and ministry.

The major concern in this chapter, once the possibility of miracle was established in the first place, has been to show the reasonableness of believing not in all alleged miracles past or present but in the particular miracles recorded in the Gospels. The significance of those miracles has been dealt with only as it bore on the question of their historicity. Despite a long tradition in Christian apologetics of arguing from the miracles to the existence of God, it seems rather that God's existence needs to be either demonstrated or presupposed before the miracles can be believed. In somewhat parallel fashion, neither do the miracles of Jesus by themselves prove his deity. Scripture teaches that Elijah and Elisha worked strikingly similar miracles, but

141. See further Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, pp. 94–115.

the Jews never came to believe in either of them as God. A remarkable, modern-day testimony to this logic appears in the work of an orthodox Jewish scholar, Pinchas Lapide, who believes in the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus but sees him not as the Messiah but as a divinely ordained prophet preparing the way for the Messiah, much as Christians view John the Baptist. Lapide adopts this stance because not all the Old Testament prophecies associated with the Messianic age were fulfilled in Jesus' lifetime, most noticeably the promises about world peace and prosperity.¹⁴² Clearly, one has to examine all the testimony of the Gospels about what Jesus did before one can decide for oneself who he was. But that does not make the miracles any less important. They may not prove all the claims of Christianity, but if they did not occur the way the Gospels say they did, then many of Christianity's claims could be disproved. In C. S. Lewis's well-chosen words, 'the accounts of the "miracles" in first-century Palestine are either lies, or legends, or history. And if all, or the most important of them are lies or legends then the claim that Christianity has been making for the last two thousand years is simply false.'¹⁴³ Much recent scholarship, however, has served to strengthen the view that the miracles are historical and that the Christian claim is true.

142. Lapide, *Resurrection of Jesus*.

143. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 97.

4. CONTRADICTIONS AMONG THE SYNOPTICS?

The conditions under which the Synoptic Gospels were formed may well have been very conducive to the careful preservation of reliable information about Jesus. But historians make mistakes even under the best of conditions. For many scholars what counts most is neither the general climate in which the Gospel traditions circulated, nor any theoretical debate about the possibility of miracles, but the actual data of the Gospels themselves. If the different versions of Jesus' life that Matthew, Mark and Luke present are irreconcilably at odds with each other, then at least one of them cannot be considered an accurate account, regardless of the circumstances that led to its composition.

Because the New Testament has been scrutinized with more intensity than any other work of literature in the history of the world, it is not surprising to discover that virtually every passage in the Gospels has been seen as conflicting with some other passage by someone or other at some time in history. One short chapter can scarcely begin to respond to all the charges of error or contradiction. But most of the charges have been answered adequately many times over by those who have written in defence of the Gospels' trustworthiness or just in the course of detailed commentary-writing. The vast majority of readers of the Synoptic Gospels in all ages have been struck not by the differences among them but by their remarkable similarities. Until the 1970s or so, even those who distinguished between the main themes of different New Testament authors such as Paul or John often grouped the

testimony of the first three Gospel writers together, not seeing the theological differences among them as noteworthy enough to merit individual treatment.¹

Nevertheless, certain differences of historical detail between parallel passages and between the overall outlines of the Gospels lead many modern critics to conclude that the Synoptics cannot be viewed as particularly reliable in the information they present. This chapter will note some of the most commonly cited examples of these divergences, but it will argue that the apparent discrepancies are just that – apparent and not genuine – and that they do not call into question the reliability of the Gospel witness. If anything, the minor variations that do occur, when coupled with the much greater amount of close agreement in detail, actually strengthen confidence in the Evangelists' trustworthiness. Verbatim parallelism, on the other hand, where it occurs, proves only that one writer has copied from another and offers no independent corroboration of his testimony. And the variations that appear in most of the parallels are no greater, and often much more trivial, than those that characterize any two historical accounts of the same events: a different selection of details, themes and phraseology, which periodically brings one account into apparent tension with the other because each reflects a unique perspective and neither tells the whole story.² The most obvious examples of the seeming discrepancies in the Gospels may be surveyed under seven major headings.

Conflicting theology?

Only since the rise of redaction criticism has this category become significant. Many redaction critics synthesize the teaching of one of the three Synoptics on a given topic in such a way as to pit it against the teaching of one of the others. Usually these syntheses result from one of the eight misuses of redaction criticism enumerated in chapter 2 (pp. 69–72). The Evangelists very rarely present specific statements in parallel passages that make opposing theological

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1. This is true especially from a survey of New Testament theologies of both conservative and liberal persuasion from c. 1950 to 1980. Cf., e.g., the chapter divisions in Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols.; and Kümmel, *Theology of the New Testament*; with Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*; and D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*. More recently, the theologies of Matthew, Mark and Luke have been treated discretely much more often.
 2. Cf., e.g., Staudinger, *Trustworthiness of the Gospels*, pp. 17–23.

points; rather, it is the overall impression created by the Gospel writers on a particular topic that leads scholars to assess their theological positions as contradictory rather than complementary. Thus it has already been noted how the so-called delay of the parousia supposedly altered the perspective of the later New Testament writers (see above, pp. 64–66); when applied to the Gospels, this belief leads to the conclusion that Luke's portrait of Jesus' teaching about the last days contradicts Mark's. Luke supposedly allows for a long interval of time before Christ's return (e.g. Luke 19:11; 20:9), while Mark still thinks it will happen immediately (Mark 9:1; 13:30).³ This view, though, neglects the evidence both in Luke's Gospel for Jesus' teaching on the imminence of the end (e.g. Luke 12:35–40; 21:24) and in Mark's Gospel for an interval preceding the end (most strikingly Mark 13:10, which Luke omits).⁴ This is not an example of an apparent contradiction between parallel passages, but only a contradiction between certain scholars' inadequate summaries of the overall teaching of the Evangelists. Examples of the same phenomenon could be multiplied but are largely irrelevant to the task at hand.⁵

In a few instances, however, an apparent contradiction between parallels has provided the impetus for hypotheses of conflicting theologies. Günther Bornkamm, for example, used the differences between Matthew's and Mark's accounts of the stilling of the storm (Mark 4:35–41; Matt. 8:23–27) to develop his view about how Matthew rejected Mark's perspective on the disciples, transforming them from faithless failures into paradigms of obedience. Whereas Mark has Jesus awaken to the disciples' cries for help, immediately rebuke the wind and then berate the Twelve for their lack of faith, Matthew describes Jesus' criticizing the disciples only before he works the miracle, and even then gives them credit for having some faith ('you of little faith'). After the miracle, the implication, according to Bornkamm, is that the disciples no

3. So esp. Conzelmann, *Theology of St Luke*, pp. 95–131.

4. See, respectively, E. E. Ellis, 'Present and Future Eschatology in Luke', pp. 27–41; and Cranfield, *Gospel according to St Mark*, pp. 388–389. Cf. Bovon, *Luke 1*, p. 11: Luke does not intend 'to overcome the traditional apocalyptic eschatological expectations with a salvation-historical perspective conceived by himself. Like the majority of his Christian contemporaries, Luke attempts far more to solve the problem of the delay of the parousia without betraying the original faith.'

5. One thinks, e.g., of the common claim that Matthew portrays a Torah-observant religion rather than Mark's and Luke's Law-free gospel. But see Meier, *Vision of Matthew*. Others claim Matthew is actually anti-Semitic so as to contradict Mark or Luke. But see S. McKnight, 'A Loyal Critic', pp. 55–79.

longer disbelieve at all.⁶ Robert Gundry finds this divergence an unambiguous example of the type of variation between Matthew and his sources that compels him to view the Gospels as contradictory. He then adds, ‘to pretend they are not – by suggesting, say, that no faith means not enough faith or that different kinds of faith are in view – is to open the door to somersaulting exegesis that could with equal legitimacy deny the clarity of scriptural statements expressing primary doctrines’.⁷ In other words, the contradiction between ‘little faith’ and ‘no faith’ is so clear to Gundry that to deny it would be to reject the plain meaning of the text in favour of special pleading.

Such a claim is puzzling, to say the least. There are examples that will be discussed later for which a reaction such as Gundry’s is more understandable (e.g. the question of whether or not Christ permitted the disciples to take a ‘staff’ with them on their first missionary journey; see pp. 187–188), but this example hardly falls into such a category. Regardless of the timing of the rebuke, it is extremely difficult to turn Jesus’ words in Matthew 8:26 (‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’), however gently spoken, into a compliment!⁸ ‘Little’ faith remains just that: not very much faith. Granted, Matthew has softened the force of Mark’s wording somewhat, and he does on the whole paint the disciples in a slightly more positive light than Mark. But this hardly produces an irreconcilable contradiction, as if Matthew had made Jesus praise the disciples’ great faith. What appear are different perspectives on the disciples’ ever-wavering response to Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, with Matthew choosing to highlight the slightly more positive side as a model for the fainthearted among his readers and Mark underlining the more negative side *for precisely the same reason*: to encourage those in his audience who felt inadequate that they too could grow in their Christian lives, just as the Twelve matured despite such a rocky start.⁹

6. Bornkamm, Barth and Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, pp. 52–57.

7. Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 626.

8. Vledder (*Conflict in the Miracle Stories*, pp. 193–194) could easily have been describing Mark’s version when he summarizes Matthew’s meaning here as a rebuke ‘for their lack of insight. They were weakened by their fear. They were too paralysed to act in their distress . . . The fear, horror and pain threatened to overpower them.’

9. On Matthew, cf. Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, pp. 137–138; Feiler, ‘Stilling of the Storm in Matthew’, pp. 399–406; on Mark, on the theme of the disciples’ misunderstanding more generally, cf. Best, *Mark*, pp. 93–95; and, for this context in particular, Geyer, *Fear, Anomaly*, pp. 241–267. The *phantasma* of Mark 6:49 could mean that the disciples thought they were seeing an apparition from the dead, a terrifying concept in the ancient Mediterranean world.

The same redactional tendencies reappear in the conclusions to the accounts of Jesus' walking on the water.¹⁰ In Matthew the disciples confess Jesus as the Son of God (Matt. 14:33); in Mark they maintain a fearful silence (Mark 6:51–52). Here John Heil persuasively argues that Mark has deliberately withheld the reference to 'the Son of God', saving it for its climactic appearance in Mark 15:39.¹¹ It is also less appropriate, because he has not narrated the episode of Peter walking on the water (Matt. 14:28–31).¹² If one places oneself in the boat with Jesus, it is not difficult to imagine worshipping Jesus coupled with a significant amount of incomprehension. After all, whatever 'Son of God' means in Matthew 14:33 (perhaps little more than 'Messiah', as esp. in the Dead Sea Scroll labelled 4Q246), it is not as full-orbed in meaning as when Peter uses it two chapters later (16:16) and Jesus' reply suggests a new level of insight not previously attained (vv. 17–19).¹³ Moreover, in Darrell Bock's words, 'The seeming contrast between the two accounts appears harsh, but it may be that Mark is looking back at what they had failed to learn about what Jesus' presence meant for them from the immediately previous event.' Matthew, on the other hand, 'notes the Christological understanding that the event had produced'.¹⁴ As with the accounts of the stilling of the storm, the theological perspectives are not identical, but they are complementary rather than contradictory.

Less radical redaction criticism that avoids the errors noted in chapter 2 has reinforced this conclusion time and again concerning the theological distinctives of the Synoptists.¹⁵ The apparent contradictions that are usually discussed when assessing the Gospels' historical value do not normally fall under this heading of conflicting theology. The same is true of form criticism's dissection of an individual passage or section *within* one of the Gospels, as, for example, when a parable or pronouncement story is said not to fit its

10. Madden, *Jesus Walking on the Sea*, pp. 103, 105–106.

11. Heil, *Jesus Walking on the Sea*, p. 75.

12. R. H. Mounce, *Matthew*, pp. 145–146.

13. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, p. 424.

14. Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture*, p. 218.

15. In addition to the studies noted on p. 74, n. 70, cf. esp. the commentaries of Keener, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*; France, *Gospel of Mark*; Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*; and idem, *Luke 9:51–24:53*. Cf., much more briefly, my summaries of the main redactional and theological distinctives of each of the Synoptic Gospels in the contexts of my introductions to each in Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, pp. 115–155.

introduction or conclusion. Whatever tension might seem to exist, it obviously did not prevent the Evangelist from compiling the passage as it now stands, so for him at least the ‘inconsistencies’ must not have been irreconcilable.¹⁶ The six remaining categories therefore focus on the more traditional types of apparent contradictions among Gospels that scholars have often analysed.

The practice of paraphrase

By far the most common kind of difference between Gospel parallels involves simple variation in language. No-one expects two different writers to retell a particular story with the identical words, but modern concerns for accurate quotation make many uneasy with certain examples of free paraphrases of others’ speech. The ancient world, however, had few such qualms. Greek and Hebrew had no symbols for quotation marks, and a historian or biographer referring to what others said did not necessarily try to cite their exact wording. So long as what was written remained faithful to the meaning of the original utterance, authors were free to phrase their reports however they liked, and no-one would accuse them of misquoting their sources or producing unreliable narratives.¹⁷ Even defenders of Scripture’s infallibility freely admit that the Evangelists usually record only Jesus’ *ipsissima vox* (actual voice) rather than his *ipsissima verba* (actual words).¹⁸ As we saw earlier (pp. 55–62), a growing amount of recent research recognizes too that not only are Jesus’ words and deeds phrased in the ways in which the individual Evangelists learned or remembered them, but that we must recognize the selectivity, stylization and significance attached to them in early Christian communities, creating what is called social memories. Thus when Mark and Luke report that the voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism declared, ‘You are my Son, whom

16. For a refutation of the notion that certain tendencies of the tradition’s transmission require a rejection of any portion of the parables or their contexts as inauthentic, see Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp. 72–94. The arguments used there in fact apply to numerous other forms of the Synoptic tradition as well.

17. See esp. Bock, ‘Words of Jesus in the Gospels’. On historical reporting in the ancient Mediterranean world more generally, which is appealed to here and elsewhere in this chapter, see esp. Hemer, *Book of Acts*, pp. 63–100, and on the reporting of speeches in particular, pp. 415–427.

18. See esp. Feinberg, ‘Meaning of Inerrancy’, p. 301.

I love; with you I am well pleased' (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22), while Matthew's account has 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased' (Matt. 3:17), Matthew, or the tradition he inherited, has probably just reworded Mark in order to highlight the fact that the heavenly voice spoke not only for Jesus' benefit but also for the benefit of the crowd (and thus for those who hear about the story later too).¹⁹ The harmonization in the ancient, heretical *Gospel of the Ebionites*, which makes the heavenly voice speak twice, once as in Matthew and once as in Mark,²⁰ is both misguided and unnecessary. It illustrates how not to approach the vast majority of Gospel parallels (but see pp. 166–168).

This type of minor variation in wording occurs with virtually every pair of Gospel parallels but does not call into question their historical reliability.²¹ Occasionally, however, the changes are substantial enough that the two versions could be taken as contradictory, but in each case they need not be. At least five categories of these more substantial changes may be discerned.

Summaries introducing new terminology

Towards the beginning of their Gospels, both Matthew and Mark epitomize Jesus' message as the preaching of repentance in the light of the arrival of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14–15; Matt. 4:17). Surprisingly, however, only Mark refers to this message here as 'the gospel'. In fact, Mark uses this noun eight times, Matthew only four, and Luke and John in their Gospels never, leading some scholars to speculate that Mark (or an earlier source) was the first to apply this Greek term for 'good news' (*euangelion*) to Jesus' message.²² This suggestion cannot be proved, but there is nothing in principle improbable with it. If it is correct, then Mark or the tradition he inherited has simply appropriated

19. Cf. Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture*, pp. 87–88.

20. Cited by Epiphanius, *Heresies*, 30.13.7–8.

21. Cf. Stein (*Difficult Passages in the Gospels*, pp. 18–20), who notes this conclusion already in the work of St Augustine.

22. R. P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations*, vol. 1, pp. 23–29. For the case that Mark got the concept from Peter, see Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, pp. 54–56. Stanton (*Jesus and Gospel*, pp. 9–62) attributes it to Greek-speaking Christians shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection, who were deliberately countering the claims of the imperial cult to bring the truly universal good news. Keck (*Future for the Historical Jesus*, p. 32) observes, on Mark 1:14–15, 'This is almost universally acknowledged to be at the same time a formulation by the church and an accurate summary of what Jesus had to say.'

an apt Greek expression that perfectly characterizes the nature of Jesus' preaching, even if Jesus never used an Aramaic equivalent to the expression. In other words, Mark has condensed or summarized Jesus' much more detailed teaching into a formula that expresses the heart of his message: 'Repent and believe the good news!' Whether or not Jesus himself used these exact words on any particular occasion in his ministry is then irrelevant (and impossible to determine).

A second possible example of this process is more controversial. In Matthew's account of the 'Great Commission', Jesus commands the Twelve to make disciples and baptize them 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19), whereas when Luke depicts the disciples' first carrying out this command, they baptize 'in the name of Jesus Christ' (Acts 2:38; cf. 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). Many scholars believe that Jesus could not have said anything as explicitly trinitarian as Matthew suggests, because they think that the Trinity was a later development in Christian theology. This conviction, however, rests on outdated and demonstrably false notions about a slow, evolutionary development of New Testament Christology. The earliest New Testament documents and the sources underlying them, while staunchly monotheistic, create astonishing links between both Jesus and the Spirit with God, suggesting a 'revolutionary' rather than 'evolutionary' development of high Christology and pneumatology.²³

The fact that Peter did not literally reproduce the baptismal formula of the Great Commission after his sermon at Pentecost may suggest, however, that Matthew has distilled the essence of Jesus' more detailed parting instructions for the Twelve into concise language, using the terminology developed later in the early church's baptismal services. Matthew would then have recognized that Jesus' self-understanding included the idea of unity with the Father (on which see pp. 315–317) and the Spirit (cf. Matt. 12:28–32 pars.), whether or not Jesus ever encapsulated that concept in an explicit trinitarian formula.²⁴ Or as R. E. O. White puts it, 'if Jesus commanded the making of disciples and the baptizing of them "in My name", and Matt. expressed Christ's fullest meaning (for disciples "of all nations") by using the fuller description current in his own day, who shall say that he seriously misrepresented our Lord's intention?' After all, 'the Commission's thought and phrasing are such as might admirably summarize

23. See esp. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*. Cf. esp. idem, 'Gospel of Mark', pp. 15–32.

24. Cf. Osborne, 'Evangelical and Redaction Criticism', p. 311; France, 'Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus', pp. 130–131. The singular *to onoma* (the name) followed by three persons' names highlights this unity.

much that Jesus had said'.²⁵ On the other hand, Robert Mounce suggests that it would have been 'quite natural' for Jesus to have gathered together into summary form his own references to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.²⁶ In that event, the language in Acts may be an abbreviation pointing to the theological significance of baptism as 'a transference of the rights of possession' to Jesus.²⁷

Theological clarification

Many examples could be listed under this heading. Chapter 2 already noted Luke's amplification of Jesus' call to tax-collectors and sinners, explaining that it was a call 'to repentance', along with Luke's addition of 'perhaps' to the words of the landlord in the parable of the wicked tenants ('perhaps they will respect him [my son]'), which corrects the potential misinterpretation that God was taken by surprise when the Jewish leaders rejected *his* son (see above, p. 99). Similar concern for theological clarity has no doubt motivated Matthew to qualify the beatitude 'Blessed are you who are poor' (Luke 6:20) with the phrase 'in spirit' (Matt. 5:3). He has not distorted a promise originally made to all the materially poor regardless of their spiritual condition. Rather, he has recognized the close equation between poverty and piety in certain first-century circles and phrased the words of Jesus in a way that clarifies that when he blessed the poor he was thinking of the materially impoverished 'who stand without pretence before God as their only hope'.²⁸

Similarly, Matthew has Jesus enjoin his followers to be 'perfect' as their heavenly Father is, while the Lucan parallel employs the word 'merciful' (Matt. 5:48; Luke 6:36). It is possible that the Aramaic word Jesus could have used (*šēlim*) implied both concepts in its original context. The two versions have simply highlighted different nuances of the concept, in line with themes and

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25. R. E. O. White, *Biblical Doctrine of Initiation*, pp. 343–344. Viviano ('Trinity in the Old Testament', pp. 193–209) argues for a similar gathering up of Jesus' teaching about Father, Son of man, and exalted angels (the latter appropriate for a personal concept of the Holy Spirit), though this seems somewhat less probable.
26. R. H. Mounce, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 268. Also leaving open this option are Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, pp. 747–748; and Keener, *Matthew*, p. 717, n. 343.
27. M. J. Harris, 'Baptism and the Lord's Supper', p. 19. There is no indication that either baptismal expression had yet become technical or formulaic, as if only one combination of words were possible.
28. Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 75. Cf. Schnackenburg, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 47; Pagán, 'Bienaventurados los pobres en espíritu', pp. 42–50.

terminology they prefer elsewhere. As F. F. Bruce explains, Jesus was declaring that ‘you must be perfect (that is, all-embracing, without any restriction) in your acts of mercy or kindness, for that is what God is like’.²⁹ Alternatively, Luke’s focus on mercy could be employing simple synecdoche (see p. 164), focusing on that aspect of perfection (or maturity/completion/blamelessness³⁰) Luke most wanted to emphasize.

Two of the most striking examples of theological clarification appear in Jesus’ teaching to his disciples about relationships with their families and to the rich young ruler about his view of Jesus. In the former instance, Luke reports that Jesus warned, ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even life itself – such a person cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14:26). At first sight Matthew appears drastically to tone down his version: ‘Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me’ (Matt. 10:37). But Matthew’s paraphrase is a fair interpretation of what Jesus’ harsher-sounding statement in Luke meant. In Semitic language and thought, ‘hate’ had a broader range of meanings than it does in English, including the sense of ‘leaving aside’, ‘renunciation’ or ‘abandonment’.³¹ Moreover, as G. B. Caird explains, ‘the Semitic way of saying “I prefer this to that” is “I like this and hate that”’ (cf. Gn. 29:30–31; Deut. 21:15–17). Thus for the followers of Jesus to hate their families meant giving the family second place in their affections.’³²

In the latter case, Mark and Luke describe Jesus beginning his reply to the rich young ruler’s question ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ with the words ‘Why do you call me good? . . . No one is good – except God alone’ (Mark 10:17–18; Luke 18:18–19). Matthew, however, rephrases both question and answer to read, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’ and ‘Why do you ask me about what is good? . . . There is only

29. Bruce, *Hard Sayings of Jesus*, p. 76. Cf. Keener, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 205; Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, p. 605. The two accounts of Jesus’ great sermon diverge enough to make it difficult to ascribe all the differences to the Evangelists’ redaction. Perhaps ‘Q’ was passed down in more than one form (Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 245) and/or numerous variations came in with the oral tradition (Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 231–234).

30. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 1, pp. 561–563.

31. Bruce, *Hard Sayings of Jesus*, p. 592; Stein, *Luke*, p. 397. For Jewish precedents for such stark allegiance, see Exod. 32:27, 29; Deut. 33:9; 4QTestimonia 15:17.

32. Caird, *Gospel of St Luke*, pp. 178–179. Cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 221.

One who is good' (Matt. 19:16–17). Most likely, Matthew wishes to avoid the potential misunderstanding of the previous version that could be read as Jesus denying his own goodness. In the Jewish milieu that emphasized good works as central to righteousness, Matthew has surely captured the point of the young man's question, recorded more literally in Mark and Luke. As for Jesus' counterquestion, Matthew could hardly have intended to change the true point of Mark's version, since he concludes with the identical affirmation of God alone as good.³³ In the fourth century, John Chrysostom raised the question of why Christ told the ruler that no-one was good but God. Answering his own question, Chrysostom continued:

Because he considered Jesus a mere man and one of the crowd, and a Jewish teacher. For this reason he spoke as a man to him . . . Therefore when he says, 'No one is good,' he does not say this to show that he is not good; far from it. For he does not say, 'Why do you call me good? I am not good' but 'No one is good,' that is, no human being. When he says this, he does not mean to exclude men from goodness but to make a comparison with the goodness of God. Therefore he adds, 'Except God alone.'³⁴

But it is only when one understands Matthew's theological concerns that the rationale for his alterations of Mark becomes intelligible.

Representational changes

In at least three clear cases, as he writes for the least Jewish audience of all the Gospels and with the most fluent Greek style of the four, Luke changes the imagery of his narrative from something distinctively Palestinian to its Graeco-Roman counterpart. The parable of the two builders is the most developed example of this process of 'representational change' (Matt. 7:24–27; Luke 6:47–49).³⁵ Luke adds that the wise man who built his house on the rock 'dug down deep and laid the foundation', a practice much more common outside Palestine than within, and turns the description of the storm with its violent wind, appropriate for the small, dry Israeli desert river beds suddenly swollen with rain, into a calmer flood, more characteristic of a larger

33. For details of a possible harmonization, see Carson, 'Redaction Criticism', pp. 135–137. For the basic point of the change, cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, p. 555.

34. *Homilies on Matthew* 63.1.

35. The term comes from Jeremias (*Parables of Jesus*, pp. 26–27), who notes these and other examples.

river such as the Syrian Orontes slowly overflowing its banks.³⁶ So, too, only Luke's version of the parable of the mustard seed has the plant growing in a garden rather than a field (Luke 13:19; cf. Mark 4:31; Matt. 13:31). Jewish purity laws forbade the planting of a mustard seed in a garden, but in the Graeco-Roman world this was a common practice.³⁷ And Luke's account of the lowering of the paralytic through the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching removes Mark's reference to 'digging', which would have been necessary with the typical thatched roofs of Palestine, and replaces it with a description of the removal of 'tiles', more common atop buildings elsewhere in the Roman Empire (Mark 2:4; Luke 5:19).³⁸ All these changes simply help a non-Jewish audience to picture the scenes more vividly and comprehensibly in their minds, even if the actual details of the imagery have changed.

Modern Bible translations have often proceeded similarly. Consider Christ's words to Saul of Tarsus according to the AV rendering of Acts 26:14: 'It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.' In contemporary English slang, this would create a graphic metaphor indeed, but not the one Luke intended with the Greek word *kentron*, which means 'sting' or 'goad'. The NKJV, like most modern translations, uses 'goad,' but how many people know that this is a kind of whip used to prod an ox? If they do, does that make the meaning of the idiom any clearer? One might envision the futility of a four-legged creature trying to raise a leg so as to kick a whip, but would one necessarily think of the possible harm it could inflict on itself if it missed? Thus, less than fully literal, earlier twentieth-century translations included, 'You hurt yourself by kicking at the goad' (Moffatt), and 'By kicking against the goads you are punishing yourself' (TCNT), while J. B. Phillips tried to explain how God prods us, by writing, 'It is not easy for you to kick against your own conscience,' and Olaf Norlie's *New Testament: A New Translation* wanted to explain the kicking as well, with 'It will be hard for you to rebel and resist.'³⁹ More recently, the GNB decided on 'You hurt yourself by hitting back, like an ox kicking against its owner's stick,' whereas the NLT prefers 'It is hard for you to fight against my will.' Eugene Peterson's *The Message* comes closest to reproducing what Luke

36. Findlay, *Jesus and His Parables*, pp. 95–96. Cf. Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, pp. 133, 135. The (T)NIV's '(raging) torrent struck' in Luke 6:48–49 considerably overtranslates what more literally reads as 'the stream broke' (ESV).

37. Or else the lines of development went from impurity to purity. For both options, see Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, p. 376.

38. C. A. Evans, *Luke*, pp. 91–92.

39. For all four of these references, see Vaughan, *Bible from 26 Translations*, p. 2225.

has done in the parables, by replacing one metaphor with a more common contemporary equivalent: 'Why do you insist on going against the grain?'

Or take 2 Corinthians 6:12b. A 'literal' translation would read, 'But you have narrow room in your intestines (or perhaps kidneys)!'⁴⁰ The AV says the same thing in Elizabethan English: 'But ye are straitened in your own bowels.' Even highly touted modern translations that typically stay quite close to the original languages cannot let this pass. Thus the NASB reads, 'but you are restrained in your own affections', while the ESV substitutes 'restricted' for 'restrained'. A more dynamically equivalent translation can opt for 'you have withheld your love from us' (NLT) Victor Furnish's Anchor Bible translation announces, 'You are cramped, rather, in your feelings,' replacing one kind of gut-wrenching experience for another.⁴¹ The GNB substitutes the more common modern metaphor for the seat of one's emotions and translates, 'it is you who have closed your hearts to us'. With all these legitimate options, it should not cause distress to discover that the original writers of Scripture at times transformed a statement into its cultural equivalent in a new context. The meaning of the overall passage in each case remains unaltered; in fact, it is precisely in order to preserve its intelligibility for a different audience that the details of the picture are changed.⁴²

Synecdoche

A common figure of speech of both literature and conversation is the use of a part of an object for the whole. The poet speaks of 'three sails' when she means three ships, and the captain cries 'All hands on deck!' when he means 'all sailors'. Two seeming discrepancies between Gospel parallels that have been explained in different ways may perhaps best be understood as instances of this type of metaphorical expression called 'synecdoche'. The first involves Jesus' promise 'If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!' This is how Matthew words it (Matt. 7:11), and Luke

40. The Greek *splanchna* referred to the internal abdominal organs, believed in antiquity to be the seat of the emotions.

41. Furnish, *II Corinthians*, p. 359.

42. Of course, not all modern readers are happy with these modifications. But, in their defence, see esp. M. L. Strass, 'English Bible Translation', pp. 153–168. For the complexities of translating the imagery of Scripture and the necessity of substituting cultural equivalents, see Beekman and Callow, *Translating the Word of God*, esp. pp. 24–25, 124–150, 201–211. For discussion of one excellent test case, see C. L. Miller, 'Translating Biblical Proverbs', pp. 129–144.

follows him almost exactly, except for the striking substitution of ‘Holy Spirit’ for ‘good gifts’ in the final clause (Luke 11:13). Because the Holy Spirit is one of his favourite themes, it is quite likely that Luke made the change and that Matthew renders Jesus’ words more literally. But since the Holy Spirit is the pre-eminent example of the type of ‘good gift’ that is a heavenly gift (cf. Mark 13:11 pars.; John 14:16–17; Acts 1:8), and thus the most important part of the whole, the change is quite justifiable.⁴³

A similar example of very close parallelism in wording with a sudden, striking change in terminology occurs at the end of Jesus’ parable of the children in the marketplace. Is wisdom justified by her ‘deeds’ (Matt. 11:19) or her ‘children’ (Luke 7:35)? Part of the problem here stems from the fact that both statements are somewhat enigmatic. Most likely their point is that even though the Jewish leaders have rejected both John the Baptist and Jesus, just as the children in the parable refused their playmates’ invitation to play both ‘funeral’ and ‘wedding’, the wisdom of God’s plan of salvation for his people will be shown to be true and righteous by the message and ministry of his emissaries. Luke perhaps preserves the more original wording; wisdom’s ‘children’ are pre-eminently John and Jesus but ultimately all who form part of God’s people. Matthew, in keeping with his emphasis on the mighty acts of God in Christ, uses synecdoche to refer to the key element that demonstrates the righteousness of God’s children: their actions.

Leon Morris observes that

In Luke’s version this wisdom is vindicated by her children – the lives of those who accept Christ’s teaching show that it was excellent. When Matthew says much the same about *actions*, he makes essentially the same point. The wisdom Jesus taught was not meant as a topic for debate in religious or philosophical schools – it was something to be lived out and it is *proved right* in the works his followers do (‘results,’ *NEB, GNB*).⁴⁴

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43. Similarly, Schweizer, *Good News according to Luke*, p. 192: ‘Luke mentions the Holy Spirit (vs. 13) because for him the Spirit represents the embodiment of all that is good . . . and because he knows how ambiguous all “good things” are.’ Cf. Stein, *Luke*, p. 328.
44. Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, p. 286. S. I. Wright (*Voice of Jesus*) shows that parables regularly function as synecdoches, with key characters and details representing larger wholes of which they are a part. It should not cause surprise, then, if the Gospel writers picked up this concept and made their own minor modifications of parables in line with the principles of synecdoche.

There is no contradiction between Matthew and Luke, only complementary perspectives on the same concept.⁴⁵

Partial reports of longer sayings

The approach of some commentators of previous generations, who assumed that every variation in the wording of someone's speech from one Gospel to the next meant that the same thing must have been said more than once in different ways, could lead to some absurd reconstructions. An oft-cited example is the notion that Peter actually denied Jesus six times due to the minor variations between the Gospel accounts of his remarks.⁴⁶ Such a harmonization flies in the face of Jesus' own prophecy, on which all four Gospels agree, that Peter would deny Jesus three times and then the cock would crow. But it is equally inappropriate to reject all attempts to harmonize varying accounts by means of this approach; it would be quite natural for one writer to record one part of a narrative and for another to focus on a different part. The use of paraphrase combined with variation in the selection of wording can account for still further differences.

Thus when one asks what the high priest and Jesus actually said to each other during his interrogation by the Sanhedrin on the night of his arrest, it is quite possible that Luke has preserved the most detailed record of the dialogue (Luke 22:67–70), since he seems to be dependent on a special source for much of his passion narrative.⁴⁷ Matthew and Mark would then have condensed into one the two questions 'Are you the Christ?' and 'Are you the Son of God (the

45. Gathercole ('Justification of Wisdom', pp. 476–488) replaces the conventional translations with 'and Wisdom has been absolved of her actions' (Matt.) or 'dissociated from her deeds' (Luke), narrowing the gap between the two versions even more. In other words, those who are rejecting the ministries of John and Jesus are not seeing that they stem from Divine Wisdom. But see Witherington (*Matthew*, p. 235), who points out that, elsewhere in this Gospel, Wisdom is associated with the Son rather than with the Father.
46. Lindsell, *Battle for the Bible*, pp. 174–176. In fact, the real problem lies not in what Peter said but in who addressed him. It is quite likely that more than three people accused him of being a disciple of Jesus (completely apart from any attempt to harmonize the parallels, note the references to 'the bystanders' in Mark 14:70 and to 'they' in John 18:25), but it is entirely unnecessary to assume that he replied with more than three denials (the Evangelists have merely paraphrased these in different ways: see McEleney, 'Peter's Denials – How Many?', pp. 467–472).
47. Catchpole, *Trial of Jesus*, pp. 153–203. Cf. Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53*, pp. 1104–1109.

Blessed)?' and would have recorded only part of Jesus' reply (Matt. 26:63–64; Mark 14:61–62). Alternatively, Luke may have rewritten Mark to distinguish more clearly the issues at stake in the interrogation. Either way, Jesus' fateful answer is probably preserved more literally in Matthew and Luke ('you say so'/'you say that I am'), since all three Synoptics agree that later that morning Jesus replied to Pilate in a similarly cryptic fashion (Mark 15:2; Matt. 27:11; Luke 23:3). Mark, however, phrases Jesus' response to the high priest with the simple, forthright declaration 'I am' (Mark 14:62), to clarify that the answer was affirmative, even if Jesus was implying by his more veiled manner of speech that he preferred another form of self-reference.⁴⁸ Instead of Messiah or Son of God, roles that for his contemporaries did not always include the suffering he understood his mission to embrace, Jesus preferred the title 'Son of man' (see further, pp. 314–315). On this all three Synoptists agree, as they describe Jesus explaining his confession to the Sanhedrin: 'you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One'.

The question of the centurion's outcry following the crucifixion resembles the problem of the wording of Jesus' confession. Mark and Matthew have him declare Jesus to be God's Son, while Luke offers a much tamer admission: 'Surely this was a righteous man' (Mark 15:39; Matt. 27:54; Luke 23:47). Both versions reflect the redactional emphases of the Gospels in which they are found. Mark and Matthew highlight Jesus as God's Son much more so than does Luke, whereas Luke, in both his Gospel and Acts, stresses the fact that Jesus and the early Christians were innocent of any crime against Israel or Rome.⁴⁹ But why could the centurion not have spoken with more detail than any one of the Gospel records, something that gave rise to both versions? This was the suggestion of Alfred Plummer a century ago, and endorsed more recently by Morris: 'the sense in which a Roman would have used the term [Son of God] is better given in Luke's words. Plummer paraphrases, "He was a good

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48. Some have argued that Jesus really denied the titles ascribed to him; others have denied that the affirmative was qualified, despite Jesus' apparently indirect manner of speaking. But see Catchpole, 'Answer of Jesus to Caiaphas', pp. 213–226. Cf. Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1162. Holzapfel, Huntsman and Wayment (*Jesus Christ and the World*, p. 100) helpfully suggest the meaning 'the terms are yours, not mine'.
49. But see Shiner ('Ambiguous Pronouncement of the Centurion', pp. 3–22), who stresses how the anarthrous 'son' and the pagan identity of the speaker, even at the level of Marcan redaction, keep the confession from being fully unambiguous. Thus the traditional theme of the vindication of the martyrs could make the centurion's words mean something remarkably close to what Luke has recorded.

man, and quite right in calling God his Father".⁵⁰ The centurion could easily have deduced Jesus' character from his exemplary behaviour on the cross and might well have heard something about the claims of Jesus from all the public stir of that week. The lack of the Greek article with 'son of god' on the lips of a commander of Roman troops could also suggest that he is ascribing the same divine honours to Jesus that were regularly reserved for the emperor.⁵¹ Such a claim would certainly presuppose Jesus' innocence as well! Each Evangelist has then selected the emphasis most consonant with his distinctive themes.⁵²

As with each of the previous examples considered, the freedom to paraphrase that the Evangelists exhibit may not be consistent with modern preoccupations with word-for-word citation but it certainly does not distort the truth of the Gospel narratives. Even today in informal conversation substantial paraphrases of another person's speech are accepted as faithful to its original meaning, so there is no reason to object to the fact that the ancient world permitted a similar flexibility with written reports. At any rate, the overall historicity of the Gospels' events is hardly called into question by these minor variations in wording.

Chronological problems

A major reason why some critics lightly esteem the historical value of the Gospels is that many of the accounts of incidents from Christ's life do not occur in the same order or location in one Gospel as they do in the next. But from at least as long ago as the time of St Augustine, it has been recognized that the Gospels did not set out to supply a detailed itinerary of Jesus' ministry with every event in its proper chronological sequence. Instead, they frequently arrange passages in topical or thematic order instead (cf. the examples on p. 53 above).⁵³ Scholars of a more traditional mould have often tried to reconstruct comprehensive 'lives of Christ', but their outlines can be only hypothetical.

50. Morris, *Gospel according to St Luke*, p. 330; Plummer, *Gospel according to St Luke*, p. 539.

51. T. H. Kim, 'Anarthrous *huios theou* in Mark 15,39', pp. 221–241. But this is disputed by E. S. Johnson, Jr., 'Mark 15,39', pp. 406–413.

52. For the key role played by the title 'Son of God' in Mark and Matthew, see esp. Kingsbury, *Christology of Mark's Gospel*; idem, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom*. For Luke's emphasis on Jesus' innocence, see esp. R. E. Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol. 2, pp. 1163–1167.

53. As emphasized in Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority*, p. 42.

Apart from the beginnings and endings of both his life and public ministry,⁵⁴ the Gospels simply do not provide enough information about the time and place of the incidents recorded to enable them to be fitted together with confidence into one and only one chronologically precise harmony. Modern redaction criticism, moreover, can usually supply a plausible rationale for why a given Evangelist chose to change the order of his sources. But if one applies the principle of assuming a chronological connection between two portions of the Synoptics only when the text explicitly presents one, then the apparent contradictions of sequence vanish. This is especially true when one realizes that the Greek words sometimes translated as 'now' or 'then' in English (e.g. *kai* or *de*) often need mean only 'and', without implying that one event happened *after* the one previously narrated. Even the words for 'now' and 'then' that *do* often imply temporal sequence (*nun* and *tote*) also frequently denote mere logical consequence (as also in English).⁵⁵

Many examples are widely accepted even by conservative commentators. Luke, for example, moves his notice of John the Baptist's imprisonment from its place in the middle of Jesus' Galilean ministry (Mark 6:14–29) to its beginning in order that it may form the natural conclusion of his section on John the Baptist's mission (Luke 3:1–20). He also brings forward the account of the sermon in Nazareth (Mark 6:1–6; Luke 4:16–30) as a keynote summary of Jesus' teaching and rejection in order to introduce his activity in Galilee. On the other hand, Luke places the account of the call of Peter, John and James later in his narrative and combines it with his distinctive story of the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1–11; cf. Mark 1:16–20), perhaps to avoid giving the impression Mark's sequence might create: that these disciples' decision to join Jesus was more spontaneous and unmotivated than it actually was (cf. p. 220, on John 1:35–51).⁵⁶

54. Here harmonizations can be achieved up to a point. See, e.g., Stein, *Jesus the Messiah*. On the resurrection stories, see also above, p. 140–141

55. As in such expressions as 'Now the point of what we are saying is' or 'He saw, then, that the solution was'. In other contexts, 'now' means little more than 'now the next thing I would like to say is', as in the sentence at the beginning of a new episode that reads, 'Now there was a person who'.

56. Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke I–IX*, p. 560. Samuel Abogunrin ('Three Variant Accounts of Peter's Call', p. 592) suggests that Mark may have omitted the miracle of the fish catch to avoid an overemphasis on the person of Peter, in keeping with his redactional tendencies elsewhere, while Joel Marcus (*Mark 1–8*, p. 178) speculates that Mark moved 1:16–20 forward from where it was in a source between vv. 32–34 and 35–39 on which he relied that functioned as a 'community-founding tradition'.

A less clear-cut example comes with the story of Jesus' healing of blind Bartimaeus and his companion (Mark 10:46–52; Matt. 20:29–34; Luke 18:35–43). Mark, followed by Matthew, claims that the miracle occurred as Jesus and his entourage were leaving Jericho, while Luke seems to claim that it happened as they were 'drawing near'. Because archaeology has demonstrated that there were two places in New Testament times called Jericho (the Old Testament city for the most part desolate and the rebuilt Herodian resort town a few miles away), a popular harmonization has envisaged Jesus as on the road in between the old and new sites. Yet no-one reading Mark or Matthew by itself would ever guess that the old city was implied. Unless they were told otherwise, a first-century audience would automatically assume that the city an Evangelist called Jericho, in which he described throngs of people flocking to Jesus, was the new, plentifully inhabited site.

Luke has probably just abbreviated Mark, as he does consistently elsewhere, leaving out the reference to the departure from Jericho. Mark, after all, begins his passage in agreement with Luke, by reporting that Jesus first came *to* Jericho, but his style is somewhat inelegant in stating, literally, that 'they come to Jericho, and as he is going out of Jericho . . .' (Mark 10:46). Luke therefore improves the style by excising the latter clause, so that one must not press him to mean that the miracle narrated in 18:36–43 occurred immediately after the action of verse 35. Luke simply records Jesus' arrival, Mark presupposes his entrance into and exit from the town, which Luke omits, and then both describe the healing as Jesus was on his way out. The blind man would have sat by the roadside, as beggars customarily did, all the while (18:35), but would have realized the significance of the passing visitor only when crowds were accompanying him upon his departure (18:36).⁵⁷ The type of gap that must be presupposed between verses 35 and 36 is hinted at by Luke's omission of any mention of crowds as Jesus was entering, and is consistent with the type of literary abridgment that occurs throughout the Gospels (cf. secs. 'Partial reports of longer sayings' and 'Omissions' in this chapter).

A possible objection to this reconstruction surfaces in Luke 19:1, when Luke reports his next story, the conversion of Zacchaeus, as occurring while 'they were going through Jericho'. But Luke does not say this occurred 'after' the previous miracle, so there is no contradiction. Luke regularly introduces passages

57. Interestingly, Calvin (*Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 2, p. 278) anticipated this solution long before the advent of modern redaction criticism. 'To draw near' (*engizēin*) in Luke 18:35 may also mean simply 'to be in the vicinity'. See S. E. Porter, 'In the Vicinity of Jericho', pp. 91–104.

with no clear temporal connection with what precedes; here the only link is the word ‘and’ (*kai*). The aorist participle ‘having entered’ (*eiselthōn*) modifies the main verb, ‘was going through’ (*diercheto*), but need not imply action consequent to 18:43 (cf. the introductory aorist participles in 12:1, 17:20 and 18:31). Rather Luke seems to have relocated this passage topically so that it can form the middle of a climactic sequence of three passages about Jesus’ upending of traditional Jewish expectation.⁵⁸ Each successive scene causes severer shockwaves: healing the blind, who were often thought to be sinful and thus punished by their incapacity; fraternizing with a tax-collector, who had demonstrably betrayed his nation in the eyes of the Pharisees by working for Rome; and telling a parable about the destruction of a nobleman’s servants and enemies, who clearly stood for the Jewish leaders. Theological considerations explain Luke’s outline, while claims of contradictions with Mark can be sustained only when the Gospels are read in a way in which they were never intended to be read.

As a final illustration of this process, one might point to a famous example of variation in order *within* a given passage. In Q’s version of the temptations of Jesus (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13), Matthew and Luke differ as to which temptation they place second and which third: jumping off the temple to be rescued by the angels or worshipping Satan to receive all the kingdoms of the earth. But Luke has linked the three temptations only with the connecting words ‘but’ and ‘and’ (Matthew uses ‘then’ and ‘again’) and has probably placed the second temptation last so that the climax of his account would end with Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem. Both city and building are important for Luke throughout his two-volume work, so the redactional change is most likely his.⁵⁹ But without any explicit statements of chronology, it is wholly unfair to call this a contradiction with Matthew.

Omissions

Omissions of entire passages or sections

Why the Evangelists omitted certain stories or episodes from the life of Christ that their sources contained is almost always an impossible question to answer.

58. Cf. Liefeld, ‘Luke’, p. 1006; Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 692; Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 2, p. 281.

59. Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 167; Carson, ‘Matthew’, p. 111. J. B. Gibson (*Temptations of Jesus*, pp. 32–37) discusses the entire reconstruction of the ‘Q’ account of the temptations and notes the consensus that finds Matthew’s order most original here.

Did Luke pass over all of Jesus' 'withdrawal from Galilee' (Mark 6:45 – 8:26) because he was structuring his Gospel along the lines of a geographical outline that covered only Jesus' ministry in Galilee, Samaria and Perea, and Judea, and in that order? Or did he delete it for a more practical reason, knowing that he wanted to add a lot of non-Markan material to his Gospel and that the typical-size scroll could contain little more than the amount of detail he finally did include? Both suggestions are plausible but neither is demonstrable. The first may be preferable, because it allows for an outline that sees Luke as the mirror image of Acts and that understands the entire two-volume work as chiasmically structured.⁶⁰ At any rate, one can hardly accuse a Gospel writer of contradicting his sources simply because he omits some of their information.

The same is true at the level of an individual paragraph. Sometimes one can suggest plausible reasons for omission, but at best they are still educated guesses. For example, perhaps Luke left out the remarkable miracle of Jesus' cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12–14, 20–25) because he had included a parable, unique to his Gospel, on the same topic (Luke 13:6–9).⁶¹ It is easy today to express disbelief that a particular Evangelist could have passed over any of the amazing deeds of Jesus and to question their authenticity if they are found in only one of the Gospels. But on anybody's reconstruction of the life of Christ, what the New Testament describes can represent only a small fraction of his marvellous activity and teaching, so omissions should occasion no surprise (cf. John 20:31). What is striking is how much *is* repeated in more than one Gospel. The unity of the Synoptists' witness to Jesus' life is much more impressive than its diversity. The fact that each Evangelist remained highly selective in which details he chose to include in no way impugns the historical accuracy of the information he did incorporate.

Omissions of details within passages

The same principles apply to the choice of details within a given passage, which regularly vary from one Gospel to the next. Matthew includes Peter's brief adventure as he steps out of the boat while Jesus is walking on water (Matt. 14:28–32); Mark and Luke do not. Matthew reports Jesus' high praise for and promises to Peter after his confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:17–19); again Mark and Luke miss out this portion of the passage. Different emphases result, but no logical inconsistencies emerge. Still, occasionally the omission of certain information from a parallel text will make one

60. See Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, pp. 140–145.

61. Cf. C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke*, p. 686.

writer appear at first to contradict another. Again there is room to look only at some of the best-known examples.

Presupposing information made explicit elsewhere

In Mark and Luke, Jesus seems clearly to forbid divorce and remarriage for any reason (Mark 10:11–12; Luke 16:18). In Matthew, on two different occasions he qualifies his remarks with the clause ‘except for adultery’ (Matt. 19:9; 5:32). Some take the word translated ‘adultery’ (*porneia*) to mean sexual sin more generally, while others limit it to very specific types of illegal marriages between close relatives or to incest, but the problem remains that Matthew grants an exception to what seems to be an absolute prohibition in Mark and Luke. Others take Jesus’ exception to be referring to grounds for separation rather than for divorce, but on this view he would not have answered the Jewish leaders’ original question about when *divorce* was permissible. Not surprisingly, many scholars assume that Matthew or the early church simply added this concession, contradicting Jesus’ original, absolute commandment because it was too severe or impractical. Yet although the exegesis of these passages is complicated by a number of ambiguous grammatical features, the most convincing solution still remains the one that sees Matthew as just spelling out what Mark and Luke leave implicit.⁶² ‘Maxims and proverbs, general statements of principle requiring qualification (cf., e.g., Prov. 18:22 with 11:22; 12:4; 21:9 . . .), were common throughout the ancient Mediterranean.’⁶³

The debate about divorce in Jewish circles in Jesus’ day pitted the followers of the famous teacher Hillel against those of his rival, Shammai. The former took a more liberal view, permitting divorce in a wide variety of circumstances; the latter, only in the case of adultery. In other words, both sides agreed on the exception that Matthew adds, so Jesus (or Mark) could have safely presupposed it without fear of misunderstanding.⁶⁴ As David Instone-Brewer demonstrates:

Matthew’s addition of the Hillelite and Shammaite phrases was a correct reinsertion of well-known details that had been abbreviated out of the account in Mark, because without them the Pharisees’ question makes no sense. These additions would have

62. For a full-orbed study, see Blomberg, ‘Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage and Celibacy’, pp. 161–196.

63. Keener, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 190, n. 91.

64. For a thorough but concise defence of this view against the major alternatives, see Carson, ‘Matthew’, p. 418.

been self-evident to any contemporary Jew, who would have inserted them mentally if they were not present.⁶⁵

An almost exactly parallel example arises with Jesus' response to the Jewish leaders' request for a sign to legitimate his ministry. Mark states that Jesus replied emphatically, 'no sign will be given [this generation]' (Mark 8:12), while Matthew twice records Jesus' same statement with the qualification 'except the sign of the prophet Jonah' (Matt. 12:39–40; 16:4; this time paralleled by Luke in 11:29–30). Jesus in Matthew goes on to explain that this sign refers to the Son of man being in the heart of the earth (and presumably then resurrected), just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish (and then rescued). Nevertheless, both Jesus' teaching elsewhere (e.g. Luke 16:31) and the Jewish leaders' disbelief after the resurrection prove that this specific sign is not what Christ's opponents had in mind. They were looking for someone to liberate them from Rome, whereas Jesus came to free them from their sins. As far as they were concerned, 'no sign except the sign of the prophet Jonah' meant exactly the same thing as 'no sign' at all. Despite a formal contradiction between the parallels, the actual meaning of the two versions is identical.⁶⁶

Excerpting different portions of a longer original

This idea has already been introduced in the section on paraphrase but here a few purer examples may be cited. In the same saying of Jesus that concluded with the divergent expressions 'good gifts' and 'Holy Spirit' (see pp. 164–165), Matthew and Luke also differ in their description of Jesus' examples of good and bad gifts. Both agree that Christ said, 'Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?' (Luke 11:11), but Matthew precedes this with the parallel comparison of bread and a stone, whereas Luke follows it with one involving an egg and a scorpion. The best solution is that Jesus employed all three illustrations. His previous comments, which appear in identical form in both Gospels (Matt. 7:7–8; Luke 11:9–10), also divide into

65. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, p. 187.

66. Swetnam ('No Sign of Jonah', pp. 126–130) ties in Mark's omission of this 'exception' with his omission of the resurrection appearances at the end of his Gospel, arguing that Mark deliberately avoided basing his apologetic for the identity of Jesus on this potentially unconvincing testimony. Marcus (*Mark 1–8*, p. 505) believes Mark wanted to avoid portraying Jesus too much like the revolutionary 'sign prophets' that dotted the landscape of first-century Israel. For details and an identical conclusion to ours, see J. B. Gibson, 'Jesus' Refusal', pp. 37–66.

three parts, ‘ask, seek and knock’, and would nicely balance a tripartite illustration in the verses that follow.⁶⁷ Moreover, highly significant manuscript evidence favours the inclusion of the ‘bread–stone’ example in Luke’s account (Ⲛ, A, C, D, W, Δ, Θ, *f*¹ *f*¹³, Old Italic manuscripts and the Vulgate plus almost all of the Byzantine tradition), even if some of the oldest texts omit it (p⁴⁵, p⁷⁵, B, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian), thus explaining its exclusion from modern translations, contra the AV).⁶⁸ It is easy to argue that the longer version is simply a later, scribal harmonization, but such corrections to the earliest texts are usually not this lengthy or this well attested. But even if the bread–stone example were not in Luke’s original manuscript, it may at least reflect recognition that Jesus did use all three comparisons in his original teaching. An alternative would be to classify the variations in imagery as representational changes (see pp. 162–164).

In the case of Jesus’ ‘words of institution’ during the Last Supper, textual criticism again comes into play. In Luke 22:15–20 Jesus blesses a cup first and then the bread, unlike Matthew and Mark who have it the other way around (Mark 14:22–25; Matt. 26:26–29). This reversal is especially clear if Luke 22:19b–20 is omitted (it is missing from some manuscripts), because it complicates the picture by referring to a second cup. But here the textual evidence almost certainly favours inclusion of these verses,⁶⁹ so that what Luke really presents is the sequence ‘cup–bread–cup’. When one realizes that the Passover ritual that the Jews even today still celebrate involved four cups of wine, then it is clear that Luke has described what actually happened by referring to an earlier cup that Mark and Matthew failed to mention.

Following conventional standards of popular speech

Every language and culture has many conventional expressions that do not mean what they literally seem to say. One of these common to modern

67. Cf. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, pp. 136–137; Manson, *Sayings of Jesus*, p. 81; McNeile, *Gospel according to St Matthew*, p. 92.

68. Metzger (*Textual Commentary*, p. 157) admits that ‘it is difficult to decide’ whether Luke’s original had two or three pairs, but notes that a majority of the five-person committee (Aland et al.) that produced the United Bible Societies Greek New Testament’s 4th ed. opted for the shorter text.

69. See now the comprehensive study of Billings, *Do This in Remembrance of Me*; cf. idem, ‘Disputed Words in the Lukan Institution Narrative’, pp. 507–526. The longer version appears in all but one of the most ancient Greek manuscripts (Codex Bezae or D). One Syriac and a few of the Old Italic manuscripts also omit vv. 19b–20.

Western and ancient Eastern cultures is the habit of speaking about people as acting for themselves even when they use intermediaries. A news reporter may state flatly, 'the President of the United States today announced', when in fact it was his press secretary who spoke on his behalf, and quite possibly a speech-writer who composed the words, yet no-one accuses the commentator of inaccurate reporting. Similarly, Matthew and Mark can speak of Pilate scourging Jesus (Mark 15:15; Matt. 27:26), even though no governor himself would ever have lifted the whip but would have left that task to his soldiers.⁷⁰ This type of linguistic convention undoubtedly explains the differences between Matthew's and Luke's narratives of the Capernaum centurion (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10). In the former the centurion himself comes to Jesus, while in the latter he sends emissaries to summon the Lord. Luke's account is more literally accurate, but Matthew's way of phrasing it would have been considered no less acceptable.⁷¹

The same variation occurs again when Matthew and Mark differ as to who requested the seats of honour for James and John when Jesus would come into his kingdom. Was it the sons of Zebedee themselves or their mother (Matt. 20:20-21; Mark 10:35-37)? Little imagination is required to picture the mother coming and kneeling, with her sons acting as spokesmen. The fact that even in Matthew's account Jesus replies to the mother in the second person plural, 'you (pl.) do not know what you ask' (Matt. 20:22), shows that he knew the sons were involved as well and were probably quite happy to comply with their mother's request.⁷² It is also easy, though perhaps not quite as natural, to envisage the disciples asking their mother to plead on their behalf so as to avoid appearance of immodesty (cf. Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels* 2.64).⁷³ Either way, the two accounts scarcely contradict one another.

70. This may also be considered an example of the rare causative use of the active voice, translated, 'Pilate caused Jesus to be scourged.'

71. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, p. 632; Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 278. Cf. further Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 73.1, with Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.16.5, on Alexander 'meeting' the Chaldaean seers, when he actually spoke only second hand with Nearchus; and 2 Kgs 21:10 with 2 Chr. 33:10 on the Lord speaking to Manasseh, when actually it was by means of his prophets.

72. Cf. Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist-Critical Reading*, p. 256; C. A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, p. 116.

73. Witherington (*Matthew*, p. 376) asks, 'Are we meant to think that the "sons of thunder" put their mother up to this request, or is she just ambitious?' He then continues, 'Whatever else one can say, she certainly appears sincere.' Nolland

Compressing or telescoping a narrative

Perhaps the most perplexing differences between parallels occur when one Gospel writer has condensed the account of an event that took place in two or more stages into one concise paragraph that seems to describe the action taking place all at once. Yet this type of literary abridgment was quite common among ancient writers (cf. Lucian, *How to Write History* 56), so once again it is unfair to judge them by modern standards of precision that no-one in antiquity required.⁷⁴ The two most noteworthy examples of this process among Gospel parallels emerge in the stories of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter and cursing the fig tree.

In the first story, Matthew drastically abbreviates Mark's three-part account, which includes (1) the initial summons for Jesus to come to Jairus' home before the girl dies, (2) the intervening delay while he heals the haemorrhaging woman, and (3) his climactic arrival after the death of the daughter, and her subsequent revivification (Mark 5:21–43; cf. Matt. 9:18–26: twenty-three verses compressed into nine). As a result, Matthew omits the initial appeal 'my daughter is dying', and has Jairus in stage 1 declare that she has just died. A comparison of the reactions of two evangelical scholars is instructive. On the one hand, I. H. Marshall remarks:

We can, of course, explain the contradiction quite easily and acceptably by saying that Matthew, whose general policy was to tell stories about Jesus in fewer words than Mark, has abbreviated the story and given the general sense of what happened without going into details. But the fact still remains that Matthew has attributed to Jairus words which he did not actually say at the time stated.⁷⁵

This is one of the key passages that makes Marshall feel that 'inerrancy' is an inappropriate category for analysing the gospel data. On the other hand, Robert Stein assesses the situation differently:

In light of Matthew's tendency toward abbreviation we can better understand what has happened in Matthew 9:18–19, 23–25. Matthew summarizes the story of Jesus'

(*Gospel of Matthew*, p. 819) notes that 'one of the main ways in which a woman in a patriarchal society could exercise power was in terms of her continuing influence over her adult sons' and sees all three involved in the desire and the request. So also already Chrysostom, *Homilies in Matthew* 65.2; and Hilary of Poitiers, *On Matthew* 20.11.

74. Hengel, *Acts*, pp. 11–20.

75. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, p. 61.

raising of Jairus's daughter . . . What he omits are various interesting but unnecessary details such as that when Jairus first arrives his daughter is not yet dead . . . Matthew's account is an inerrant summary of Jesus' raising of Jairus's daughter. Difficulties are encountered if the details of this summary are pressed in a way that Matthew never intended.⁷⁶

A synthesis of these two opinions might state that Matthew's account seems to have a minor 'error' according to certain modern definitions of the term but not according to most ancient ones. But surely it is the latter that counts; even the most ardent defenders of biblical inerrancy admit that the original intention of Scripture must be the final arbiter, so Stein's verdict seems slightly fairer.⁷⁷

The same type of problem arises when Matthew telescopes the two-day sequence of events in the cursing of the fig tree into one uninterrupted paragraph that seems to refer only to the second day's events (Mark 11:12–14, 20–25; Matt. 21:18–22). But there is no necessary contradiction unless one reads more into the account than is actually present. Matthew's introduction 'early in the morning' does not specify which day is in view, and there is no reason to exclude an interval of time between verses 19 and 20. Mark does not deny that the fig tree began to die immediately; he merely insists that the disciples did not see it withered until the next day.⁷⁸ To reject this type of harmonization as special pleading is to ignore the fact that virtually every passage in the Gospels leaves out a plethora of detail that could make it much more complex; it is only when formal inconsistencies between parallels appear that one is reminded of this fact in such a vivid fashion.

A final example of compressing a two-stage event into one surfaces in the trial narratives of the Synoptics, though exactly what happened in each of the two stages of that event is impossible to determine with certainty. Matthew and Mark agree that Jesus was brought before an informal gathering of the

76. Stein, *Difficult Passages in the Gospels*, pp. 33–34. By way of contrast, Stein notes the absurd position in which Osiander's sixteenth-century harmonization landed him – that Jesus raised Jairus' daughter twice (p. 12)!

77. Although he does not appear to prefer this option, Witherington (*Gospel of Mark*, p. 186, n. 164) cites G. A. Chadwick ('Daughter of Jairus', p. 310) as observing that an anxious person could easily say 'she is dead by now' and mean 'she is at the point of death'.

78. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, p. 389. Moreover, Matthew's use of 'immediately' 'does not mean that [the tree] became barren at once, but merely that it began to wilt from that moment on. When Jesus and the disciples pass by it again on the following day, they thus could observe the result of His curse' (p. 390).

Sanhedrin in the middle of the night of his arrest, interrogated and convicted of blasphemy (Mark 14:53–65; Matt. 26:57–68). Then ‘early in the morning’ the court held a consultation and reached the decision to go to Pilate to request Jesus’ execution (Mark 15:1; Matt. 27:1–2). It is not clear whether this second stage in the proceedings was a more formal trial, because the Sanhedrin could not have legally sat in judgment during night-time hours, or whether, having already broken the law in their haste to do away with Jesus, they dispensed with even the pretence of legality when daylight came and simply concluded their discussion without giving the defendant further opportunity to speak. Either way, Luke has condensed the two stages into one and prefaced his account with the time indicator ‘at daybreak’ (Luke 22:66–71). Once again no contradiction emerges here unless one presses the texts beyond their intended meaning. That the Jewish authorities did not question Jesus almost immediately upon his arrest in the middle of the night is inconceivable in view of their eagerness to do away with him, and it is quite probable that they repeated their questions to make at least some kind of show of legality when daylight first dawned.⁷⁹

In the conventions of historical reporting of the day, Luke would thus have been entirely justified to narrate his account as he has, even if it meant assimilating some of the language of the earlier proceedings to that of the later ones.⁸⁰ On the other hand, as Marshall points out, ‘Mark’s account of the “trial” itself contains no time-reference,’ and

the appearance of a night-time meeting in Mark results from the juxtaposition of the trial with Peter’s denial (which certainly took place by night) and from the fact that business began extremely early in the morning. It is, therefore, probable that Mark and Luke are reporting the same incident from different points of view, namely an enquiry by the Sanhedrin which took place at dawn . . .⁸¹

79. On the accuracy of Mark’s version, see Sherwin-White, ‘Trial of Christ’, pp. 97–116; for Luke, see Catchpole, *Trial*, pp. 153–203. Unfortunately, neither acknowledges the force of the other’s position. Hagner (*Matthew 14–28*, p. 809) agrees that ‘we probably have a *de facto* second meeting of the Jewish authorities that same morning (cf. Luke 22:66)’, but also admits that ‘this meeting may be considered the final stage of the meeting described in 26:57–68’.

80. Cf. Kennedy, ‘Classical and Christian Source Criticism’, p. 142: ‘slightly different versions of essentially the same pericope may result from varying reports of what was said about the same subject on different occasions’.

81. Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 847. So also Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV*, p. 1466.

So perhaps the council proceeded more legally than many critics have given them credit for. In either event it is certainly inappropriate to demean the Evangelists' historical credibility on account of these minor variations.

Composite speeches

General considerations

Matthew punctuates his narrative of the life of Christ with five major 'sermons' of Jesus (chs. 5–7, 10, 13, 18, 23–25), which are largely unparalleled in Mark and have partial parallels scattered throughout Luke's Gospel, often in entirely different contexts from those to which Matthew assigns them. As a result, the vast majority of contemporary scholars believe that these 'sermons' are artificial, composite creations of Matthew, who collected together individual sayings from Q (thus the parallels in Luke) and supplemented them with material peculiar to his Gospel. This additional material is variously described as Matthew's own creative inventions, the sayings of early Christian prophets, or authentic teaching of Jesus acquired from other sources and given new contexts. Similar assessments are then made of other shorter 'speeches' of Jesus in the Synoptics, with the result that the old form-critical axiom of discrete sayings of Jesus all being preserved in isolation from each other still often prevails. This presupposition particularly characterized the work of the Jesus Seminar in the 1990s (recall pp. 16–17).

This premise, though, proves highly improbable. Jewish teachers in the first century were not like Oriental gurus, pronouncing one pithy pearl of wisdom at a time and leaving their disciples to search their inner selves to determine its significance. They did utter memorable proverbial sayings, but they also regularly spoke in coherent, organized, discursive form, not unlike modern preachers.⁸² That Jesus delivered detailed messages on discipleship (Matt. 5–7), on mission (10) or on the destruction of the temple and the end of the world

82. To be sure, the organization of longer discourses was often quite different from the structure of modern preaching. Jewish midrash (see pp. 75–87), e.g., tended to link one theme or teaching to the next by association of similar words or concepts more than by strictly logical progression of thought. For one possible outline of the Sermon on the Mount utilizing such connections, see Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics*, pp. 191–200. The final structure of the material Matthew selected for inclusion, however, seems almost certainly to be his. See Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 1, esp. pp. 62–64.

(24–25) is entirely likely, and the probability of such sermons having been summarized and preserved by word of mouth is equally great in view of the nature of oral tradition in antiquity (see pp. 55–62). Even if Jesus is considered to be sufficiently distinct from his Jewish contemporaries so as to limit the value of analogies to other teachers of his day, it is inconceivable that he should have had large throngs assembled to hear him and only have taught for as brief a period of time as it would have taken to utter even as ‘long’ a message as the Sermon on the Mount. At the outset, it makes much more sense to view the Synoptic ‘sermons’ as substantially abbreviated accounts of much longer messages of Jesus than to imagine them as built up from small, individual bits of ‘free-floating’ tradition.⁸³ It is possible that thematically related teachings of Jesus from other occasions may have, in turn, supplemented the core summary of the discourse (cf., e.g., Matt. 13:1–52 with Mark 4:1–34),⁸⁴ though even this is uncertain.

Two problems nevertheless remain insuperable for many critics. First, if Matthew’s five sermons are selections, at least for the most part, from longer originals, why then has Luke broken them up and scattered his parallels about in such seemingly random fashion? The Beatitudes form part of Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (6:20b–23), the Lord’s Prayer appears towards the beginning of his travel narrative (11:1–4), and the passage about not laying up treasure on earth is found later still (12:33–34), even though in Matthew they are all part of one unified sermon (on the mount) from earlier in Christ’s ministry. Second, Jewish and Graeco-Roman writers regularly composed ‘artificial’ speeches of highly composite origin, so why should the Gospel writers be viewed any differently?

It is difficult, however, to find in composite discourses elsewhere a close parallel to the conclusions that Matthew gives his sermons, which in all but one case refer to Jesus ‘having ended *these* sayings’ (7:28–29, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1; 11:1 is the partial exception that speaks simply of his finishing his instruction). If the critical consensus is correct, then at the very least Matthew has used a quite awkward expression that easily misleads his readers into assuming that he has narrated unified sermons of material already spoken by Jesus. Granted that ancient writers did create composite speeches without any intention to mislead, they also reported genuine speeches left intact (cf. Thucydides, *History* 1.22.1). Since Matthew could easily have omitted or rephrased his

83. Cf. esp. Kennedy (*New Testament Interpretation*, pp. 67–69), who defends a similar view in the light of the practices of ancient rhetoricians.

84. E. E. Ellis, *Making of the New Testament Documents*, p. 177, n. 206.

concluding formulas, it is hard to avoid their natural implication, which leaves Matthew claiming the latter practice as the one he adopted, however abbreviated his accounts may have been.⁸⁵ At the same time, since only 26:1 refers to 'all these sayings', Matthew may well have constructed his sermons out of shorter, connected discourses by adding or interspersing small amounts of authentic teaching of Jesus on related topics from other original contexts.⁸⁶ A similar process lay behind the composition of the targums (see p. 62, n. 41) and would have been accepted as very natural. Either way, the fact that other New Testament writings that predate the Synoptics seem to know connected blocks of tradition from Matthew's sermons confirms the view that the tradition contained much more than isolated sayings of Jesus (see pp. 286, 290).⁸⁷

As for the problem of the Lucan parallels, it appears that Luke rather than Matthew is the Evangelist who has most frequently arranged his sayings of Jesus in topical sequence.⁸⁸ Most of the material from one of Matthew's sermons that appears in a different context in Luke falls into his central section or travel narrative (9:51 – 18:14), which is strikingly void of details about chronology and location of events. Luke has few transitional words that require a given passage to be describing teaching of Jesus that occurred in the same context as the preceding passage, whereas thematic parallels readily suggest a topical outline for this portion of his Gospel. Luke 11:1–3, for example, combines the Lord's Prayer, the parable of the friend at midnight, and the command to 'ask, seek and knock'. The first and third of these passages are paralleled in different contexts in Matthew (in separate parts of the Sermon on the Mount), while the parable is unique to Luke. Presumably, Luke has gathered the three together because they all deal with the topic of prayer.⁸⁹ The section concludes with no summary statement suggesting that Jesus spoke them all at once, but instead shifts abruptly to a different topic, opposition to Jesus, beginning with the debate over the source of his power to exorcize (11:14–23). Moreover, for many of the shorter sayings of Jesus, one must

85. Carson, 'Matthew', p. 123.

86. Cf. France, *Gospel according to Matthew*, p. 60; and Stein, *Luke*, p. 198. On the juxtaposition of one authentic teaching of Jesus to interpret another, see Wanke, 'Bezugs- und Kommentarworte'.

87. Cf. Bauckham, 'Study of Gospel Traditions', pp. 378–379.

88. So already MacMunn, 'Who Compiled?', pp. 221–225.

89. For a detailed display of this topical kind of outline for all of Luke's central section, see Blomberg, 'Midrash, Chiasmus', pp. 244–246.

never forget the possibility that parallels in multiple contexts in the Gospels reflect Jesus' own repetition of the same teaching on different occasions. This type of solution can be the 'easy way out' at times, but it is irresponsible not to consider it at all, even when the wording is similar enough from one Gospel to the next to suggest the use of a common source. As Carson comments, 'the pithier the saying the more likely it was to be repeated word perfect',⁹⁰ and this would be true when Jesus' teaching was translated into Greek as well. More importantly,

there are few methodologically reliable tools for distinguishing between, say, two forms of one aphoristic saying, two reports of the same saying uttered on two occasions, or one report of one such saying often repeated in various forms but preserved in the tradition in one form.⁹¹

In other words, if one Evangelist knew that Jesus said something similar on several different occasions but had a written account of his words only from one of them, he would have felt free (and been completely justified in doing so) to follow that wording in his description of Jesus' teaching on any of those occasions.

All these reflections, however, merely embody general principles. Can a view of this Gospel's sermons as connected messages from Jesus, however selectively condensed, be substantiated with any evidence from the texts apart from the Evangelist's concluding statements? David Wenham has attempted to do this in minute detail for Jesus' eschatological discourse (Mark 13; Matt. 24–25; Luke 21:5–36, with partial parallels scattered elsewhere); if he is at all on target in his approach, the critical consensus will need serious modification.⁹² His position will therefore be discussed in some detail and then some much briefer remarks on the other Matthean sermons will be offered.

A test case: the eschatological discourse

Wenham argues that a version of Jesus' sermon about the last days, longer than that preserved in any of the three Synoptics, lies behind the Gospel accounts of that discourse of Christ, and that all have excerpted and rearranged that

90. Carson, 'Matthew', p. 123.

91. Ibid., p. 243. Cf. Bird, 'Formation of the Gospels', p. 133, and the literature there cited.

92. D. Wenham, *Rediscovery of Jesus' Eschatological Discourse*.

account in various ways. Wenham suspects that this pre-Synoptic version was written, but allows that it could have been only oral. He builds his case by beginning with the parable of the watchman, which forms the conclusion to Mark's version of the discourse (Mark 13:33–37). Luke has relocated this parable by inserting it into his travel narrative (Luke 12:35–38), but in a context that has parallels to Matthew's version of the eschatological discourse. The two parables of the thief and the faithful servants (Luke 12:39–46) reappear in Matthew 24:42–51 but have no Marcan counterparts. Wenham therefore suggests that all three of these parables about faithful stewardship originally stood together near the end of Jesus' sermon. Further, the introduction to Luke's parable of the watchman ('let your loins be girded and your lamps burning', Luke 12:35), absent from Mark's version, sounds like the perfect conclusion or summary of Matthew's parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1–12); perhaps that parable originally preceded the other three. On the other hand, Mark's parable of the watchman includes a unique statement that sounds like a reminiscence of the parable of the talents ('giving to his servants authority, to each his work', Mark 13:34a; cf. Matt. 25:14–30), so perhaps the parable of the talents originally followed this series of passages. It requires the addition of only Matthew's final parable of the judgment of the nations (Matt. 25:31–46) to this series, and all the major sections of this part of Jesus' sermon on the last days fall into line as a collection of parables that Jesus spoke, one after the other. The table below shows how all three Synoptics preserve traces of this sequence of the original discourse's conclusion.

<i>Parable of ten virgins</i>	Matthew 25:1–12		Luke 12:35
<i>Parable of watchman</i>		Mark 13:34b–36	Luke 12:36–38
<i>Parable of thief</i>	Matthew 24:43–44		Luke 12:39–40
<i>Peter's question</i>			Luke 12:41
<i>Jesus' answer</i>		Mark 13:37	
<i>Parable of faithful stewardship</i>	Matthew 24:45–51		Luke 12:42–46
<i>Parable of talents</i>	Matthew 25:13–30	Mark 13:33–34a	
<i>Parable of sheep and goats</i>	Matthew 25:31–46		

The second section of Wenham's book applies a like strategy with similar results to the less divergent accounts of the main body of Jesus' discourse. This section, common to all three of the Synoptics, contains Jesus' less parabolic teaching about the signs accompanying the end (Mark 13:5–32; Matt.

24:4–41; Luke 21:8–36). Here also the pre-Synoptic version may have been longer than any of the current forms. A passage such as Luke 17:22–37 on the coming of the Son of man would then not be an isolated fragment that Matthew and Mark have joined with other sayings in order to construct a longer, composite discourse (cf. the parallels in Matt. 24:17–18, 23, 26–28, 37–41; Mark 13:14–16, 19–23) but would be an account of what Jesus originally said in his sermon, which Matthew and Mark have condensed and which Luke has relocated in his travel narrative as part of Jesus’ teaching about when and how the kingdom will appear (cf. the subsequent parable in Luke 18:1–8 of the unjust judge). By the end of Wenham’s study, every passage has a logical place in a reconstructed eschatological discourse that contains more detail than is found in any single Gospel.

The evidence for the dozens of careful, exegetical decisions that Wenham has to make to support his case varies from one instance to the next, and some of the pieces in his jigsaw should perhaps be put together differently.⁹³ But even if every facet of his reconstruction is not equally convincing, scholars must still face up to its significance. In all probability, Jesus originally uttered one connected, coherent eschatological discourse from which the three Synoptists have chosen to reproduce different portions in different places. They did not invent the idea of such a discourse by combining a large number of short, isolated sayings from unconnected contexts in Jesus’ life, even though they may have used a few such sayings to provide authoritative commentary on controversial details.

The other sermons in Matthew

If Wenham’s approach to the eschatological discourse is at all valid, then the likelihood of Matthew having excerpted similar, lengthy accounts of Jesus’ teaching for his other four sermons increases. The Sermon on the Mount and the sermon in parables (5–7 and 13) have shorter parallels in Luke 6:20–49 and

93. See my review of Wenham in *TrinJ* 6 (1985), pp. 115–118. Few scholars have actually engaged Wenham’s proposal since it appeared in the early 1980s. It has been called ‘intriguing’ and ‘fascinating’, and labelled the best of recent source-critical proposals for this material, but ultimately ‘inconclusive’ and too ‘speculative’ (the four adjectives in quotations recur again and again in the literature), without any adequately detailed assessments. Most studies of the Olivet Discourse have simply ignored it. Ulrich Luz, in a volume of over 660 pages on the last eight chapters of Matthew alone (*Matthew 21–28*, p. 182, n. 13), is aware of Wenham’s book but declares, ‘the limitations of space prevent an explicit discussion!’

Mark 4:1–34, respectively. Once again it is usually assumed that the shorter accounts are more authentic, though even they are generally supposed to be somewhat composite, while unparalleled information in Matthew is taken as redactional invention. But why, for example, must Jesus have spoken only four beatitudes (Luke 6:20–22), which then inspired Matthew on the one hand to add four more of his own (Matt. 5:3–10) and Luke on the other to append four woes to balance them (Luke 6:24–26)?⁹⁴ Is it not more natural to imagine Jesus speaking all eight beatitudes followed by eight woes (or perhaps inserting one woe after each beatitude), with Matthew and Luke each choosing different ways of abbreviating the collection? ² *Enoch* 52.11–12, after all, pairs in alternating sequence six blessings and six curses, while 4Q525 from Qumran begins with a long list of beatitudes.⁹⁵ In addition, much of what Luke lacks from his ‘Sermon on the Plain’ more generally involves distinctively Jewish legal issues, less relevant for his more Gentile-Christian audience; perhaps he has deliberately abbreviated an original account more akin to Matthew’s longer version.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, one must freely admit that the idea of composite speeches is not the creation of post-Enlightenment, sceptical higher criticism; centuries ago John Calvin could write:

Both Evangelists had the intention of gathering into one single passage the chief headings of Christ’s teaching, that had regard to the rule of godly and holy living . . . It should be enough for reverent and humble readers that here, before their eyes, they have set a short summary of the teaching of Christ, gathered from his many and various discourses, of which this was the first, where he spoke to his disciples on the true blessedness.⁹⁷

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94. Even some relatively conservative commentators seem locked into this position. Cf., e.g., Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 113. Coming to similar conclusions, Luz, before opting out of all interaction with Wenham (see previous note), in his shorter, 460-page commentary on the first seven chapters of this Gospel (*Matthew 1–7*, pp. 226–229), manages to devote several pages to at least as speculative a reconstruction of the tradition history of the Beatitudes.
95. It is hard to be sure how many, because of the fragmentary state of the manuscript. At least five uses of the word for ‘blessed’ appear, and probably at least a couple of the gaps in the text could be filled in with more. Cf. Puech, ‘4Q525 et les péricopes des béatitudes’, pp. 80–106.
96. See esp. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, pp. 548–557.
97. Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 1, p. 168.

When it comes to explaining Matthew 7:28 about Jesus' finishing 'these sayings', Calvin suggests that Matthew means that

there was a like impression over His address when He came down from the mount, as with the rest of His teaching, which had by now reached a number of the people. So the sense is that in all the various places, where He had given the people a taste of His teaching, astonishment had affected them . . .⁹⁸

This interpretation is conceivable but it is certainly hard to derive from the particular words Matthew uses.

It has already been noted that Matthew's summary statement (Matt. 11:1) following Jesus' sermon on mission (10:5–42) is not quite so exact, and here the case for a composite discourse is more compelling. In fact, it is precisely when one accepts that Matthew has combined at least two different speeches of Jesus into one that one of the most notable inconsistencies among all the Synoptic parallels can be cleared up. The sermon on mission begins with Jesus preparing the Twelve for their first 'solo' expedition preaching about the kingdom of heaven to their fellow Israelites (10:5–16). The urgency of their mission is to be visibly highlighted by their travelling unencumbered by unnecessary clothing or baggage; not even 'sandals' or a 'staff for walking is permitted (v. 10). Luke agrees with the prohibition of the staff, omits all reference to footwear and otherwise greatly curtails his parallel (Luke 9:1–6). Mark's account is slightly longer than Luke's but not nearly as elaborate as Matthew's (Mark 6:6b–13). Yet in Mark, Jesus does permit both staff and sandals (vv. 8–9). Surely, if ever there were an unassailable contradiction in the Gospels, this would be it.⁹⁹

Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine Matthew or Luke editing Mark and rescinding Jesus' permission to take at least shoes and walking stick; a change from a more severe restriction to a lesser one would be the natural development. Moreover, Luke 10:1–24 describes a very similar commission (this time of seventy-two disciples¹⁰⁰), which Matthew's account of the charge to the Twelve (9:37–10:16) often echoes. These echoes sometimes create greater parallelism between Matthew's sermon to the Twelve and Luke's commission to

98. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

99. E.g. the avowedly evangelical philosopher Davis lists this as one of only six errors he can find in Scripture, yet declares, 'I know of no way to reconcile this inconsistency' (*Debate about the Bible*, p. 106).

100. Many manuscripts speak only of seventy, but the earliest textual evidence slightly favours the number seventy-two.

the seventy-two than between Matthew's sermon to the Twelve and Luke's version of the same sermon. The most obvious illustration of this parallelism is the famous saying about the plentiful harvest with few labourers (Matt. 9:37–38; Luke 10:2; no parallel in Mark 6 or Luke 9).¹⁰¹ Since the seventy-two most likely included the Twelve (cf. Luke 10:17 and 23), an attractive hypothesis suggests that Matthew has combined some of Jesus' instructions to the Twelve with some of those to the seventy-two. On the one occasion staff and shoes were permitted; on the other, they were forbidden. Since all Matthew implies is that these are commands given by Jesus to the Twelve in preparation for mission, one can hardly accuse him of error, even if he does not spell out the two stages of that mission in the same way Luke does. Previous examples of this kind of 'telescoping' in Matthew have already appeared (see pp. 177–180), so a further illustration should cause little surprise. Luke has then apparently edited his ninth chapter much as he did his trial narrative: assimilating some of the wording from the second commissioning speech into the first.¹⁰² Such practices scarcely discredited the historical reputation of ancient writers in the eyes of their contemporaries (cf. above, p. 177), so it is unfair to malign them today by applying anachronistic standards of historiography.

Apparent doublets

This category can apply to differences among the Gospels or to repetition within one Gospel itself. It is one thing to argue that Jesus often said much the same thing in more than one setting, but it is usually much more difficult to believe that two entire incidents that seem strikingly parallel could be referring to separate events. Hence scholars frequently speak of doublets: passages created by the Evangelists or the early church on the basis of a genuine incident in Jesus' life that depict him doing much the same thing all over again in

101. Bock (*Jesus according to Scripture*, p. 173) notes also that Matt. 10:14 is paralleled in Luke 9:5, whereas Matt. 10:16 is paralleled in Luke 10:3.

102. See esp. Osborne, 'Redaction Criticism', p. 314. For the same basic solution, Carson ('Matthew', pp. 241–247), who, however, addresses the problem of Luke 9:3 by assuming that 'take' means 'acquire'. This works well in Matthew, where the verb *ketomai* replaces Mark's *airō*, but less so in Luke, where there is no change of verb. For a survey of several other proposals, cf. Ahern, 'Staff or No Staff', pp. 332–337. For additional signs of conflation in Matt. 10, see esp. Morosco, 'Matthew's Formation', pp. 539–556.

a new context. Thus Mark and Matthew describe Jesus miraculously feeding both five thousand and four thousand (Mark 6:32–44; 8:1–10; Matt. 14:13–21; 15:32–39; unlike Luke who includes only the former [9:10b–17], since the latter forms part of Jesus’ ‘withdrawal from Galilee’, a section Luke omits altogether; see above, p. 41). Matthew also ‘doubles’ the story of Jesus’ healing of the blind men (Matt. 9:27–31; 20:29–34) and the account of the Pharisees’ request for a sign (Matt. 12:38–42; 16:1–4). In an example that does not involve repetition within any of the Synoptics, Luke has apparently transformed Mark’s and Matthew’s story of the anointing of Jesus. Instead of describing one of the women who accompanied the disciples as attending to Jesus in the home of Simon the leper in Bethany (Mark 14:3–9; Matt. 26:6–13), he relates a story about the profuse display of affection for Jesus by a local prostitute who entered uninvited at a dinner given by a Pharisee named Simon (Luke 7:36–50).

In every one of these instances, however, enough details differ from the one account to the next to place the theory of fictitious ‘doubling’ in jeopardy. In the last example of the two ‘anointings’ the only unusual features that Luke and Mark have in common are the name of the man whose home provided the setting (Simon) and the use of an ‘alabaster flask of ointment’. But Simon was an extremely common Jewish name (Jesus himself had two disciples and a brother so called), and the phrase describing the perfume was a stereotyped one, so neither of these parallels proves decisive.¹⁰³ Otherwise, the passages are quite different and should be seen as separate events from different periods in the ministry of Christ.¹⁰⁴

Support for the other three examples of potential doublets is slenderer still, since in each case the parallel events occur in the same Gospel. That Jesus should have healed a number of blind men with much the same dialogue and in much the same fashion, or that he repeatedly had to respond to requests for spectacular signs, is entirely in keeping with the thoroughly supernatural nature of his miracle-working ministry, on which fact all the Gospels agree. The repetition of the feeding of the multitudes is more surprising, but it is quite probable that the five thousand were mostly Israelites and the four thousand

103. Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 308; Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, p. 352. Both note again, however, that some of the language from the Marcan (and Johannine) narrative of the one event may have influenced Luke’s narration.

104. Cf. the list of supporters of this view given by Holst, ‘Anointing of Jesus’, p. 435, n. 2, though Holst himself is not among them. Cf. also Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 213. Bock (*Luke 1:1–9:50*, p. 690) agrees as well, noting that there are nine NT figures named Simon and twenty-nine in Josephus.

predominantly Gentiles, so that Jesus was foreshadowing the extension of the kingdom to the non-Jewish world by the duplication of the miracle. The feeding of the four thousand is grouped with passages in which Jesus is outside Galilee and ministering to Gentiles (cf. Mark 7:24–37), and the words for the ‘baskets’ that were used to collect the leftovers differ in the two accounts: the one referring to a container more commonly used in Palestine (*kephinos*) and the other to one more prevalent elsewhere (*spyris*).¹⁰⁵ Matthew 15:32 appears to presuppose this interpretation, with the crowd seemingly the same as the Gentiles of verse 31 who had ‘glorified the God of Israel’.¹⁰⁶

The only real obstacle to belief in the two accounts as depicting separate events is the difficulty of picturing the disciples replying to Jesus a second time by asking how it would be possible to feed such a crowd (Mark 8:4). But in Matthew’s version, the emphatic position of the Greek pronoun *hēmeis* suggests that they were protesting only their inability to feed the multitude *on their own* apart from Jesus’ intervention: ‘Where could *we* get such bread in the wilderness so as to satisfy such a crowd?’ (Matt. 15:33).¹⁰⁷ Carson concurs, adding that the new Gentile audience, Jesus’ rebukes to the disciples elsewhere for their little faith, and the ‘vast capacity for unbelief inherent in humanity’ all ensure that the disciples’ response here fails to prove this passage a doublet.¹⁰⁸

In general, there is little evidence for the wholesale creation of fictitious narratives in historical writing from Jesus’ day; at the very least a historical core of genuine information is usually present, even when expanded by legendary embellishment. Critics have offered no convincing reasons for viewing the

105. Cf. France, *Gospel of Mark*, pp. 306–307; Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, pp. 235–236; Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, p. 409.

106. France, *Gospel according to Matthew*, pp. 248–249; Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 319. Cf. already Hilary of Poitiers, *On Matthew* 15.5. Contra the view that finds support here and throughout the feeding of the four thousand for a *Jewish* crowd, see Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, pp. 111–112.

107. Knackstedt, ‘Beiden Brotvermehrungen im Evangelium’, pp. 315–316. Cf. Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 320. Keener (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 419) thinks that ‘they assume again that they must procure bread by purely natural means’.

108. Carson, ‘Matthew’, p. 358. Cf. Williamson, *Mark*, p. 142: ‘The incredible dullness of the disciples is precisely the point the feeding of the four thousand intends to make in its present context.’ Edwards (*Gospel according to Mark*, p. 229, n. 38) adds, ‘even mature Christians (which the disciples are not yet) often doubt the power of God after having experienced it’.

Gospels with any less respect, and much evidence favours treating them as even more historically reliable. As most modern synopses of the Gospels now stand, at least a few of the allegedly parallel passages printed in adjacent columns really represent independent traditions from different occasions in Jesus' ministry. The shorter the passage, the more plausible this becomes. A few of the most noteworthy longer examples not treated here are certain pairs of Jesus' parables; for example, the marriage feast and the great banquet (Matt. 22:1–14; Luke 14:16–24), the talents and the pounds (Matt. 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27), and possibly even the wandering sheep and the lost sheep (Matt. 18:10–14; Luke 15:3–7).¹⁰⁹

Variation in names and numbers

The last category of apparent discrepancies between Gospel parallels to be examined involves the seeming confusion of names and numbers. These are often compounded by textual variants, since names were frequently translated with variant spellings, while letters and symbols very similar in appearance to each other were often used to represent different numerals.

Personal and place names

Some of the seeming inconsistencies between parallels can be resolved fairly easily. Did Jesus follow his departure from Capernaum with a preaching tour of Galilee or Judea (Mark 1:39; Luke 4:44)? Probably only Galilee; Luke in several places uses the term 'Judea' to refer to all of Israel as the 'land of Jews' (cf. Luke 1:5; 6:17; 7:17; 23:5; Acts 2:9; 10:37).¹¹⁰ Did Jesus preach his first great sermon on a mount or a plain (Matt. 5:1; Luke 6:17)? Most likely he gathered the crowds on a level place in the Galilean foothills. Luke agrees that Jesus had already been higher up in mountainous terrain (Luke 6:12), while Matthew can scarcely have envisioned the throng of people balanced on a steep incline! Since the Greek word for 'plain' can also mean 'plateau', this harmonization is

109. For details, see Blomberg, 'When Is a Parallel?', pp. 78–103. Cf. idem, 'Orality and the Parables'.

110. Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 199; Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke I–IX*, p. 555; Bovon, *Luke 1*, p. 165. Schnabel (*Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, p. 259), however, thinks that Luke's distinctive emphasis on Jerusalem elsewhere suggests he had the actual province of Judea in mind, in which case Jesus would have taught in both Galilee and Judea at this juncture in his ministry.

a perfectly plausible one.¹¹¹ What was the town to which Jesus and the disciples returned after the feeding of the four thousand: Magadan (Matt. 15:39) or Dalmanutha (Mark 8:10)? Probably Magdala! Magadan seems just to be a variant form of the name. The village was originally known, in Hebrew, as *migdal nunya* (fish tower). Abbreviate the four syllables by removing the first and one gets *dalnunya*, easily Graecized to Dalmanutha.¹¹²

In other cases, the problems are more complex. According to what seems to be the best textual evidence,¹¹³ in Mark 5:1 and Luke 8:26 Jesus went to the region of the Gerasenes when he healed the demoniac called 'Legion', whereas Matthew 8:28 identifies the location as the region of the Gadarenes. Some manuscripts however supply the opposite reading in each case, while still others refer to the Gergesenes. The cities of Gerasa and Gadara both lay east of Galilee, but too far from the lake for this narrative: thirty and five miles away, respectively. The territory of Gadara seems to have included the city of Khersa, however, which lay on the eastern shore. Khersa, in Greek, could easily have been spelled the same way as Gerasa, leading to the ambiguity. Matthew, as usual, tries to clarify an ambiguity, in this case by substituting 'Gadarenes'. He presumably did not suspect that later scribes less familiar with the geography of Palestine would find this place name equally ambiguous, so the various textual variants developed in an attempt to sort out the problem. As modern Bible translations stand, then, Mark is simply giving a Graecized spelling of the name of the city and Matthew the name of the province.¹¹⁴

By far the most complicated divergence under this heading is the seemingly hopelessly muddled genealogies of Jesus as recorded by Matthew and Luke

111. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, vol. 1, p. 320. Gundry (*Matthew*, p. 66) protests that large numbers of diseased people (Matt. 4:24) would hardly have been able to climb the mountain, but he overlooks the lengths to which the sick consistently went throughout Jesus' ministry in order to try to see him and be healed. If the traditional site of the Sermon, on the grass-covered plateau below the Franciscan chapel on the 'Mount of Beatitudes' on the north-west side of the Sea of Galilee, is at all like the place in which Jesus actually spoke, it would have been only one grassy hill up from the lake to climb or be carried.
112. See McNeile, *Gospel according to St Matthew*, p. 234.
113. The editors of the United Bible Societies 4th ed. of the Greek New Testament (Aland et al.) rate their judgment in each of the three passages with only a C-level of confidence (almost as uncertain as they ever are).
114. See esp. Annen, *Heil für die Heiden*, pp. 201–206. Cf. Tzaferis, 'Pilgrimage', pp. 44–51; Edwards, *Gospel according to Mark*, pp. 153–154.

(Matt. 1:2–17; Luke 3:23–38). Space prohibits a treatment of all the detail.¹¹⁵ Suffice it to say that the two main attempts at resolution have involved viewing (1) Matthew's list as supplying Joseph's ancestry and Luke's referring to Mary's (on the assumption, possibly inferable from Rom. 1:3, that Mary also came from the lineage of David¹¹⁶), or (2) Matthew's giving the legal succession-list for Joseph by which he was a legitimate heir to the throne of David and Luke's mentioning Joseph's actual human parents and their family tree. Jacques Masson produced an extremely detailed study of the genealogies and cleverly suggested a reconstruction that combines elements of both 1 and 2, with Mary's great-great-grandfather being the same as Joseph's great-grandfather. But although most of his study convincingly explains the differences between the two lists of names involving Jesus' earlier ancestors, this final stroke relies solely on the eighth-century writing of St John the Damascene.¹¹⁷ It is perhaps more likely that something more along the lines of 2 is the correct solution, as Gresham Machen clearly delineated in 1930.¹¹⁸

Numbers

In several cases, one Gospel refers to two characters where the parallels mention only one (two blind men in Matt. 20:30 vs. one in Mark 10:46, two demoniacs in Matt. 8:28 vs. one in Mark 5:2, or two angels at the tomb in Luke 24:4 vs. one in Mark 16:5). Yet this phenomenon does not recur often enough to enable one to speak of a tendency in the oral tradition to add characters or of a redactional concern to provide two witnesses to an event, as some have tried to do. It is more natural to suggest that there really were two characters present in each

115. Again Carson is a model of clarity and conciseness in sifting through all the intricacies ('Matthew', pp. 62–70).

116. R. D. Draper, 'From the Annunciation', p. 126.

117. Masson, *Jésus fils de David*.

118. Machen, *Virgin Birth of Christ*, pp. 202–209. The strongest evidence in favour of 1 involves references in the Jewish Talmud to the father of someone named Mary being Eli (cf. Lerle, 'Almenverzeichnisse Jesu', pp. 112–117), and to apocryphal Christian traditions that name him as Joachim (a Hebrew variant of Eliachim, from which Luke's 'Heli' could have been derived). Explanation 2 is a more plausible variant of an ancient Christian explanation that required numerous levirate marriages at different points in the genealogies. A simpler, though entirely speculative, variant is that Matthew's genealogy proceeds through the line of Joseph's maternal grandfather, while Luke's follows that of Joseph's paternal grandfather. See Nettelhorst, 'Genealogy of Jesus', pp. 169–172.

case, but that one acted as spokesman for the two and dominated the scene in a way that left the other easily ignored in narratives that so regularly omitted non-essential details.¹¹⁹ In another example, ambiguous grammar is the culprit. From one point of view, Matthew 21:7 seems to be saying that Jesus straddled two donkeys (cf. Mark 11:7 and Luke 19:35, which mention only one) during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem! But common sense dictates that the second occurrence of the pronoun ‘them’ in the sentence that reads, ‘they led the donkey and her colt and placed upon them garments and he sat upon them’, refers back to the garments, not to the donkeys (and to more than one garment on one particular donkey).¹²⁰ Perhaps the strangest difference in enumeration among the Synoptic parallels is Luke’s altered description of the chronology of the transfiguration. Instead of Mark’s ‘after six days’ (Mark 9:2), Luke reads, ‘about eight days later’ (Luke 9:28). His insertion of the word ‘about’ prevents this from creating a contradiction, but the reason for the difference is very difficult to pinpoint.¹²¹ Already in the fourth century, though, Jerome observed, ‘in Matthew the days in the middle are counted, but in Luke the first and last are added’ (*Commentary on Matthew* 3.17.1).

Conclusion

By now the most striking dissimilarities between the various Synoptic parallels

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119. Carson, ‘Matthew’, p. 217; Archer, *Bible Difficulties*, p. 325; Poythress, ‘Adequacy of Language and Accommodation’, p. 373; Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, p. 513.
120. Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 410. Many commentators ridicule this explanation, insisting that Matthew has misunderstood the synonymous parallelism of Zech. 9:9 and imagined Jesus somehow sitting astride both animals. But surely we can give this Jewish-Christian credit for better understanding than that. Instone-Brewer (‘Two Asses of Zechariah 9:9’, p. 98) argues that Matthew understood synonymous parallelism but did not believe Zechariah was to be interpreted that way. Believing two animals were in view, he did not want us to imagine Jesus straddling them, just ‘that both animals were fully involved in the process of conveying Jesus to the city’, creating possibly deliberate ambiguity as to the antecedent of ‘them’ in ‘sat on them’.
121. Marshall (*Gospel of Luke*, p. 382) notes several possible explanations but understandably finds it difficult to endorse any with enthusiasm. Perhaps the two most likely are that Luke has abandoned a subtle Old Testament typology (Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai after six days’ preparation) or that he is using just a more common Greek idiom for ‘one week later’ (using inclusive reckoning).

have been surveyed in some detail. Others could be mentioned but they usually admit of easier solution. It is strange how often the reliability of the Gospels is impugned by scholars who believe them to be hopelessly contradictory, yet who have never seriously interacted with the types of solutions proposed here. Most of these proposals readily concede that the Evangelists freely reworded and rearranged the traditions they inherited, but not to the extent that their Gospels should be considered historically unreliable. The solutions suggested here may not all carry equal conviction; scholars have often put forward different reconciliations for many of them. In a few cases, better solutions may still await future research. Yet unconvincing harmonization does not discredit the method itself, if more convincing alternatives are available. When one realizes that historical research regularly seeks to harmonize apparently conflicting testimonies, it becomes clear that it is disingenuous to disparage this method in the way so many today do when it is applied to the Gospels.¹²² And even if a few of the apparent contradictions were regarded as errors (though none discussed here has seemed to merit that label), the general trustworthiness of the Gospels could easily remain untarnished. The student who takes the time to read any three reliable historians' accounts of other ancient figures or events will frequently find much more variation among them than he encounters in the Synoptics. All these observations add up to a strong case for the historical accuracy of the first three Gospels. Those who disagree may be invited to reconsider their methodology and to reflect on the possibility that they are treating the biblical documents more harshly than is warranted.

122. For a detailed defence of this rather strong criticism, see Blomberg, 'Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization'.

5. PROBLEMS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

A careful comparison of the first three Gospels demonstrates that the similarities between them far outweigh the differences. When one turns to the Fourth Gospel, however, one seems to have entered a different world altogether. The person who reads the four Gospels straight through from start to finish notices this most clearly; after having read many of the same stories three times over, he or she is amazed at how different John is. As a result, a viable case for the historical reliability of the Synoptics does not automatically apply to the Gospel of John as well. As with the study of the parallels among Matthew, Mark and Luke, one must look very closely at the differences between John and the Synoptics to see whether or not they reflect genuine contradictions that discredit John's value as a record of historical fact.¹

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1. For a scathing attack on the historical *and* theological reliability of the Fourth Gospel, see Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* For a much fuller defence of the historical reliability of John than this chapter has room for, see Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*. For an intermediate perspective, representing a large cross-section of recent scholarship and affirming the historicity of a substantial minority of the Gospel data, see Lincoln, *Gospel according to Saint John*.

The distinctives of John's Gospel

Even a relatively superficial comparison of John with the three Synoptics reveals at least five main categories of distinctives.² Probably the most obvious involves John's selection of material. Numerous features of the life of Christ, found in all three of the Synoptics, find no place in John. Some of the most noteworthy include Jesus' baptism, the calling of twelve disciples, the exorcisms, the transfiguration, the parables and the institution of the Lord's Supper. Instead, John includes narratives and teachings found nowhere in Matthew, Mark or Luke: the miracle of water turned into wine, the reanimation of Lazarus, Jesus' early ministry in Judea and Samaria, his regular visits to Jerusalem, and extended discourses in the temple and synagogues as well as in private meetings with both his disciples and his opponents.

Almost as striking are John's theological distinctives. First, he is the only Evangelist directly to identify Jesus as fully divine (1:1; 10:30; 20:28). Whereas the Synoptics suggest to some a gradual unfolding of Jesus' own awareness about his Messianic identity, along with his disciples' blindness on this issue until Peter's climactic confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27–30), John's opening chapter portrays John the Baptist, Andrew, Philip and Nathanael all confessing Jesus to be the Christ. Throughout John's Gospel Jesus reinforces this conclusion by referring to himself as the bread of life; the living water; the good shepherd; the vine; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth and the life; and even, apparently, the absolute 'I am' of the Old Testament, the name by which God the Father makes himself known.

Second, differences emerge in John's view of eternal life and judgment, which he sees to be already present in Christ's ministry (e.g. 3:18; 5:24) rather than primarily future; his presentation of John the Baptist, who denies that he is Elijah (1:21) even though the Jesus of the Synoptics said that he was (Mark 9:11–13); and his description of the time and nature of the Holy Spirit's arrival: before the ascension privately (John 20:22) rather than afterwards, publicly, at Pentecost.

Third, seeming contradictions of chronology appear. The Synoptics record Jesus' attendance only at the Passover feast that immediately preceded his death, and they give no clear indication that he had ever been in Jerusalem as an adult prior to that occasion. John, however, recounts three Passovers and other lesser festivals with extensive teaching ministries of Jesus in the Jewish capital. Specific

2. For a helpful chart of a large number of these, categorized under seven headings, see P. N. Anderson, *Fourth Gospel*, pp. 98–99.

events seem to have been mislocated too. Jesus' dramatic cleansing of the temple appears in John not as a prelude to his execution but in the earliest days of his ministry (2:14–22; cf. Mark 11:15–17), his anointing by Mary of Bethany occurs not one but six days before his death (12:1; cf. Mark 14:3), and the call of Andrew and Simon to be disciples takes place in Judea prior to his return to the north instead of along the banks of the Sea of Galilee at a later date (1:35–42; cf. Mark 1:16–20). John's account of the last twenty-four hours before Christ's death is brimming with apparent discrepancies. It seems to disagree with the Synoptics concerning the day on which Jesus died (Passover rather than the day after), concerning the number and nature of the various hearings or trials (e.g. before Annas, the former high priest; and at length before Pilate, rather than before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin with Pilate acting to rubber-stamp their actions), and concerning the hour of the crucifixion (sixth rather than third).

Fourth, various other ostensible historical discrepancies emerge. John shows no knowledge of Christ's birth in Bethlehem but tells how the Jews rejected Jesus because they knew that no prophet would come from Nazareth (7:52). It seems that the temple cleansing cannot be the catalyst for Jesus' arrest as in the Synoptics, since John has moved it to the start of Jesus' ministry, and he attributes Jesus' final demise to the reanimation of Lazarus instead (11:45–53). Most notably, John's reference to Jews who believed in Jesus being 'put out of the synagogue' (9:22) is widely believed to be a gross anachronism, reflecting not the historical circumstances of Jesus' life but a policy established only at the end of the first century when John's Gospel was finally compiled.

Fifth, and finally, the style of John's writing differs markedly from that of the Synoptics. Jesus' language is indistinguishable from John's. Both refer regularly to such themes as light, life, witness, truth, glory, election, knowledge, abiding, the word and the world, topics relatively uncommon in the first three Gospels. In the discussion with Nicodemus, for example, one cannot even be sure at what point Jesus' words end and John's narrative resumes (see 3:10–21; probably, the break occurs between vv. 15 and 16). Further, John's Jesus regularly speaks in extended discourses rather than the short, proverbial sayings so well known to readers of the Synoptics. And in several instances, John's narratives seem out of sequence. In Jesus' farewell discourse, the time to leave the upper room appears to have arrived with Jesus' conclusion, 'Rise, let us go hence' (14:31), but he then continues talking for another three chapters! So also John 21 reads like an after-thought appended to the original conclusion of the Gospel in 20:30–31.³

3. Little wonder, then, that John's Gospel features only slightly in the quest for the historical Jesus. Even fairly conservative scholars often bracket its use for tactical

Before examining these Johannine distinctives in more detail, the features that John and the Synoptics share should also be identified. Too often discussions of John's Gospel have failed to do this, leaving the impression that it is only the divergences that prove noteworthy. In fact, there are numerous correspondences of detail, many even more remarkable because they appear in passages that otherwise seem quite independent of each other. This survey will not include the stories of Jesus' arrest, trials, crucifixion and resurrection, because there many scholars agree that John and the Synoptics shared some common sources of information. But even limiting the analysis to the rest of the Gospel, where most today would see John as independent of the other Evangelists, a remarkable list of parallels of various types emerges. The apparent independence of this testimony gives it added weight, because multiple attestation is an important criterion in determining historical authenticity (see p. 311).⁴

Similarities between John and the Synoptics

John and the Synoptics do refer to a number of the same incidents from Jesus' pre-passion ministry. Usually these are recounted with enough variation of detail to suggest that John was not relying on the written form of any of the other Gospels or on a common source. Often minor details seem to conflict with their Synoptic counterparts, but closer study suggests that in fact they do not. The most important parallels include (1) the description of John the Baptist as the fulfilment of Isaiah 40:3 ('the voice of one crying in the wilderness') and the forerunner of the Messiah (John 1:23/Mark 1:2–3 pars.), (2) the contrast between John's baptism with water and the Messiah's coming baptism with the Spirit (John 1:26–27, 33/Mark 1:7–8 pars.), (3) the Spirit's anointing of Jesus as testified by the Baptist (John 1:32/Mark 1:10 pars.), (4) the

reasons, because they perceive the uphill climb required in arguing for its historicity to be much steeper than with the Synoptics. But see now P. N. Anderson, *Fourth Gospel*, pp. 154–173.

4. This independence may need to be qualified, especially in the light of Bauckham, *Gospels for All Christians*, and esp. in view of his own chapter, 'John for Readers of Mark' (pp. 147–171). P. N. Anderson (*Fourth Gospel*, p. 128) draws a helpful chart to show the possible influences of pre-Johannine tradition on the different layers of Synoptic tradition, which he then unpacks on pp. 129–145. But we must still think of independence at the *literary* level of the finished forms of John and of the Synoptics.

feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1–15/Mark 6:32–44 pars.),⁵ and (5) the walking on the water (John 6:16–21/Mark 6:45–52 par.).

A second category of similarities involves stories that narrate incidents unparalleled in the Synoptics but wholly in keeping with the type of thing that regularly happens in the first three Gospels. Thus in both John and the Synoptics, Jesus heals the paralysed and the crippled, even using the identical words ‘Take up your bed and walk’ (John 5:8; Mark 2:11). In both, Jesus gives sight to the blind, raises the dead, and cures an official’s son at a distance (John 4:46b–54; Luke 7:1–10 par.). In both, Jesus defies the traditional interpretations of the Sabbath law, even to the extent of going out of his way to do unnecessary ‘work’ such as mixing mud and saliva in performing a healing (John 9:6–7; Mark 8:23–25), or commanding those he cured to carry their beds. Both John and the Synoptists tell of Jesus refusing to work miracles simply to satisfy his opponents (John 6:30–34; Mark 8:11–13 pars.),⁶ both know of attempts to arrest Jesus prematurely that fail due to his mysterious disappearances (John 8:59; 10:39; Luke 4:29–30), both describe his friendship with Mary and Martha and characterize the two women quite similarly (John 11:20; 12:2–3; Luke 10:38–42), and both relate how some in his audiences accused him of being possessed by demons (John 10:19–21; Mark 3:22 pars.).

So too John records specific teachings of Jesus that closely resemble those found in the Synoptics, even if the contexts and important details vary. One must be born again (or become like a little child) to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3; Mark 10:15 pars.). An abundant harvest awaits the labourers (John 4:35; Matt. 9:37–38 par.). A prophet is without honour in his homeland (John 4:44; Mark 6:4 pars.). Judgment of unbelievers will be according to their works

5. If ever John were directly dependent on Mark (or on any of the Synoptics), outside the passion narrative, it would be in the story of the feeding of the five thousand, where numerous correspondences of detail appear. But Barnett (‘Feeding of the Multitude’, pp. 273–297) has made a strong case for independence. Barnett examines in minute detail the linguistic parallels and divergences and concludes that the similarities occur only in those places where an accurate account of the event could be told in no other way, but that wherever the narratives can vary they do.
6. The often-made claims that, in John, Jesus works signs to prove he is the Messiah (contra the Synoptics) or only in positive contexts are one-sided views of the evidence, because John elsewhere plays down the value of signs (see esp. 20:29) or points out the inadequacy of merely signs-based ‘faith’ (see esp. 2:23 – 3:21). For a more balanced treatment of the Fourth Gospel’s ambivalent view on the value of signs, see Kysar, *John*, pp. 80–86.

(John 5:29; Matt. 25:46). The Father reveals the Son; no-one knows the Father but the Son (John 10:14–15; 13:3; 17:2, 25; Matt. 11:25–27 par.). Jesus and, derivatively, his disciples are the light of the world (John 8:12; Matt. 5:14 par.). Part of the purpose of Jesus' teaching is to harden the hearts of those already opposed to him, with Isaiah 6:9 cited in defence of this (John 9:39; 12:39–40; Mark 4:12 pars.; 8:17–18 pars.). Jesus identifies himself metaphorically with the good shepherd who seeks to rescue the errant members of his flock (John 10:1–16; Matt. 18:12–14; Luke 15:3–7). True discipleship means servanthood as illustrated in the Last Supper (John 13:4–5, 12–17; Luke 22:24–27). Jesus faces and resists the temptation to abandon the way of the cross (John 12:27; Mark 14:35–36 pars.). Receiving Jesus means receiving the one who sent him (John 12:44–45; Mark 9:37; Matt. 10:40; Luke 10:16). The disciple is not greater than his master (John 13:16; Matt. 10:24; Luke 6:40). The Holy Spirit will tell the apostles what to say in the future (John 14:26; 15:26; Mark 13:11; Matt. 10:19–20 par.). The disciples will be expelled from the synagogues (John 16:1–4; Mark 13:9; Matt. 10:17–18 par.), scattered throughout various parts of the world (John 16:32; Mark 14:27 pars.), and given the authority to retain or forgive the sins of their brothers (John 20:23; Matt. 18:18).⁷ Peter Ensor helpfully suggests that we should label these kinds of sayings Jesus' 'ipsissima sententiae – sayings which appear in Johannine dress, but which genuinely reflect the viewpoint of Jesus himself, as we may ascertain it from the evidence of the Synoptic Gospels.'⁸

Other similarities are less specific but equally worthy of mention. Granted John contains no clear narrative parables like those found so often in the Synoptics, he nevertheless presents a picture of a Jesus who is equally fond of metaphors and figurative or proverbial comparisons. In addition to those mentioned above, one may consider the vine and vine dresser (15:1–6), the son's apprenticeship (5:19–20a), working and walking in the daylight (9:4; 11:9–10), the thief, the gatekeeper and the sheepfold (10:1–3a), sowing versus reaping (4:37), slavery versus sonship (8:35), the growth of a grain of wheat (12:24), or the pain of a woman in labour (16:21).⁹ In both John and the other Gospels the crowds regularly marvel at the authority with which Jesus teaches,

7. Lindars (*Gospel of John*) argues that these Synoptic-like sayings in John are authentic teachings of Jesus embedded in new contexts the fourth Evangelist has created for them. Cf. his 'Discourse and Tradition', pp. 83–101.

8. Ensor, 'Johannine Sayings of Jesus', p. 32

9. Cf. further Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 366–387; Dewey, 'Paroimiai in the Gospel of John', pp. 81–99; Schweizer, 'What about the Johannine "Parables?"', pp. 208–219; and Thatcher, *Riddles of Jesus in John*.

which surpasses that of the Jewish leaders.¹⁰ Both disclose the persistent misunderstanding of Jesus' audiences, and of the disciples, concerning the nature of his Messiahship.¹¹ Both reveal that Jesus' favourite title for referring to himself was the somewhat ambiguous phrase 'Son of man', and in none of the Gospels is this title used by anyone other than Jesus to describe himself.¹² Mark and John explicitly relate that the two titles most crucial to their understanding of Jesus' nature are 'the Christ' and 'the Son of God' (Mark 1:1; John 20:31). One of the most characteristic introductions to Jesus' sayings in the Synoptics is the Hebrew 'Amen' ('verily' or 'truly'); Jesus uses this equally often in John, though it always appears in doubled form ('Amen, amen, I say to you').¹³ In all four Gospels, finally, Jesus reveals a uniquely intimate relationship with his Father as characterized by the Aramaic word 'Abba' (almost but not quite 'Daddy'), which would have horrified the Jews, who were accustomed to approaching God with a greater sense of distance and respect.¹⁴

Most of the above parallels match details of John with details in Mark. Many of the distinctives of John's passion narrative have striking parallels to features found elsewhere only in Luke. Gerhard Maier, however, notes additional distinctive links between John and Matthew. Perhaps the five most significant are (1) the extensive use of Old Testament quotations and the announcement of their fulfilment, (2) the frequency, extent, location, and instructional nature of extended sermons of Jesus, (3) elaborate farewell speeches (the Upper Room and Olivet Discourses), (4) an emphasis on private

10. See esp. J. W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, pp. 43–61.

11. See esp. Coutts, 'Messianic Secret in St John's Gospel', pp. 45–57; cf. Stibbe, 'Elusive Christ', pp. 19–38.

12. John 12:34 is no exception, since the crowd is simply asking Jesus about his use of the title. 'Son of man' occurs thirteen times in John, compared with twelve uses by Jesus of the unqualified title 'Son', and three by him of 'Son of God' as a title. But even then the statistics are deceptive, because the 'Son of man' references are well scattered about John's Gospel, while over half of Jesus' use of 'Son' by itself occur in 5:19–26.

13. The doubling may reflect liturgical use or recognition of the term as an indicator of emphasis.

14. The Aramaic word appears in Greek transliteration in the Gospels only in Mark 14:36, but is preserved in Gal. 4:6 and Rom. 8:15 and is thus assumed widely to underlie Jesus' numerous uses of the standard Greek vocative *patēr* (Father) in all four Gospels. See esp. S. McKnight, *New Vision for Israel*, pp. 49–65.

instruction for the disciples, and (5) an evangelistic purpose that sees the Christian gospel as being offered first to the Jew and then to all the Gentiles. One might add the observation that conceptual parallels to every petition in Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer reappear in Jesus' so-called high-priestly prayer of John 17, all but one of them in the identical order.¹⁵ Maier concludes that John and Matthew, usually viewed as the least similar of any pair of the four Gospels, are in fact much more complementary than is normally admitted.¹⁶

Interlocking

In a number of places, John presents information that seems puzzling until one learns other details found only in the Synoptics.¹⁷ John 3:24 makes a passing allusion to the imprisonment of the Baptist, which is narrated only in the first three Gospels (Mark 6:14–29 pars.). The cursory references to the beginning and ending of Jesus' trial before Caiaphas make sense only if one knows something like the fuller story that appears just in the Synoptics (Mark 14:53–65 pars.) Again, John 11:2 explains that Lazarus' sister Mary 'was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair'. This could just be a foreshadowing of the actual narrative of that event in 12:1–8, but it reads more naturally like a reference back to something John knows his readers will already recognize. Intriguingly, Mark 14:9 has Jesus explicitly declare that Mary's sacrifice would be told 'wherever the gospel is preached around the world . . . in memory of her'. All these and similar examples remind us that John's Gospel is not just off in its own little world unconnected to the core message regularly preached in the earliest decades of Christianity and well represented in the first three Gospels.

The reverse phenomenon also frequently occurs. John's Gospel will include a passing remark that explains something left opaque in the Synoptics, even though John does not have a parallel in his Gospel to whatever that unclear item

15. W. O. Walker, Jr., 'Lord's Prayer', pp. 237–256.

16. G. Maier, 'Johannes und Matthäus-Zweispalt', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2, pp. 267–291. For a more tenuous set of 'parallels' in the context of the claim that John sometimes complements but sometimes contradicts Matthew, see Viviano, 'John's Use of Matthew', pp. 209–237.

17. See esp. Bauckham, 'John for Readers of Mark'. Cf. Dvorak, 'John and the Synoptic Gospels', pp. 201–213; Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, pp. 47–49.

was.¹⁸ Mark 14:49, for example, finds Jesus insisting, ‘Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me.’ But in Mark, this is the first time Jesus has ever been in Jerusalem and he has taught there only during Monday and Tuesday of ‘Passion Week’. John alone depicts Christ attending the frequent annual festivals in Jerusalem, as faithful and healthy Jewish adult males geographically close enough to make the trip were expected to do. Now Jesus’ remarks in Mark make more sense. Or, again, why was the false charge brought against Christ the specific allegation that he had threatened to destroy the temple (Mark 14:58–59)? Nothing in the Synoptics answers this question, but in John 2:19, Jesus declared, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ John explicitly adds that even the disciples did not realize he was talking about the ‘temple of his body’ until after the resurrection (vv. 20–22). Such a claim could easily have led to a later garbled charge against him.¹⁹ Finally, why did the Sanhedrin enlist the Roman governor, Pilate, in their quest to execute Jesus (Mark 15:1–3 pars.)? The Mosaic Law repeatedly prescribed stoning carried out by the Jewish leadership itself for capital offences. Again, John alone supplies the answer. Under Roman occupation, the Jewish people were not allowed to carry out this law (John 18:31). Again, examples could be multiplied. The fact that John does not seem to be consciously addressing these various questions, but just ‘happens’ to do so as he is narrating other stories, suggests that he is more tied in to historical events than many critics allow.

Authorship and date

Before returning to the problem of the apparent contradictions between John and the Synoptics, a few other remarks on the composition of the Fourth Gospel are in order. Those who would defend John’s historicity have regularly appealed to the privileged position of the apostle John, Jesus’ ‘beloved disciple’ (John 13:23–25; 19:26–27, 34–35; 20:2–5, 8; 21:1–7, 20–22), one of an intimate circle of three (with Peter and James) who experienced events the other nine disciples did not (e.g. the transfiguration or the agony in Gethsemane). Even though early church tradition claimed that the Fourth Gospel was the

18. See esp. Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 40–63. Cf. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, pp. 52–55; Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, pp. 53–54.

19. The prediction at the beginning of the Olivet Discourse to the coming destruction of the temple was spoken only to Andrew, Peter, James and John (Mark 13:3), none of whom is likely to have reported this prophecy to Jesus’ opponents.

last to be written, just before the beginning of the second century when John was a very old man, it was argued that the events and teachings of the two to three years he spent with Jesus would have been indelibly impressed upon his memory and thus reliably preserved.

Today, for a variety of reasons, not all of equal weight, all but the most conservative of scholars no longer believe that John the apostle was the author of the Fourth Gospel.²⁰ The strongest of these reasons stems from the data of the Gospel itself. The 'beloved disciple' (and it is never clear that this disciple *must* be John, because he remains unnamed²¹) is referred to in the third person, not as an 'I' or a 'we' who is writing the book, while the work concludes with a reference to a 'we' who 'know that his testimony is true' (21:24). Moreover, the last episode in the book seems designed to correct the erroneous belief that had spread around the churches that the beloved disciple would stay alive until Jesus' second coming (21:20–23). The most natural way of explaining why the Gospel writer should have included these verses is that the disciple had just died, and certain Christians were having trouble reconciling his death with the fact that Christ had not yet returned.²² Many scholars go so far as to postulate several editors who continually expanded an original core of the Fourth Gospel, so that only a small historical nucleus need be linked with eyewitness testimony.²³

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20. Prominent evangelical scholars who argue against John, the son of Zebedee, as author include Hengel, *Johannine Question*; Witherington, *John's Wisdom*; and Bauckham, 'Beloved Disciple as Ideal Author', pp. 21–44 (cf. idem, 'Papias and Polycrates', pp. 24–69).
21. Unless one takes John 11:3 as disclosing that information, when Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that their brother, Lazarus, is sick and refer to him as 'the one you love'. Thus a few people over the years have argued for Lazarus as the beloved disciple and author of the Fourth Gospel (most recently, see Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?* But the term 'disciple' does not actually appear in this passage, as it does in the five 'beloved disciple' passages, a curious omission if the author were trying to tip his hand at this juncture.
22. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter*, p. 81; Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 412; Talbert, *Reading John*, p. 262.
23. R. E. Brown (*Gospel according to John*) initially argued for five stages of composition of the Johannine material. In his posthumously published *Introduction to the Gospel of John*, pp. 64–86, Brown simplifies his five stages to three, not so much because he has changed his mind, but because he is amused by those who find his earlier approach too complicated and wants to help those he calls 'arithmetically challenged' (p. 64)! For no fewer than eight stages postulated, see Ashton, *Studying John*.

J. Louis Martyn's thesis that the Fourth Gospel is a two-level drama more revealing of the circumstances of John's community at the end of the first century than of events in the life of the historical Jesus has come to be accepted in many circles as having been proved.²⁴ In fact, there are no close parallels in the ancient world to the type of literary genre Martyn postulates, while the vast majority of the textual indicators within the Gospel suggest that its writer thought he was producing some kind of *one-level history*.²⁵

Indeed, a strong case for the apostle John's having written a substantial portion of the Fourth Gospel – perhaps even all but the closing verses – can still be credibly defended.²⁶ But the question of John's historical reliability depends surprisingly little on the viability of such a case. Recent Johannine scholarship, sometimes called 'the new look on John', has gone a long way to undermine earlier scepticism simply by pointing out evidence for the bulk of the Gospel relying on sources with highly accurate details about Palestinian geography, topography, politics, society and religious custom.²⁷ The Dead Sea Scrolls have provided parallels to theological concepts once associated exclusively with Greek thought.²⁸ Archaeological digs have unearthed the probable remains of the pools of Bethesda (John 5:2) and Siloam (9:7) and have suggested possible sites for the Pavement (19:13), which were previously unknown (and unmentioned in the Synoptics). That John's Gospel relies heavily on early, Palestinian sources with reliable historical information, regardless of its final date and author(s), was demonstrated in massive detail by the writings of C. H. Dodd.²⁹ But Dodd stopped well short of arguing that

24. Martyn, *History and Theology*.

25. Hägerland, 'John's Gospel', pp. 309–322.

26. See in brief, Bruce, *Gospel of John*, pp. 1–6; Carson, *Gospel according to John*, pp. 68–81; Morris, *Gospel according to John*, pp. 4–25; Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, pp. 22–41; and, in detail, Westcott, *Gospel according to St John*, pp. ix–lxvii.

27. See Potter, 'Topography and Archaeology', pp. 329–337; Scobie, 'Johannine Geography', pp. 77–84; Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter*, pp. 9–40; and Keener, *Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1, pp. 172–232. The term 'new look' was first coined by J. A. T. Robinson, 'New Look on the Fourth Gospel', pp. 338–350.

28. See esp. Charlesworth, 'Dead Sea Scrolls', pp. 65–97.

29. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*. Cf. also idem, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 444–453. The use of sources is compatible with apostolic authorship. Historians of any age who were eyewitnesses of the events they report are often glad to consult other sources that enable them to double-check and to supplement their memories.

all of John's information is accurate, largely due to the differences with the Synoptics already surveyed.³⁰ So as with the study of those three Gospels, analysis must proceed beyond general considerations of the circumstances in which the Gospel was written to face squarely the alleged contradictions.

The alleged contradictions reconsidered

Omissions and singly attested material

John's omission of so much of what the Synoptics contain and his inclusion of much of what they leave out should cause little surprise. On any theory of the Gospel's composition, he had much material from which to choose. If John had already read the Synoptics and was writing later, then he undoubtedly assumed that much of what they emphasized needed no further repetition. Instead, he focused on information they omitted in order to supplement them. If John wrote independently of the first three Gospels, then the variation is due simply to the large body of information from which he could select. John 20:30 and 21:25 plainly allow this possibility ('Jesus performed many other signs . . . which are not recorded in this book'; 'Jesus did many other things as well'). Any two ancient historians' accounts of a given person or period of history differ from each other at least as much as John does from the Synoptics, when they do not rely on common sources for their information.³¹

Some would argue, though, that if certain events found only in John or only in the Synoptics really happened, then they could hardly have been omitted from any fair presentation of the gospel. Yet in fact many of the omissions or singly attested events *are* broadly paralleled elsewhere. Jesus works spectacular miracles in the first three Gospels, including raising the dead, even if the miracles of changing water into wine and raising Lazarus are missing. The latter did not occur in Galilee, which is the main focus of the Synoptists, and the disciples on which the first three Evangelists rely for their information may not have been present for this miracle.³² Indeed, once Mark made the decision to narrate only one trip by the adult Jesus to Jerusalem (his last one), and Matthew and Luke

30. As amply documented by Carson, 'Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel', pp. 83–145. Cf. the subsequent debate in King, 'Has D. A. Carson Been Fair?', pp. 97–102; and Carson, 'Response to J. S. King', pp. 73–81.

31. See, e.g., the emphasis on the selective nature of ancient historians' writings in Hengel, *Acts*, pp. 3–34. Cf. throughout Byrskog, *Story and History*.

32. M. J. Harris, 'Dead Restored to Life', p. 312.

followed suit, any events that occurred in Judea during other trips could not be included in the Synoptics. John may omit Christ's baptism and the first 'eucharist', but he alone includes Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus about the need to be born of water as well as the Spirit (3:3–21; see v. 5) and the sermon in the Capernaum synagogue on eating his flesh and drinking his blood (6:26–59; see esp. vv. 53, 56).³³ Parables appear to be a uniquely Jewish form of communication. The rabbis told hundreds of them, but not a single close parallel in form has appeared in Graeco-Roman literature of the day. To the extent that John was writing to a predominantly Gentile-Christian community in and around Ephesus, he may have realized that parables per se did not communicate well. Exorcisms in the Hellenistic world were closely bound up with magic or what we would call 'the occult'), and John no doubt wanted to distance Jesus from those charges (already observable in the Synoptics; see Mark 3:22 pars.).³⁴ In many cases the motives for the inclusion or omission of a particular detail may be irrecoverable, but that is no valid reason for rejecting its genuineness.³⁵

Theological differences

Much more serious are the apparently divergent theologies that John and the Synoptics offer. By far the most striking themes on which they seem to differ are their views of who Christ was and how he understood his own identity and mission. This theme will be dealt with first and the other themes more summarily.

Christology

Certainly, John is the only Evangelist to make such direct statements as 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (1:1). Yet John fails to report the virgin birth, which reflects 'high' Synoptic Christology, although his prologue may be viewed as a kind of substitute. Nor should it be thought that John stresses only the deity of Christ, for his humanity remains equally in the forefront.³⁶ The starting point of John's prologue is

33. For a well-balanced presentation of John's 'sacramental' and 'non-sacramental' tendencies, see Paschal, 'Sacramental Symbolism', pp. 151–176. Of course, John 3 and 6 have both been interpreted so as not to refer to baptism or the eucharist at any level.

34. For both of these kinds of omissions, along with related ones, see Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, pp. 49–52, and the literature there cited.

35. Cf. R. E. Brown, *Gospel according to John*, vol. 1, pp. xlii–xliii.

36. See esp. M. M. Thompson, *Humanity of Jesus*. Cf. Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology*.

the unity of the Father and the Son, but its culmination is the incarnation: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' (1:14). Jesus may declare that he and his Father are one in a sense that the Jews interpret as a blasphemous equation with God (10:30), but overall his discourses dwell much more on his subordinate role in doing nothing but what the Father commands (cf. esp. 14:28: 'the Father is greater than I').³⁷ In the case of the Synoptics, Matthew and Luke could hardly have believed that Jesus was merely a man like all others, however exalted or honoured by God, when they include the accounts of his conception by the Holy Spirit and only one human parent (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:35). As I. H. Marshall emphasizes, 'the evidence in the Synoptic Gospels not only fits an incarnational understanding of Jesus but positively cries out for it'.³⁸ Simon Gatheriole has now produced an extensive volume on the amount of Synoptic data that point to Christ's pre-existence.³⁹

If the Evangelists' assessments of Jesus are compatible, what then of Jesus' own self-understanding in the various Gospels? For example, how can the Jesus of the Synoptics, who is constantly telling those who confess him to be the Messiah to tell no-one about it, be the same Jesus who in John responds to the Samaritan woman's statement about the coming of the Christ with the plain affirmation 'I am he' (4:26)? What of all the other so-called 'I am' sayings? In the case of the Samaritan woman, it was no doubt precisely her identity that enabled Jesus to speak plainly. The Samaritans for the most part were not expecting the Messiah to be as much a nationalistic, militaristic ruler as were many in first-century Judaism; instead, they were looking more for a teacher, restorer and converter, much more consistent with the role Jesus envisaged for himself.⁴⁰

The other 'I am' statements are in fact much more ambiguous and metaphorical than is generally realized, because modern readers are so influenced by the history of their interpretation. A first-century Jewish audience, hearing a rabbi refer to himself as, say, the bread of life, would probably not have known what to make of it, which is precisely the response John records (6:60). Jesus is described as using the formula 'I am' much more

37. On which, see esp. Barrett, 'Father Is Greater Than I', pp. 19–36.

38. Marshall, 'Incarnational Christology', p. 15.

39. Gatheriole, *Pre-existent son*.

40. Cf. Carson, *John*, pp. 226–227; Keener, *Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1, pp. 619–620; Köstenberger, *John*, p. 158; Strathearn, 'Jesus Teaches at Jacob's Well', pp. 255, 265. On the authenticity of the major theme of Jesus' 'works' in John, esp. as introduced in 4:35, see Ensor, *Jesus and His Works*.

often in the Fourth Gospel than in the Synoptics, but it is not clear that these revelations make his claims for himself that much more explicit. Jesus' apparently ungrammatical proclamation 'before Abraham was born, I am' (8:58) may refer back to the divine name revealed in Exodus 3:14, 'I am what I am', but it is not obvious that in the rigidly monotheistic context of Judaism this would be the only conclusion drawn. The fact that the Jews immediately tried to stone him does not mean they understood his statement as a direct equation of himself with God. Claiming that Abraham had seen his day (v. 56) itself bordered on blasphemy,⁴¹ and the Jews had already tried to kill him for much lesser 'crimes', such as healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:6) and speaking of God's love for the Gentiles (Luke 4:29)! Stephen Motyer plausibly concludes that John 8:58 'would *not* be heard as a claim to be *God*. It *would* be heard as a claim to be a divine agent, anointed with the name and powers of God, and (in this case) active in the *genesis* of Abraham.'⁴² And it is possible that Mark 14:62, in which Jesus responds to the high priest's question about his identity with a reference to the exalted Son of man of Daniel 7:13–14 coming on the clouds of heaven, reflects at least as lofty a claim.

The accuracy of John's perspectives on the self-understanding of Jesus may be defended by at least four further arguments.⁴³ First, whatever the precise implications of Jesus' 'I am' statements, they follow a format virtually unparalleled in the first-century world. No other known religious leaders used first person metaphors quite like 'I am the vine' or 'I am the resurrection and the life' and so forth. The nearest parallels are in papyri and inscriptions describing the claims of the mythical Egyptian goddess Isis, who was popular throughout the ancient Greek-speaking world. But these 'I am' statements tend to be more straightforward claims that can be interpreted literally ('I am the one who discovered fruit for men'; 'I am the one who is called goddess among women') and for the most part date from a period too late to have

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41. For the definitions of blasphemy in Judaism prior to AD 70, which were broader than merely arrogating the divine name to oneself, see Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism*. Cf. A. Y. Collins, 'Charge of Blasphemy', pp. 379–401. Gundry (*Old Is Better*, pp. 98–110) creatively suggests that Jesus *did* use the divine name of himself but that the Evangelists paraphrased his words to avoid committing the same 'blasphemy' themselves.
42. Motyer, *Your Father the Devil?* p. 209. Cf. McGrath, *John's Apologetic Christology*, pp. 103–116.
43. For a vigorous defence of the authenticity of these sayings, see Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, pp. 142–159. Cf. Stevens, "'I AM' Formula', pp. 19–30.

influenced the composition of John's Gospel.⁴⁴ The much more natural background for Jesus' 'I am' statements is the Old Testament name for God,⁴⁵ even if Jesus sufficiently veiled it so that his claims were not always thought blasphemous.

Second, when the Jews directly confront Jesus with the question of his identity, he replies as cryptically in John as in any of the other Gospels. In John 8:25 they ask, 'Who are you?', and Jesus responds, 'Just what I have been telling you from the beginning', while in 10:25 he answers their plea to 'tell us plainly' merely with the retort 'I did tell you, but you do not believe.' Even his disciples do not think he is speaking clearly to them until he has almost finished his farewell discourse on the night of his arrest (16:29).⁴⁶

Third, on at least two occasions, the Synoptics also utilize the 'I am' form of address, with overtones somewhat reminiscent of the divine name. When Jesus appears walking on the water, his words 'It is I. Don't be afraid' (Mark 6:50) could equally be translated, 'Do not fear, I am', and when he speaks of false Christs who will come claiming 'I am he' (Mark 13:6), the words again literally read 'I am'.⁴⁷

Finally, and most importantly, however exalted John's view of Jesus may seem, it contains nothing that is not implicit in the picture painted by Matthew, Mark and Luke of a man who would sovereignly overrule Jewish interpretations of the Law, claim that his words would last for ever, pronounce the forgiveness of sins, describe humanity's eternal destiny as dependent on its reaction to him, demand absolute loyalty from his disciples, offer rest for the weary and salvation for the lost, promise to be with his followers always, guarantee that God would grant them any prayers requested in his name, identify who was the greatest and least among all humanity, and

44. The inscription from which these two examples of 'I am' statements are taken is the earliest of its kind so far discovered and *does* date from the first half of the first century. See G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, vol. 1, pp. 10–21. But the closer, metaphorical parallels in the Mandaean, Hermetic and Gnostic literature are at least one to two centuries later.

45. Harner, *'I Am' of the Fourth Gospel*; C. H. Williams, *I Am He*. Both find the most immediate background in Isaiah's use of 'I am' as a name for God (cf., e.g., Isa. 47:8, 10), rather than in Exod. 3:14.

46. Cf. Carson, 'Understanding Misunderstandings', p. 84: 'no Evangelist surpasses John in preserving the sense of *confusion* surrounding Jesus' identity'.

47. Cf. C. H. Williams, "'I Am" or "I Am He"?'', pp. 343–352.

promise that his disciples would judge and rule over the twelve tribes of Israel.⁴⁸ Even if one analyses only those few Synoptic sayings of Jesus regarded as authentic by almost all scholars, by virtue of their distinctiveness over against the teachings of both Judaism and the early church (the so-called ‘criterion of double dissimilarity’; see below, p. 311), one finds included many of the above-mentioned claims which require one to assume that Jesus viewed himself as more than a man. Royce Gruenler examined these in great detail in the early 1980s and came to a conclusion that remains highly unusual in today’s scholarly climate: ‘I honestly cannot say that I find a single explicit christological utterance of Jesus in the Gospels, including the Gospel of John, that is generically inappropriate to his implicit claims arrived at by the criterion of dissimilarity.’⁴⁹ This claim has been widely ignored, but it has never been rebutted.

Other themes

It is increasingly being recognized that alleged tensions between John and the Synoptics on the other theological topics noted at the outset of this chapter have been overstated.⁵⁰ John actually presents eternal life and judgment as both present and future, even if he tends to emphasize the former more than the Synoptics do.⁵¹ Thus he can juxtapose in consecutive verses such teachings of Jesus as ‘Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life’ (5:24), and

Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live . . . for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned’ (5:25, 28–29).

48. For these and similar characteristics, see France, ‘Worship of Jesus?’, p. 28; cf. throughout Witherington, *Christology of Jesus*.

49. Gruenler, *New Approaches*, p. 15. Cf. E. E. Ellis, ‘Background and Christology’, pp. 1–25. For a broader overview of John’s Christology as complementary to that of the Synoptics, despite its numerous distinctives, see Keener, *John*, vol. 1, pp. 282–320.

50. See esp. Smalley, *John*, pp. 191–242; Ridderbos, *Gospel of John*, pp. 1–16; Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 181–216.

51. Carroll, ‘Present and Future’, pp. 63–69; Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 334–344.

Or, on the issue of John's view of his namesake, the Baptist may have denied being Elijah because he assumed the Pharisees were asking about a literal heavenly Elijah returning to earth, as some Jews thought he would.⁵²

The so-called Johannine Pentecost is more puzzling. It certainly seems as if Jesus dispenses the Spirit before his ascension when he gives the disciples authority to lead his church in fulfilment of all the promises regarding the Paraclete, whom he had said he would bestow. Attempts to reduce Jesus 'breathing out' the Spirit on the disciples to a symbolic gesture or enacted parable portending a still future event leave John's narrative inexplicably incomplete. Why would he bother to foreshadow an event he never describes? Allegations that John has transformed the account of Acts 2 into this entirely different scenario overlook the fact that not all the disciples are present (Thomas is missing) and that the rest of the Gospel does not at all depict the disciples as fully empowered for service. At the beginning of chapter 21, Peter simply returns to his fishing without having been reinstated as a disciple in good standing.⁵³ More importantly, John 20:19–23 functions quite differently from Acts 2. Luke's Pentecost narrative focuses almost exclusively on the disciples' preaching to others; here all attention centres on Jesus' commissioning the disciples. If a Lucan analogy must be found, Luke 24:49 would be a more viable candidate. There, as in John 20:21, Jesus is speaking to the disciples on the evening after his resurrection and is specifically sending them forth in a context that refers to the empowering of the Holy Spirit ('what my Father has promised').⁵⁴

A very attractive explanation therefore views John's and Luke's narratives as describing separate events, both equally real and significant. The resurrection

52. Burge, *John*, p. 72; de Jonge, 'Jewish Expectations', pp. 246–270. De Jonge notes also that many Jews believed in a 'hidden Messiah' who would not know who he was or have any power until Elijah came and revealed him; perhaps John wanted to deny for himself this role as well.
53. Both ch. 21 and the references to Thomas in ch. 20 have been dismissed as secondary additions, in which case these objections would lose their force. But, on ch. 21, cf. pp. 237–238; 20:24–29 is much more difficult to separate from 20:19–23 because of its continuity with preceding material in style and content.
54. Cf. Michaels, *John*, p. 349: 'Historically, there are hints in Luke and Acts that *even before Pentecost* the Spirit indeed played a role in the ministry of the risen Jesus to his disciples.' After citing Acts 1:2 and Luke 24:45, 49a as examples, Michaels adds, 'Clearly something is given and something is still expected. Luke's emphasis is largely on what is still expected, whereas John's emphasis is exclusively on what is already given.'

of Jesus was the climactic vindication of his sinless life and unjust death, yet his ascension to the right hand of the Father was needed to complete the process and to make public to the universe his triumph and sovereignty. So also Jesus' breathing out the Spirit gave the disciples the authority to lead the company of his followers, even though the full, public and permanent manifestation of this gift would arrive only at Pentecost.⁵⁵ To put it almost simplistically, in John 20 the disciples receive the Spirit; in Acts 2 they are filled with the Spirit, who empowers them to preach the gospel boldly. Luke consistently associates the filling or fullness of the Holy Spirit with special occasions on which the disciples fearlessly witness for Christ (e.g. Acts 4:8; 7:55; 13:9), even though the Spirit remains more generally with believers at all times. Nothing in Luke or Acts demands that Pentecost be seen as the first occasion on which the disciples had any experience of the Spirit: the reference to their coming 'baptism' in the Spirit in Acts 1:5 is best taken as referring to the immersion or filling that occurred at Pentecost, and not just to an initiatory experience. The reason for the gap between the reception and the filling of the Spirit, then, is that at the time of John 20:22 Christ was not yet ascended (cf. John 7:39).⁵⁶

Chronological problems

Overall outline of John

How long did Jesus' ministry last? Interestingly, those who find John and the Synoptics irreconcilable here usually argue that John's information is right and the Synoptics' wrong. For a number of reasons a two- to three-year ministry, which John's three Passovers demand, stands up much better to scholarly scrutiny than a one-year ministry.⁵⁷ But nothing in the Synoptics *limits* Jesus' ministry to a year, so it would seem that this problem has been exaggerated. In fact, the Synoptics contain remarkably few references to time, place or

55. See esp. Hatina, 'John 20,22', pp. 196–219. Cf. van Rossum, 'Johannine Pentecost', pp. 149–167; Bennema, 'Giving of the Spirit', pp. 195–213; Bruce, *Gospel of John*, p. 397, n. 18.

56. John 20:17b's 'I am ascending' must be a future-referring present tense, even without Luke's mention of a forty-day interval between the resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:3), because Jesus continues to appear to the disciples in the rest of chs. 20–21 and John gives no indication that these are different types of appearances from the one Mary experienced (as if, e.g., he were now appearing from heaven after his ascension, as to Paul on the Damascus road).

57. For details, see J. A. T. Robinson, *Priority of John*, pp. 123–157, with a chart on p. 157. Cf. Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, p. 345.

sequence of events, whereas John is replete with chronological and geographical details. Although it stands much traditional commentary of both conservative and liberal persuasion on its head, a strong case can be made for the view that John describes the ministry of Jesus almost entirely in chronological order (though omitting numerous episodes), whereas the Synoptics are more topical in their structure, especially for Jesus' Galilean and Perean ministries.

All this of course depends on taking the Gospel data at face value. Many would argue that John's references to time and place were not meant to be taken literally but symbolically. But no convincing scheme has been proposed for interpreting his wealth of references in a consistently non-historical fashion; whatever symbolism may be present seems to be in addition to the historical data rather than instead of them. Thus when John notes that the wedding at Cana happened on the third day (2:1), it may be due to a parallel he sees with the resurrection on the third day, and the joy of Jesus' restoration to his bride, the church. But whether or not this additional symbolism is present, the wedding most likely did actually happen two days after Jesus first called Peter and Andrew, since there are no particular symbolic overtones to suggest that the events of the previous day (the calling of Philip and Nathanael, 1:43–51) did not take place at that exact time.⁵⁸ If the 'second day' literally followed the first, then the 'third day' should be interpreted similarly.

Further support for John's overall outline of Jesus' ministry surfaces when one considers that even within the space of one year, faithful Jews would have tried to go to Jerusalem for several of the annual festivals held there. Whatever else Jesus may have challenged in Judaism, there is no evidence for his despising these holy days, so it is entirely appropriate that he should have made more trips to Jerusalem than just the one described in the Synoptics. More positively, the stories of the first three Gospels contain specific hints that his trip to Jerusalem immediately before his crucifixion was not his first. How was he able to command his disciples to make provisions for the Last Supper just by meeting a man with a water jar (Mark 14:13–16) or to gain a donkey and her colt for his triumphal procession just by going to a certain village and saying, 'The Lord needs them' (Mark 11:1–6)? Where had he met Mary and Martha

58. For a balanced view of history and symbolism in John's references to time and place, see Kieffer, 'L'espace', pp. 393–409. Kieffer notes that most of the details that have a fairly clear double meaning are not the specific references to date or location but more general expressions such as 'being lifted up' (referring both to the crucifixion and subsequent glorification in heaven) or 'it is finished' (referring both to the drink offered Jesus on the cross and his life with its atoning significance).

(Luke 10:38–42), with whom he presumably lodged in Bethany during the last week before his death (Matt. 21:17)? To what occasions was he referring when he lamented over Jerusalem ‘how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing’ (Matt. 23:37)? Why were Judeans present in Galilee already stirring up trouble for Jesus at the start of his ministry there (Mark 3:8)? All these questions find a ready answer if one accepts John’s outline of Christ visiting Jerusalem frequently over a period of two or more years. Finally, one must not misread John either; he, like the Synoptics, knows that a large part of Jesus’ ministry took place in Galilee (7:3), even if he has not chosen to emphasize this fact.⁵⁹

Specific dislocations?

For many commentators, one of the divergences between John and the Synoptics that most clearly illustrates John’s lack of interest in historical sequence involves the various accounts of the cleansing of the temple. In the Synoptics, Jesus re-enters Jerusalem the morning after ‘Palm Sunday’, ejects the merchants, overturns their tables, forbids further commerce, and supports his stance by citing Scripture (“My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations”? But you have made it “a den of robbers”, Mark 11:17; cf. Isa. 56:7; Jer. 7:11). In John, the cleansing occurs at the very outset of Jesus’ ministry. This time Jesus uses a rope for a whip to drive out the animals, again upsets the furniture and forces the merchants to leave, but objects to their actions on different grounds: ‘Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!’ (2:16). John then notes that the disciples later associated this action with the Old Testament text ‘zeal for your house consumes me’ (Ps. 69:9). He also appends a subsequent dialogue in which Jesus replies to the authorities’ demand for a sign to justify his action by prophesying, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days,’ a prophecy not understood until after the resurrection. Which version is accurate, or are both somewhat distorted? Or can both be ‘right’ at the same time?

It is tempting to suggest that both John and the Synoptics have excerpted different segments from a larger whole and to assume that, as so often elsewhere, one or the other has relocated this event according to a topical rather than a chronological outline. The Synoptists make it clear that Jesus’ cleansing of the temple proved to be ‘the last straw’ for the Jewish authorities, sealing his imminent doom (Mark 11:18), so a convincing harmonization would require John to be the Evangelist who has relocated the passage. The strongest

59. Headlam, *Fourth Gospel as History*, p. 8.

evidence in support of this suggestion is twofold. First, John 2:13–25 is the only passage in the opening four chapters of John not linked to what precedes or follows it by an explicit reference to chronological sequence. Second, many commentators recognize a major division in John's Gospel between chapters 11 and 12, and chapter 12 introduces the second 'half' of the gospel with a chronologically dislocated passage (see p. 219). One could therefore assume that the cleansing of the temple introduces the first 'half' in the same way, with the six-day sequence of 1:1 – 2:12 as an introduction.⁶⁰

On the other hand, it is at least possible that Jesus cleansed the temple twice.⁶¹ Although this option is seldom taken seriously today except in a few very conservative circles, at least six factors support it.

(1) Except for the bare minimum of content required to narrate a temple cleansing, all the details differ from the one account to the other.

(2) If Jesus felt strongly enough about the temple corruption to purify it once at the outset of his ministry, it would be only natural for him to do it again at the end.

(3) He could probably have done the deed once with impunity, since it was an overtly Messianic act of which at least some of the Jews would have approved. Perhaps Jesus' emergence out of John the Baptist's orbit combined with John's popularity to allow Jesus to enact a small prophetic object lesson like this.⁶² But once it became clear that his concept of Messiahship was not what most of the Jews were looking for, a repetition would almost certainly have sealed his fate. This danger explains why he offered no objections during his intermediate visits to Jerusalem, although the Jewish traders may well have gone back to their practices soon after the initial confrontation.

(4) In the Synoptics, Jesus is accused at the end of his life of having threatened to destroy the Jewish temple and in three days build another 'not made with [human] hands' (Mark 14:58 pars.), an apparent reference to the type of thing he says explicitly only in John 2:19. But the garbled detail of this accusation, coupled with Mark's observation that the witnesses could not agree

60. On these two points, with important variations, see France, 'Chronological Aspects of Gospel Harmony', pp. 40–43; and Michaels, *John*, p. 50. On the latter point, cf. esp. Kreitzer, 'Temple Incident of John 2:13–25', pp. 93–101.

61. Unlike some of the discrepancies among the Gospels that were hotly debated in the early church, this one seems to have been explained quite uniformly in this way until recent centuries. See the detailed documentation in Braun, 'L'expulsion des vendeurs du temple', p. 178. But recall the approach of Tatian (above, p. 28).

62. Cf. Wayment, 'Jesus' Early Ministry', p. 208.

(Mark 14:59), makes more sense as a confused recollection of something said two or three years earlier, not just a few days before.

(5) The difference in the severity of Jesus' remarks is appropriate to each of the two contexts; only at the end of his ministry does he call the Jews thieves and incite racist outrage by referring to the Gentiles' need to pray in the temple court originally reserved for them (Mark 11:17).

(6) In John's account, the Jews reply with a reference to the rebuilding of the temple having begun forty-six years before (John 2:20), a figure that places this event in AD 27 or 28.⁶³ But Jesus was probably not crucified until at least AD 30, and John would not have invented such an incidental confirmation of chronology if he were freely reshaping the Synoptic version with little concern for keeping the facts straight.⁶⁴

Randolph Richards has recently defended the approach that sees two separate temple incidents from the perspective of the ancient cultures of honour and shame. Responding specifically to the charge that it would have been impossible for Jesus to have upset the temple courts as described in John 2, without him having been arrested soon thereafter (as in the Synoptics), Richards points out that Jesus' behaviour and teaching were challenged by the demand for a sign (John 2:18). When Jesus failed to produce the kind of sign the authorities requested, he would have been shamed in the eyes of all present. This, initially, was adequate punishment and would normally have served as a sufficient deterrent to any teacher pondering the replication of such a protest. On subsequent trips to Jerusalem, the strategy appears to have worked. Jesus arouses the ire of various authorities with some of his teaching,

63. Herod's reign effectively began in 37 BC. Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 15.380) states that the rebuilding began in Herod's eighteenth year; i.e. 20 or 19 BC. The seemingly conflicting testimony of Josephus (*Jewish War* 1.401) places the beginning of the rebuilding three years earlier. Either this refers to preliminary work or is a mistake, since it does not fit in with other ancient chronological data. And it would yield a date of AD 24–25 for the temple cleansing, which is even further removed from possible dates of the crucifixion (cf. p. 225). Cf. further J. A. T. Robinson, *Priority of John*, pp. 130–131.

64. For similar arguments, see Morris, *Gospel according to John*, pp. 167–169; Carson, *Gospel according to St John*, pp. 176–178; Köstenberger, *John*, p. 111; Westcott, *Gospel of St John*, vol. 1, pp. 96–97; Milligan and Moulton, p. 27; Askwith, *Historical Value of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 195; Plummer, *Gospel according to St John*, p. 89; and Mathews, 'John, Jesus and the Essenes', pp. 101–126.

but never again creates an ‘incident’ to upset temple trafficking. When he does so at the Passover that the Synoptics describe, however, he has become ‘shameless’. If conventional cultural deterrents no longer keep him in his place, steps must be taken to prevent him from ever demonstrating in this fashion again.⁶⁵ While this scenario does not prove that the two-cleansings theory is superior to the one-cleansing approach, it does dispense with the strongest arguments *against* seeing two separate incidents being narrated.⁶⁶

The position in the Gospels of Jesus’ anointing by Mary may be dealt with more briefly. Again John gives a precise reference to time: six days before the Passover (12:1). But Mark’s account is less specific. Mark 14:1–2 states that it was two days before the Passover when the Jews finalized their plans to kill Jesus. But 14:3 seems to start a new unit of thought, and Mark does not say that these events happened after those of the previous verses. When one sees how 14:10 resumes the account of the plot to do away with Christ, verses 3–9 (the story of the anointing) stand out as intrusive in their present context. Most probably Mark has relocated them here, without saying when they actually happened, to bring the incident into closer connection with the events that led to Jesus’ death. On the one hand, Jesus himself justifies Mary’s lavish ‘waste’ of expensive perfume on the grounds that she is preparing his body for burial. On the other hand, Mark’s juxtaposition of passages provides a sharp contrast between Mary’s devotion and Judas’ treachery.⁶⁷ Some have made heavy weather of the fact that, in John, Mary anoints Jesus’ feet; but in Mark and Matthew, his head. They have thus argued from this difference, coupled with the variation in context, for two separate anointings. Nevertheless, both versions describe Jesus explaining Mary’s actions as a preparation for burial, while bodies were usually covered with scented oils from head to foot. The half-litre of ointment (John 12:3) poured over Jesus could easily have covered much of his body. Hypotheses about separate events seem unnecessary here. Luke’s apparent parallel, however, as noted a chapter ago (above, p. 189),

65. Richards, ‘Another Brick’.

66. Although I continue to find it very difficult to choose between the two options, in the light of Richards’s work I am now inclined to agree with Bock (*Jesus according to Scripture*, p. 427), when he writes, ‘Neither option is impossible, although two cleansings seem slightly more likely because the differences between the accounts outweigh the similarities, and each Gospel seems to give a specific setting to the cleansing each describes.’

67. W. L. Lane, *Gospel according to Mark*, pp. 491–492; Edwards, *Gospel according to Mark*, p. 411; France, *Gospel of Mark*, p. 547.

probably does refer to a different event altogether. The principle applied here is that one must avoid assuming that a little variation in detail automatically makes separate events of apparent parallels, whereas one must be willing to move in that direction when the differences greatly outweigh the similarities.

Harmonizing the various accounts of the call of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew provides a final example of this principle. John 1 speaks only of four disciples, apparently because this is an initial call to identify and travel with Jesus, not the more formal beginning of his Galilean ministry, as in Mark 1:16–20.⁶⁸ Strictly speaking, in John only Philip was specifically called by Jesus. Peter, Andrew and Nathanael associated themselves with him voluntarily, and John gives no indication to what extent they intended to continue following him. Again the two different Gospels give each other greater credibility. The unexplained suddenness of the Synoptic callings makes more sense if some of the Twelve had associated with Jesus previously and begun to tell others about him, while the continued association of the disciples with Jesus in John is explained by their more formal selection in the Synoptics. Acts 1:21–22 demonstrates that Christ had followers from the time of his baptism onward, and the overlap of John's and Jesus' ministries highlighted in John 1 and 3 gives the followers of John the Baptist time to form good opinions about Christ.⁶⁹ C. K. Barrett's claim that John's narrative leaves no room for a subsequent call, because the disciples never go back to their fishing practice, ignores the highly selective nature of the Fourth Gospel, which Barrett otherwise rightly stresses.⁷⁰

The initial enthusiasm of the first disciples, along with that of John the Baptist, is consistent with the progression of Messianic understanding outlined in the Synoptics. Messianic fervour was rampant in Israel and many 'charismatic' leaders were hailed as prophetic figures by overeager adherents.⁷¹ Jesus deserved at least equal enthusiasm and no doubt received it. But when John the Baptist was languishing in prison, and the other disciples were trying to cope with Jesus' reinterpretation of the Messiah in terms of the suffering

68. R. E. Brown, *Gospel according to John*, vol. 1, p. 77; Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, p. 306; Higgins, *Historicity of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 42; Sanders and Mastin, *Gospel according to St John*, p. 99; Keener, *Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1, pp. 465–467.

69. See, respectively, J. A. T. Robinson, *Priority of John*, p. 168; and Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, p. 120.

70. Barrett, *Gospel according to St John*, p. 79.

71. Barnett, 'Jewish Sign Prophets AD 40–70', pp. 679–697. Cf. throughout Charlesworth, *Messiah*.

servant, they would only naturally begin to question their initial zeal. With Rodney Whitacre, 'it is unlikely that the disciples would have taken long to begin wondering whether Jesus were the Messiah, but John, agreeing with the Synoptics, allows that they had to grow in their understanding of who Jesus was'.⁷² Even at the end of chapter 1, John depicts Jesus as refocusing Nathanael's attention away from his Messianic confession of the 'Son of God' and 'King of Israel' to 'the Son of man' on whom angels would ascend and descend⁷³ (most probably a reference to the crucifixion and resurrection⁷⁴). Significantly, no-one again confesses Jesus as the Messiah in John's Gospel until many have stopped following him. Only then does Simon Peter reply to Jesus' question to the Twelve 'You do not want to leave too, do you?' with the confession 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God' (6:66–69). This interchange, in turn, functions much like the confession of Peter on the road to Caesarea Philippi in the Synoptics (Mark 8:27–30 pars.), as Christology becomes increasingly explicit in the remaining portions of the Gospel narratives. As it turns out, John and the Synoptics are compatible in their portraits of the disciples' progression of commitment.⁷⁵

Passion narrative

In one respect, there are fewer historical problems with the closing chapters of John's Gospel because they describe essentially the same sequence of events as the Synoptic narratives. If John is independent of the first three Gospels, then his text offers valuable corroboration of many of the details they report concerning Jesus' death and resurrection. But when the texts run closely parallel, there is also a greater possibility for allegations of contradiction when minor divergences occur. The three most troublesome involve the day of Jesus' death, the events surrounding his arrest and trials, and the hour of the crucifixion.

Despite the Synoptics' clear references to the Last Supper as a Passover meal (Mark 14:12, 14, 16; Matt. 26:17, 19; Luke 22:7–8), John seems to believe that Passover fell on the Friday of Jesus' execution, rather than the Thursday

72. Whitacre, *John*, pp. 72–73.

73. Cf. Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to st John*, vol. 1, p. 319; Köstenberger, *John*, pp. 72, 84; Ridderbos, *Gospel of John*, p. 91.

74. Bruce, *Gospel of John*, pp. 62–63. The exegesis of John 1:51 is hotly disputed, though, and the point being made here still holds even if this interpretation is incorrect.

75. Cf. Lindars, *Gospel of John*, p. 113; Sanders and Mastin, *Gospel according to st John*, pp. 14–15; M. de Jonge, 'Jewish Expectations', p. 252.

preceding it (John 13:1; 18:28; 19:14, 31). Most scholars therefore argue that one of the accounts altered the date for theological purposes: either the Synoptists wanted to turn Jesus' last meal into a Passover celebration or John wanted to link Jesus' death with the slaughter of the sacrificial lambs. Either way, one of the versions' dates would be incorrect. Those who have held out for the possibility of harmonizing the two have usually appealed to some kind of theory by which not all Jews celebrated the Passover at the same time. Some evidence suggests that the Essenes in Qumran, the community south-east of Jerusalem famous for the Dead Sea Scrolls, celebrated the Passover earlier in the week than others did. Others suggest that Galilean Jews differed from their Judean counterparts or that Pharisees disputed with Sadducees over the correct date. Similar, less widely held approaches also compete for acceptance. A few argue that Jesus himself simply decided to celebrate the meal a day early, perhaps knowing that he would not live long enough to do it the following night.⁷⁶

That debates over the correct day for the Passover occurred in ancient Judaism is quite probable. Later references in Jewish tradition point to such debates, and the fact that the Passover lambs were to be slaughtered on the afternoon of the fourteenth day of the month, calculated from the first sighting of the new moon, left room for dispute on the basis of changing weather conditions. But there is no evidence that such disputes ever led the Jews *in Jerusalem* to permit two consecutive days of Passover meals to accommodate conflicting positions. Instead, whichever group won out at a given point in history fixed the date as long as it held power. Jerusalem would have experienced virtual chaos if different groups of Jews had tried to observe all the holy-day rituals and taboos during conflicting twenty-four-hour periods. Nor is there much to suggest that Jesus would have so identified with any particular Jewish subgroup as to be inclined to follow its customs over against the majority. And how would any reader of the Gospels ever know which method of dating the Evangelists were following? In any event Mark 14:12 seems to prevent any type of early celebration of the Passover: Jesus and his disciples ate the meal on the day the lambs were slaughtered.⁷⁷ Finally, like the proposal that postulates two

76. For a good survey of the various theories, see Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, pp. 71–75. Cf. also Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, pp. 81–90.

77. France ('Harmony', pp. 50–54) reinterprets Mark 14:12 differently, because technically the Passover meal began a new day (Jewish days being reckoned from sundown to sundown). But by France's own admission, usage of terminology was loose, and the rest of his defence is less persuasive than the interpretations adopted above, which he dismisses without feeling their full force (pp. 47–49).

Jerichos to solve the problem of where Jesus healed Bartimaeus (see above, p. 170), the recourse to two different days for celebrating Passover founders on the lack of any hint of such a distinction in the Gospels themselves.⁷⁸

The most plausible harmonization of John and the Synoptics therefore requires a closer look at the specific terms John uses in his apparently contradictory verses and the contexts in which they are found. In 13:1, John maintains that it was ‘just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come’; in verse 2, that they were now eating dinner. One could assume that this dinner refers to his last evening meal prior to the night of the Passover, but it seems natural to take it to refer to the meal just announced in verse 1. Verses 1–2 would thus describe the depth of the love Jesus already had for his disciples before the Passover. Such love led him to see his mission through to the end, culminating in the Last Supper, with all the rich symbolism he invests in it (be it the foot-washing ceremony of John’s Gospel or the ‘first communion’ of the Synoptics).⁷⁹ In the words of Cullen Story:

The presence of Judas, Jesus’ prediction of his betrayal, Judas’ departure from the table (implicit in the Synoptics, explicit in John), the affirmation by Peter of unswerving loyalty to Jesus, and Jesus’ prediction of his denial: all of these circumstances together form solid lines of connection between the meal in John 13 and the Synoptic account of the holy supper.⁸⁰

In 13:29, then, when some of the disciples think that Judas left in order to buy provisions for ‘the feast’, the word used would refer to the week-long festival. Which particular meal during those seven days required these provisions is left unspecified. If the meal in progress was the first night’s banquet, then ‘the feast’ would quite naturally refer to part or all of the remaining six days.⁸¹ Indeed, on the common view that John is narrating events one day *before* the beginning of Passover, it is difficult to imagine ‘why Jesus should send Judas out for purchases for a feast still twenty-four hours away. The next day would

78. The most detailed discussion of these issues and of the harmonization proposed here is Geldenhuys, *Gospel of Luke*, pp. 649–670. Cf. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, pp. 455–458 and ad loc.; and Köstenberger, *John*, p. 400 and ad loc.

79. Cf. Ridderbos, *Gospel of John*, p. 455; Burge, *John*, pp. 365–367.

80. Story, ‘Bearing of Old Testament Terminology’, p. 317.

81. Morris (*Gospel according to John*, p. 558) observes that the expression ‘may indicate that the Passover still lay ahead’, but concedes that ‘the words might mean the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread’.

have left ample time.' Moreover, 'on any night other than Passover it is hard to imagine why the disciples might have thought Jesus was sending Judas out *to give something to the poor*; the next day would have done just as well'.⁸² But on the first Passover night, almsgiving was explicitly commanded.⁸³ In fact, the temple gates were left open so that beggars could gather to receive whatever others wished to give them (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.2.2.).⁸⁴

This explanation makes equally good sense of 18:28, in which the Jewish leaders wish to avoid defilement that would prevent them from eating the Passover. In fact, defilement that was incurred during the daylight hours could expire at sundown and would not necessarily prevent their celebration of an evening dinner (cf. Lev. 15:5–11), so it is more likely that John has in mind the lunchtime meal known as the *bagigab*, celebrated during midday after the first evening of Passover.⁸⁵ The Mishnah shows the rabbis' later concern for purity throughout the various annual festivals and devotes an entire tractate to 'Mid-Festival Days' (*Moed Katan*) and another to festal offerings (*Hagigab*), including offering brought between the first and last days of feasts, as here (e.g. *Hagigab* 1.3). The tractate *Oholoth* (18.7, 10) shows that Gentiles' residences, but not their open courtyards, were considered unclean. Against the objection that 'eating the Passover' cannot refer to these later meals, see 2 Chronicles 35:7–9. It is true that the later meals are not singled out apart from the initial Passover dinner, but, if John has already narrated this first meal, readers would understand that it could not be included again.⁸⁶

John 19:14 does not contradict this by the day of Jesus' death being labelled 'the day of Preparation of the Passover', since the Greek word *paraskeuē*, translated 'day of Preparation', was (and still is) the standard name for Friday in Greek. Since Friday was always Preparation Day for the Sabbath (Saturday), it came to be called by that name (cf. *Didache* 8.1; *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 7.1). John's language is thus a natural shorthand for saying 'the day of preparation for the Sabbath during Passover week' or simply 'Friday in Passover week'. Verses 31

82. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, p. 475. Cf. Kruse, *Gospel according to John*, p. 290.

83. Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, pp. 54, 82. Cf. Barrett, *Gospel according to st John*, p. 448; Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture*, p. 496, n. 13.

84. Köstenberger, *John*, p. 418.

85. See esp. B. D. Smith, 'Chronology of the Last Supper', pp. 29–45. Cf. Köstenberger, *John*, p. 524; Burge, *John*, p. 499. On the other hand, on any chronology, the uncleanness could have been more severe and could have generated a week's impurity. See Borchert, *John 12–21*, p. 238.

86. Cf. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, pp. 589–590.

and 42 virtually require this interpretation, because in the former John explicitly states that the next day was to be a (special) Sabbath, while in the latter the hurry to bury Jesus' body before sundown makes sense only if the next day was one of rest from work. And this is precisely how the Synoptics understand the term as well (see Mark 15:42; cf. Matt. 27:62; Luke 23:54).⁸⁷ Mark 15:42 proves particularly clear, calling the day of Jesus' death 'the day of Preparation' but then immediately explaining, 'that is, the day before the Sabbath'.

A final, incidental corroboration of this solution comes from computer-assisted astronomical calculations. If Jesus was crucified on the fifteenth day of the Jewish month Nisan, as this reconstruction requires, rather than on the fourteenth day, before the Passover had been eaten by most of the Jews, as the other proposed harmonizations require, then the only year close to the time of Christ's ministry in which he could have been crucified would have been AD 30. In all other years immediately before and after, 15 Nisan did not fall on a Friday.⁸⁸ But AD 30 turns out to be the very year that many scholars have accepted as the year of Christ's death, for other reasons.⁸⁹ Once again the Gospels demonstrate greater accuracy than many critics allow.

F. F. Bruce concisely summarizes the problems in the Fourth Gospel surrounding the legal action taken against Jesus and points out plausible solutions.⁹⁰ First, many have questioned John's reference to Roman troops superintending Jesus' arrest (the 'soldiers' in 18:3 are more literally an imperial 'cohort'), because the Jews had the right and responsibility to arrest those they suspected

87. Cf. Story, 'Bearing of Old Testament Terminology', p. 318; Ridderbos, *Gospel of John*, p. 606; Burge, *John*, p. 508; Kruse, *Gospel according to John*, p. 364.

88. Goldstine, *New and Full Moons*, p. 86. Humphreys and Waddington ('Dating the Crucifixion', pp. 743–746) note that 15 Nisan in AD 30 fell either on a Friday or a Saturday, depending on the atmospheric conditions at the time of the previous new moon. They proceed to defend an AD 33 date for the crucifixion, in which 15 Nisan definitely fell on a Saturday, primarily by assuming that Peter's mention at Pentecost of the moon turning to blood (Acts 2:20) referred back to a lunar eclipse at the time of the crucifixion (3 April 33). This is an unlikely interpretation of a clearly prophetic and apocalyptic passage (Peter is citing Joel 2:31), which is included in the Pentecost sermon because of the more relevant verses that surround it. If, however, the astronomical evidence conclusively pointed to AD 33 as the year of the crucifixion, then the preferable solution would be France's (see above, p. 222, n. 75).

89. See further Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, pp. 397–401.

90. Bruce, 'Trial of Jesus', pp. 7–20.

of crimes. But the volatile political climate of Jerusalem at feast time makes their involvement quite natural, especially given that the Synoptics agree that the arresting party thought it was confronting a dangerous person with a large following. The term *lēstēs* (Mark 14:48 pars.), often translated as ‘thief’ or ‘robber’, more properly refers to an insurrectionist or rebel leader! Because John’s redactional emphasis focuses on the guilt of the *Jews* in condemning Jesus, it is unlikely he invented this detail, which implicates the Romans as well.⁹¹

Second, only John includes a reference to an informal hearing for Jesus before the former high priest Annas (18:13; cf. Luke 3:2). But again this is perfectly believable, because Annas’ continuing influence even in his ‘retirement’ would have been quite natural. In Jewish thinking the priesthood was conferred for life, irrespective of Roman action in deposing a given priest and replacing him with another (cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.151, 160). Also, simple deference and respect for one’s elders would have made this hearing an appropriate courtesy, even if modern customs make it seem unnecessary. Even Barrett, who accepts contradictions elsewhere, follows Blinzler, Brown, Dodd and D. P. Senior, observing that, with five sons and one son-in-law succeeding him, ‘[Annas] retained great influence’, so that ‘there is no historical difficulty in the statement that Jesus first appeared before him’.⁹²

Third, the claim that the Romans retained the sole right of capital punishment (18:31) has often been termed a Johannine error, especially in view of the counter-example in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58). At first glance, Josephus seems to presuppose the Jews’ right to capital punishment when he reports on the inscription in the temple precincts threatening death to Gentiles who entered the area reserved for Jews (*Jewish War* 6.124–126). Moreover, he narrates the Sanhedrin’s execution of James, the Lord’s brother, in AD 62 (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.197–203). On the other hand, Stephen’s stoning reads more like mob action that defied technical legalities. The description of the permission to let Jews execute temple transgressors reads like an exception to

91. For the nine arguments of Blinzler (*Trial of Jesus*, pp. 64–69) against a Roman presence and for my more detailed response, see Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, pp. 228–230. Cf. Beasley-Murray, *John*, pp. 321–322; Borchert, *John 12–21*, pp. 217–218; Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture*, pp. 525–526. For relevant historical background more generally on Jesus ‘Before the Romans’, see the article so-entitled by Huntsman in Holzapfel and Wayment, *From the Last Supper through the Resurrection*, pp. 269–317.

92. Barrett, *Gospel according to st John*, p. 524. Cf. also J. A. T. Robinson, *Priority of John*, p. 248; Keener, *Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 2, pp. 1089–1090.

a rule, made as a special concession to the Jewish leadership. And Josephus elsewhere refers to Coponius, the first procurator of Judea in AD 6, being invested by the emperor with the 'highest power', defined as 'the power unto killing' (*Jewish War* 6.117).⁹³ In context, this authority is most naturally interpreted as a fairly exclusive right to capital punishment. In fact, a passage in the Talmud appears to confirm this interpretation, by declaring that capital punishment had been taken from the Jews forty years before the destruction of the temple in AD 70 (*p. Sanbedrin* 1.1; 7.2).⁹⁴

Finally, John greatly elaborates on Jesus' audience with Pilate, but does so in a way that dovetails remarkably with Roman judicial procedure. Far from undermining confidence in John, his unique additions to the passion narrative (the formal charge and condemnation, the reference to Pilate as 'Caesar's friend' [i.e. legal representative] and the use of the tribunal seat) all serve only to strengthen it.⁹⁵ John's portrayal, absent from the Synoptics, of an actual conversation between Pilate and Jesus before Jesus fell silent better accounts for the creedal expression cited in 1 Timothy 6:13 about Jesus' 'good confession' that he made 'while testifying before Pontius Pilate'.⁹⁶ And Pilate would certainly have been worried about Jewish accusations that he was betraying Caesar by failing to punish a threat to the kingship (19:12), as is demonstrated by his backing down on leaving Roman shields in Herod's palace after certain Jews 'mentioned that the Emperor Tiberius would not approve his violating their customs' (Philo, *To Gaius* 38.301–302).⁹⁷

Perhaps the most puzzling of all the differences between John and the Synoptics comes with the simple little variation between Mark 15:25 and John 19:14. Was Jesus crucified at the third or the sixth hour of the day?⁹⁸ The former time has no symbolic significance; the latter has often been taken to point to

93. Cf. further Legasse, *Trial of Jesus*, pp. 54–56; Keener, *Gospel of John: A Commentary*, pp. 1107–1109; Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism*, pp. 7–12.

94. The number could just represent the common Jewish use of 'forty' as a round number for a generation or so, but, if taken literally, could reflect garbled knowledge of some key event in AD 30, the most probable year for Christ's crucifixion, in which Jews would have liked to have executed a person but had to hand that person over to Rome!

95. See Harvey, *Jesus on Trial*, pp. 61–65.

96. R. E. Brown, *Gospel according to John*, vol. 2, p. 861.

97. Keener, *Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 128. Cf. Borchert, *John 12–21*, p. 255.

98. For a survey of all the main solutions to this problem proposed throughout church history, see Karavidopoulos, 'L'heure de la crucifixion', pp. 608–613.

the noon hour when Passover lambs were slaughtered, counting, as was normally done, from 6am onward. But if the above solution concerning the day of Jesus' death is correct, then this cannot be the meaning of the hour, even for John, since the Passover sacrifice would have occurred the day before. If our previous harmonization of the information about the day of Christ's death is incorrect and this *is* the time of the slaughter of the lambs, it is striking that John makes nothing of it. And, apart from the possible implications of the reference to noon in John 19:24, nothing else in the context of John's crucifixion narrative suggests it! Back in chapter 1, the Baptist identifies Jesus as the 'Lamb of God' (1:29, 36), but this word for 'lamb' (*amnos*) never appears again in the Fourth Gospel, nor does the concept. The common claim that the Fourth Gospel has a significant Lamb-of-God Christology is drastically exaggerated!

There is even less evidence for the view that John was adopting the practice of later Roman civil reckoning whereby hours were counted from midnight on. This would have permitted John to end the trial before Pilate at 6am and to begin the crucifixion (as in Mark) at 9am. But it would also force one to imagine the culmination of the Sanhedrin's deliberations, the audience with Pilate, the subsequent hearing before Herod (found only in Luke 23:6–12), Jesus' return to Pilate and the final dialogue with the Jews all occurring in the space of less than half an hour. For the other Gospels assert that all these events occurred after dawn, and dawn at that time of year in Jerusalem could have been no earlier than 5.30am.

A better suggestion equates Mark's references to time with quarters of a day. In his Gospel, indeed in every case save one in all the Synoptic Gospels and Acts (Matt. 20:9; in the context of a parable that requires this specificity), the only hours of the day ever mentioned are 'third', 'sixth' and 'ninth' (Matt. 20:3, 5; 27:45–46; Mark 15:33–34; Luke 23:44; Acts 2:15; 3:1; 10:3, 9, 30; 23:23). When one recognizes that the widespread lack of precise timekeeping devices in the ancient world led to the practice of dividing the day into fourths so that people often did not worry about speaking any more specifically than this, it becomes plausible to interpret Mark's 'third hour' to mean any time between 9am and noon. John's 'about the sixth hour' will also then refer to sometime before midday, perhaps within an hour or so.⁹⁹ Admittedly, *John* does refer to the in-between hours elsewhere in his Gospel (1:39; 4:52), so that, as generally

99. See esp. J. V. Miller, 'Time of the Crucifixion', pp. 157–166. Cf. Ramsay, 'About the Sixth Hour', pp. 216–223; Cadbury, 'Some Lukan Expressions of Time', pp. 277–278; Carson, *Gospel according to John*, pp. 604–605; Morris, *Gospel according to John*, p. 708; and Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture*, p. 534.

in a study of his chronology, he seems *at times* to be somewhat more precise than the Synoptics, but not always. Gerald Borchert adds that he has observed ‘this same phenomenon as a missionary among people who do not wear watches and for whom a designated meeting time of 10:00 a.m. means some time in the middle of the day, and it can actually take place not in the morning but in the early afternoon’.¹⁰⁰ Thus neither account necessarily contradicts the other.

Alleged historical discrepancies

Is John unaware that Jesus was born in Bethlehem rather than Nazareth? In fact, John knows the birthplace, but apparently some in Jesus’ audiences did not. Their ignorance is not surprising, since Jesus had grown up and lived in Galilee for all but the earliest years of his life. That John lets this mistaken impression stand without comment testifies only to his skilful use of irony. Not only do these Jews not realize where Jesus was born (7:42), but they even challenge Jesus’ admirers to cite any Scripture supporting the rise of a prophet from Galilee (7:52), overlooking the clear Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 9:1–2 about the people of the regions later known as Galilee who had walked in darkness but later saw a great light (cf. Matt. 4:14–16).¹⁰¹

As for the problem of the cause of his arrest – the reanimation of Lazarus or the second cleansing of the temple – it is entirely plausible to accept both incidents as causes.¹⁰² Neither John nor the Synoptics maintain that only one factor brought on the hostilities; both even specifically mention other motives as well. In Mark, Jesus’ transgression of the Sabbath laws causes the Jews to plot his destruction from early on (Mark 3:6), while in John his problems are compounded by his claims of oneness with God (John 5:18; 7:32). His power over death paradoxically sealed his fate in the minds of the chief priests, and his revolutionary ministry in the temple undoubtedly alienated a large segment of the middle and upper class, who stood to benefit most from the business transacted there. But even after both of these events, it was not until Judas volunteered to betray Christ that the officials could conveniently arrest him. Had this scheme not presented itself so quickly, the Gospel writers might well have told of still other reasons for the provocation of the authorities.

100. Borchert, *John 12–21*, p. 258.

101. Cf. Lindars, *Gospel of John*, p. 305; Barrett, *Gospel according to st John*, p. 330; Bruce, *Gospel of John*, pp. 183–184.

102. See esp. J. P. Martin, ‘History and Eschatology’, p. 332; J. A. Robinson, *Historical Character of St John’s Gospel*, pp. 40–41.

The most blatant of the alleged historical errors or anachronisms in the Fourth Gospel involves John's reference to the Jewish edict to excommunicate followers of Jesus from the synagogue (9:22; cf. 12:42 and 16:2). Commentators of virtually every theological stripe at times claim that at least here John has too quickly read the circumstances of his own time at the end of the first century back into his account of what happened a half-century or so earlier. The widespread policy of banning Christians and other dissidents from the synagogue, known as the *birkat ha-minim* (a curse on the heretics), is usually dated to about AD 90 after a long and painful process of growing separation between Christians and Jews. Yet several recent studies have placed large question marks in front of this typical reconstruction of events.¹⁰³ To begin with, nothing in the context of John 9:22, 12:42 or 16:2 suggests that this policy of excluding Jesus' supporters from the synagogue extended outside Jerusalem. Second, the word used in each of these passages for being put 'out of the synagogue' (*aposynagōgos*) occurs nowhere else in early Jewish or Christian discussions of the later, more universal ban, so it is doubtful if that is what John had in mind here. Third, a re-examination of the ancient sources makes it likely that the *birkat ha-minim* was never a watershed in finally dividing Jews from Christians, nor a single edict uniformly enforced, nor even a policy extending beyond Jewish sectarians to include Gentile Christians as well. Fourth, if the book of Acts is even remotely historical, then unofficial persecution or informal harassment of key Christians by certain Jewish leaders took place in numerous venues around the empire from the earliest years of the church's history.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, since the first edition of my book there has been a considerable acceptance of these points by a much higher percentage of commentators than prior to the 1980s.¹⁰⁵ Raimo Hakola's recent survey concludes flatly, 'The Jewish sources discussed . . . do not help to explain the Johannine

103. See esp. Joubert, 'Bone of Contention', pp. 351–363; van der Horst, 'Birkat ha-minim in Recent Research', pp. 363–368; Mimouni, 'Birkat Ha-minim', pp. 275–298. Mayo ('Role of the *Birkat Haminim*', pp. 325–344) warns against swinging the pendulum too far in the opposite direction, however; the curse was *one* key dividing point between Jews and Christians, including Gentile Christians at a later date, just not *the* watershed.

104. For older literature supporting these conclusions, see Carson, 'After Dodd, What?', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2, pp. 123–125.

105. E.g. Hengel, *Johannine Question*, pp. 114–115; Talbert, *Reading John*, p. 161; Pryor, *John, Evangelist*, p. 43; Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, pp. 59–61; Borchert, *John 1–11*, pp. 319–321; Motyer, *Your Father the Devil?* p. 94; Ridderbos, *Gospel of John*, p. 343.

references to the final excommunication of Christian believers from the synagogue. John is the only witness to this kind of practice.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, a perusal of much earlier commentary on John's Gospel quickly reveals that this whole problem is in fact the creation of modern scholarship. Unlike most of the issues discussed in this chapter, this one seems to have gone wholly unnoticed throughout most of church history.

Johannine style

Jesus' extended discourses

Jesus' last recorded reply to Nicodemus' questions begins, "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen" (John 3:10–11). In the next two verses, the dialogue shifts from first person speech to third person, yet apparently Jesus is still speaking: 'how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man' (vv. 12–13). All four Gospels depict Jesus referring to himself in this indirect way as the Son of man, so the shift from first to third person is not that surprising. But after a second reference to the Son of man in verses 14–15 as having to be 'lifted up', so that 'everyone who believes may have eternal life in him', John continues for six more verses in language that repeatedly refers to Jesus as the 'Son', the 'only Son' and the 'only Son of God'. This paragraph sounds exactly like the way John writes elsewhere (e.g. 1:14–18) and not like Jesus' own teaching. This is all the more noteworthy since this paragraph begins with the well-known verse 'for God so loved the world . . .' (v. 16), which closes by echoing Jesus' final words of verse 15 ('may have eternal life'). Many modern translations therefore punctuate the text so as to indicate that Jesus' words ended at verse 15, with verse 16 resuming John's commentary. Or at least they note this as an option. A similar phenomenon recurs later in the chapter when John the Baptist's words (3:27–30) seem to flow directly into John the Evangelist's comments (3:31–36) without a distinct break.¹⁰⁷

Modern scholarship may well be correct in ending Jesus' and the Baptist's words earlier than older translations typically did. But even if one were to assume that Jesus and John the Baptist spoke all the material in chapter 3 that could potentially be attributed to them, the question of why the style and

106. Hakola, *Identity Matters*, p. 55.

107. On the first part of John 3, see E. E. Ellis, *New Testament Documents*, pp. 173–174; on the second, J. Wilson, 'Integrity of John 3:22–36', pp. 34–41.

language of the writer of the Fourth Gospel is so similar to that of the discourses would remain. Also unsolved would be the problem of why Jesus speaks in frequent, prolonged and unparalleled sermons, seemingly unlike anything found in the Synoptics. Of course, the previously discussed considerations about the significance of omissions and singly-attested material (see pp. 207–208) apply here too. At least eight additional points, however, help to counterbalance the claim that John has simply invented speeches for his characters in language no different than that of his narrative elsewhere.

(1) As noted in the discussion of the Synoptic parallels in the last chapter (p. 157), one does not need to claim that the long sermons in John represent Jesus' *ipsisissima verba* (actual words) but only that they give a faithful summary or interpretative paraphrase of what he said (the *ipsisissima vox*, or 'actual voice'), however much they may have been couched in distinctively Johannine style. These discourses are no doubt digests of much longer messages, but the fact that they are longer than most of Jesus' Synoptic teaching actually suggests they may be *less* abridged and therefore closer to his originals in *content*, even if not in style.

(2) It is *not* true that the discourses of Jesus in John are wholly indistinguishable from John's narrative style elsewhere. H. R. Reynolds's much-neglected commentary lists over 145 words spoken by Jesus in John that are never used by the Evangelist elsewhere, and many of these are general enough that they would have been appropriate in narrative as well as discourse.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, there are even enough distinctives in vocabulary and syntax to suggest to some scholars that they can discern the presence of an underlying sign-source that included the numerous miracles John narrated, though this is more debated.¹⁰⁹

(3) Some of John's style may have been directly or indirectly inspired by Jesus' own manner of speech. In at least one famous passage from Q (Matt. 11:25–27; Luke 10:21–22), Jesus uses language almost identical to that which characterizes his speeches in John, when he thanks his Father for having revealed himself to babes rather than to wise men, adding, 'all things have

108. Reynolds, *Gospel of St John*, vol. 1, pp. cxxiii–cxxv.

109. See esp. Fortna, *Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor*. The Jesus Seminar repeatedly accepted a Signs Gospel as one of John's sources, labeling it as one of the earliest Christian documents, probably to be dated to the 60s. For a rejection of this hypothesis of source criticism because of the seemingly pervasive unity of style throughout John, see van Belle, *Signs Source in the Fourth Gospel*.

been given to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, nor the Father except the Son and the one to whom the Son wishes to reveal him'.¹¹⁰

(4) Much of John's homiletic or sermonic style for Jesus' teaching may reflect the use of that teaching in preaching or liturgical contexts in the early church. As with point 1 above, the form may have been changed without necessarily altering the content. Barnabas Lindars developed this concept in a variety of ways throughout his career,¹¹¹ while Earle Ellis observes how so many of John's discourses have shorter, partial, conceptual parallels scattered about the Synoptics, indicating that 'John's discourses may be a collection and interpretive elaboration of shorter sayings of Jesus. John expresses in his own style what was taught or implied in sayings of Jesus known to him. The teaching is the Lord's, but the mould in which it comes to us is the evangelist's'.¹¹²

(5) John's unique emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in helping the disciples to remember everything Jesus taught them as well as leading them into new truth (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:12-13) must not be neglected. On the one hand, these verses suggest that the writer of this Gospel believed that the Spirit had superintended the process by which the traditions about Jesus and the memories of the eyewitnesses of his life were preserved so as to safeguard their accuracy. On the other hand, they claim that what was unintelligible or unacceptable to the disciples during Jesus' earthly life would become clear and credible later. If the Synoptics come closer than John to preserving Jesus' actual words in many places, John may well believe that he has better expounded their significance in the light of what the Spirit has taught the church since Jesus ascended to his Father.¹¹³ At the same time, although 'the Spirit is seen as a source of continuing revelation for the disciples', nevertheless in these passages

that revelation is seen as ultimately going back to the exalted Jesus and is not confused with the role of reminding the disciples what Jesus has said during his

110. See esp. Denaux, 'Q-Logion', pp. 163-199.

111. In addition to the works already noted above (p. 201, n. 7), see his *Behind the Fourth Gospel*; and 'Traditions Behind the Fourth Gospel', pp. 107-124. Cf. esp. Theobald, *Herrenworte im Johannesevangelium*.

112. E. E. Ellis, *World of St John*, pp. 53-54.

113. Cf. Ridderbos, 'Christology of the Fourth Gospel', pp. 19-21; idem, *Gospel of John*, p. 509.

earthly ministry. The words of the exalted Jesus are basically *not* conveyed in the farewell discourses, they are only promised as something the Spirit *will* bring when the Spirit comes to the disciples.¹¹⁴

What is more, John is the only Evangelist who repeatedly stresses that the disciples later came to recognize the significance of certain teachings they failed to understand during Jesus' lifetime (e.g. 2:18–22; 7:37–39; 12:16; 16:25). The very fact that he takes pains to preserve what Jesus said even when it was not fully understood strongly suggests that he has not blurred the lines between the earthly Jesus and the risen Lord.¹¹⁵

(6) Some of the differences between John and the Synoptics probably stem from the different contexts in which Jesus found himself. Privately, with his disciples, he was likely to explore the depths of theological perplexities more readily than in his public addresses to the crowds. This observation, for example, goes a long way to account for John 13 – 17, Jesus' upper room discourse, especially since this was the last time he would be with the Twelve before his death. Other differences derive from the Fourth Gospel's regular accounts of Jesus' more formal teaching in the synagogues and the temple rather than his informal addresses to crowds in the open air as in the Synoptics.¹¹⁶ The specific claims Jesus makes surrounding the Jewish feasts, for example, all tie in with central features of those festivals. He works miracles on the Sabbath because his heavenly Father continues to work seven days a week (ch. 5). He offers living water and light for the world at Tabernacles because of the unique water-drawing and candelabra-lighting ceremonies held daily during that holiday (chs. 7–9). He is the good shepherd-ruler as opposed to the corrupt leaders of his day, just as Hanukah (Dedication) celebrated the purifying of the temple and installation of Maccabean rulers after the Jews ousted their Syrian overlords in 164 BC (ch. 10).¹¹⁷

(7) Pitting the brief sayings of Jesus characteristic of the Synoptics over against the longer discourses in John also overlooks the fact that both types of

114. Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, p. 253.

115. See esp. throughout Carson, 'Understanding Misunderstandings'; cf. idem, 'After Dodd, What?', pp. 121–122.

116. Cf. Cullmann, *Johannine Circle*, p. 24; Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 134.

117. See further Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, ad loc., and the literature there cited. These points have now been nicely summarized in B. D. Johnson, 'Jewish Feasts'.

speech occur in all four Gospels, even if the emphasis differs. Even in Mark, an entire chapter is devoted to the eschatological discourse (Mark 13), while Matthew contains five extended sermons (Matt. 5–7, 10, 13, 18, 24–25). If the arguments are correct in chapter 4 concerning the probable unity of at least some of these sermons (above, pp. 180–188), then the likelihood of John also having preserved the outlines of longer discourses increases.

(8) Further evidence that the sermons in John are not composite mosaics of a few historical sayings of Jesus merely glued together with creative additions by the Evangelist comes from various studies that point to their tight-knit unity. The ‘bread of life’ discourse in John 6:26–59 is a carefully constructed exposition of parts of Exodus 16 dealing with the manna God provided for the Israelites, in the style of typical rabbinic commentary of the day.¹¹⁸ John 10:1–16 may be a similar ‘midrash’ (cf. pp. 82–87) on the good shepherd of Ezekiel 34.¹¹⁹ Jesus’ discourse on the relationship between the Father and the Son in 5:19–30 is an intricately wrought chiasmus (inverted parallelism) with close verbal correspondences between verses 19 and 30, 20 and 28–29, 21 and 26, 22 and 27, and 24 and 25.¹²⁰ The Farewell Discourse (chs. 14–16) probably reflects a somewhat looser, but also much more extensive chiasmic form as well. The implications of such structures for unity and authenticity have already been noted. Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus (3:1–21), finally, follows the interesting pattern of Nicodemus’ questions becoming progressively shorter and Jesus’ answers growing ever longer, exactly as modern studies of the psychology of persuasion would lead one to expect. The reversal occurs as Jesus ignores Nicodemus’ opening gambit (‘we know you are a teacher sent from God’, 3:2) and little by little successfully redirects attention away from who he is to who Nicodemus is and ought to be.¹²¹ This discussion, like the more formal addresses in John, is more credible as it stands than is usually admitted.

118. Borgen, *Bread from Heaven*; Hunter, *According to John*, pp. 97–98. Borgen argues for the unity of the discourse but does not attribute it to Jesus; Hunter recognizes that, granted the unity, nothing prevents one from seeing the sermon as authentic.

119. Gerhardtsson, *Good Samaritan – Good Shepherd?* p. 13.

120. Vanhoye, ‘Composition de Jn 5:19–30’, pp. 259–274.

121. Cotterell, ‘Nicodemus Conversation’; cf. idem, ‘Sociolinguistics and Biblical Interpretation’, pp. 61–76. On the possibility of rabbinic corroboration of the existence of Nicodemus, as a wealthy and influential Pharisaic leader, or at least of his extended family as such, see Bauckham, ‘Nicodemus and the Gurion Family’, pp. 1–37.

More generally, what often seem like abrupt transitions more likely reflect Jesus' characteristic freedom in moving from one topic to the next without always indicating his transitions. Because he perceived people's unspoken thoughts and recognized questions intended to trap or distract him, he often bypassed customary amenities and spoke directly to the heart of the matter at hand. One perhaps needs to question the plausibility of the elaborate source- and redaction-critical reconstruction of modern scholars rather than charging John with widespread distortion of the facts. To be sure, sources and redactors can create tightly knit unities too, but if they do, then they cover the very tracks – the seams and inconsistencies – that otherwise enable them to be detected.

Other redactional seams?

Surely the most awkward transition in all the discourses in John occurs in 14:31 when Jesus encourages his disciples to rise and leave the upper room but then proceeds to preach to them for another three chapters. Even relatively conservative commentators often admit that here John has confused the order of things. A few take Jesus' words more metaphorically to mean something like 'let us be prepared for spiritual warfare', or 'let us get ready to enter the new Promised Land', but these interpretations seem less natural. D. A. Carson suggests a more helpful approach:

Far from indicating a seam, 14:31–15:1 evidences a momentous recollection of detail. Jesus and his disciples leave the room in response to his quiet *Egeiresthe, agōmen enteutben* [Rise, let us go hence]. They leave the city, walking in several clumps: twelve men can scarcely walk in one group in the narrow streets of Old Jerusalem and along the narrow path across the Kidron and up the Mount of Olives. This circumstance explains the description surrounding the dialogue in 16:17–19. Moreover, as they pass by vineyards, Jesus finds in them another metaphor to use on this most awesome of nights; and he begins, 'I am the true vine . . .' (15:1).¹²²

That this view is not the desperate expedient of an uncritical conservatism is proved by its endorsement by Ernst Haenchen in a commentary that is in many places one of the most sceptical among major, established works on John.¹²³ More recently, Scott Kellum has demonstrated the literary unity of the Farewell Discourse on numerous levels, including style, topics and structure.

122. Carson, 'After Dodd, What?', p. 123.

123. Haenchen, *John* 2, p. 128 (but cf. p. 131). Cf. also Westcott, *Gospel according to st John*, p. 187.

Kellum concludes that 14:31 not only signals when the disciples left the Upper Room (while not leaving Jerusalem to cross the Kidron ravine for Gethsemane until 18:1), but also slows down the reader ‘immediately before the peak of the discourse’.¹²⁴

On the other hand, perhaps Jesus does not leave immediately after suggesting that he and his followers should head off to the place of his arrest. George Parsenios calls attention to intriguing parallels in Greek tragedy to ‘the delayed exit’, in which speakers recognize their need to go to face opposition but then wait, perhaps carrying on further monologue or dialogue. The result focuses even more attention on the central roles of those characters and further explains the significance of the hour. If this is what John is portraying Jesus as doing, then no literary *or* historical seam need be seen here.¹²⁵

Similarly, Paul Minear argues that chapter 21 was planned from the outset to deal with the unfinished business of Peter’s reinstatement and the future of his and the beloved disciple’s ministries, even though 20:31 reads like the conclusion of a Gospel.¹²⁶ In both his discussion and Carson’s, one may wonder whether or not full weight has been given to the undeniable abruptness of John’s narrative, but even if their solutions are questioned, it is at least important to stress that the apparent lack of smoothness in these parts of John does not support theories of additional stages of redaction. Why, if John’s Gospel was reworked as many as five times (so Brown), should these ‘seams’ still be here at all? Lack of fluency in writing points more to the *omission* of a final stage of editorial proofreading and revision than to additional editors who still could not smooth things out! In any event, the number of revisions of a document has no necessary relationship to its historical accuracy.

Grant Osborne notes several additional features of chapter 21 that support its historicity, although he believes it was added by the writer of the first twenty chapters as something of an afterthought. The most important of these are (1) the apparent aimlessness of the disciples upon their return to Galilee, which would hardly have been invented by the early church, because it consistently

124. Kellum, *Unity of the Farewell Discourse*, p. 238.

125. Parsenios, *Departure and Consolation*, pp. 49–76. Less immediately convincing but somewhat along the same lines is the proposal of Stube (*Graeco-Roman Rhetorical Reading*, pp. 134–136, following Frank Thielman) that John is deliberately writing in a solemn but obscure style, befitting the treatment of sublime but grand religious mysteries, as supported by various authorities on religious style in the ancient Mediterranean world.

126. Minear, ‘Original Functions of John 21’, pp. 85–98.

sought to portray the apostles in a good light; (2) the similarity of the miracle of the great catch of fish to Luke 5:1–11, coupled with enough difference in detail to discount the theory that the stories are mere doublets; (3) the apparent allusion in 1 Peter 5:2 to Peter's commissioning by Jesus to 'tend his sheep'; and (4) the ambiguity of the prophecies about the fates of Peter and John (vv. 20–23), which would have been made much plainer if John were simply inventing material to satisfy the curiosity of late first-century Christians.¹²⁷

Additionally, numerous themes tie this 'epilogue' closely to material that has appeared earlier in the Gospel, while the use of a prologue (1:1–18) makes an epilogue quite natural. Note, too, how 1 John has a prologue (1:1–4), a clear purpose statement near but not at the end of the letter (5:13) and then a small amount of additional material not obviously essential to the document but appropriate nevertheless.¹²⁸ Yet scholars do not parcel up the epistle of John into redactional layers like they do the Fourth Gospel.

Conclusion

One of the most prolific of modern British New Testament scholars, James D. G. Dunn, issues a strenuous appeal in a significant article to 'let John be John'.¹²⁹ By this he means that one must not assume that John intended to write the same kind of history as the Synoptics. The Fourth Gospel must be seen, so Dunn argues (following the consensus of modern scholarship), to be a highly developed theological interpretation of the meaning of Jesus, quite unlike a factual selection of the things he did and said. One should heartily agree that the interpreter of any document must be faithful to the purposes and intentions of its original author, and that John delves into theological issues more deeply than the Synoptics do. Derek Tovey's detailed study of *Narrative Art and Act in the Fourth Gospel* (1997) concludes that John should be placed approximately a quarter of the way along a spectrum that begins with pure history as merely 'an accurate memory of what has happened' and ends with pure myth as 'narrative which is neither true nor does it approximate to

127. Osborne, 'John 21', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2, pp. 293–328.

For even tighter connections with the rest of the Fourth Gospel, see Breck, 'John 21', pp. 27–49. Cf. Franzmann and Klinger, 'Call Stories', pp. 7–15.

128. See, respectively, P. F. Ellis, 'Authenticity of John 21', pp. 17–25; and Talbert, *Reading John*, p. 258.

129. Dunn, 'Let John be John', pp. 293–322.

actual events'. It is slightly freer in this respect than the Synoptics.¹³⁰ Indeed, a significant portion of this freedom may be due to John's desire to write a bit along the lines of the ancient Greek dramatists.¹³¹ But the survey undertaken here of the apparent problems involved in affirming historicity in the Fourth Gospel leaves us wholly convinced that John was also trying to record accurate information about Jesus' life. In fact, in terms of detail of chronology and geography, John supplies much more information than Matthew, Mark or Luke. And the alleged contradictions between John and the Synoptics begin to disappear upon closer scrutiny.

A remarkable witness who agreed with much of what this chapter has defended was the liberal Anglican bishop John A. T. Robinson. Robinson's last book, edited posthumously in the mid-1980s, drew together a lifetime of research on the Gospel of John and defended its historical accuracy with an enthusiasm and rigour not frequently found even among conservative scholars writing on this topic.¹³² Robinson still needlessly pitted John against the Synoptics from time to time, but when he did so he always sided with John's account of events, unlike the majority of scholars, who prefer the Synoptics. Robinson also dubiously alleged that traditional interpretations of John's Christology have read the idea of Christ's deity into John's texts when it is not really there. Notwithstanding these criticisms, one cannot help but admire the meticulous scholarship that led a theologian of Robinson's persuasion to put forward a powerful case for John's historical trustworthiness. As a result, his 'new look' has grown considerably over the last twenty-plus years. With individual authors like Maurice Casey and groups of academics like the Jesus Seminar now more aberrant than mainstream, it is not nearly as surprising to see a wide swathe of scholarship of varying theological traditions endorse a fair amount of history in John.¹³³

130. Tovey, *Narrative Art and Act*, p. 273. Cf. Byrskog, *Story and History*, pp. 235–238.

131. Building on numerous older, shorter summaries with similar conclusions, see esp. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*.

132. J. A. T. Robinson, *Priority of John*. The best of his earlier work had appeared in *Twelve New Testament Studies*; *Twelve More New Testament Studies*; and *Redating the New Testament*, pp. 254–311. Unlike portions of this last volume, *Priority of John* consistently depends on arguments based on positive evidence rather than on silence.

133. Cf. and contrast Silva, 'Approaching the Fourth Gospel', pp. 17–29; García-Moreno, 'Autenticidad', pp. 13–67; S. C. Barton, 'Believer, the Historian and the Fourth Gospel', pp. 289–302; E. E. Ellis, 'Background and Christology', pp. 1–25;

It is difficult, finally, to reconcile John's insistence on the eyewitness nature and truth of his narrative with views that would claim he is not trying to write reliable history, however theologically interpreted it may be.¹³⁴ Claims like 19:35 ('he who has seen it [the crucifixion] has testified, and his testimony is true, and he knows that he speaks the truth, in order that you also may believe') are not easily explained away.¹³⁵ F. F. Bruce's conclusion to his study of John's trial narrative provides a fitting summary for this investigation of the entire Gospel:

John presents the trial and execution of Jesus, as he presents everything else in his record, in such a way as to enforce his theological *Leitmotiv*: Jesus is the incarnate Word, in whom the glory of God is revealed. But the events which he presents in this way, and pre-eminently the events of the passion, are real, historical events. It could not be otherwise, for the Word became flesh – the revelation became history.¹³⁶

Footnote no. 133 (*cont.*)

Lea, 'Reliability of the History', pp. 387–402; M. M. Thompson, 'Historical Jesus and the Johannine Christ', pp. 21–42; D. Wenham, 'Enigma of the Fourth Gospel', pp. 149–178; de la Fuente, 'Trasfondo cultural del cuarto evangelio', pp. 491–501; Moloney, 'Fourth Gospel', pp. 42–58.

134. Morris, 'Fourth Gospel and History', pp. 129–130.

135. Cf. Kermodé's attempt to do so (*Genesis of Secrecy*, pp. 101–123), which fails utterly to convince.

136. Bruce, 'Trial of Jesus', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1, p. 18. For a detailed defence of an opposing perspective, see Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*.

6. THE JESUS-TRADITION OUTSIDE THE GOSPELS

From a modern perspective, the life and teachings of Jesus seem so significant an influence on the last twenty centuries of world history that it is hard to imagine them escaping the attention of ancient historians. It is surprising to hear scholars claim that in fact there is very little corroborating evidence outside the Gospels for the life of Christ. F. F. Bruce uses this claim as the springboard for his survey of *Jesus and Christian Origins outside the New Testament* (1974). In this book, Bruce discusses the testimony of Graeco-Roman historians, ancient Jewish sources and non-canonical Christian testimony to the actions and sayings of Jesus, concluding on the one hand that the amount of evidence confirming the Gospel portraits of Jesus has been underestimated and on the other hand that there are good reasons for many of the extra-biblical sources not to say much about Jesus. Robert van Voorst covers much of the same territory, at times in even more detail, interacting with more recent scholarship and coming to similar conclusions in his *Jesus outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (2000).¹

This chapter does not propose to duplicate Bruce's or van Voorst's very thorough studies. It will merely survey briefly the areas on which they touch, focusing on some of the recent scholarly debate not treated in their

1. Cf. also France, *Evidence for Jesus*, pp. 19–85, 140–157; Habermas, *Historical Jesus*.

discussions. It will also go into some detail on a topic that remained outside the purview of Bruce and van Voorst: the seeming shortage of references to the details of Jesus' earthly life *in the other New Testament writings*. This chapter may be divided into four parts, therefore, involving discussion of (1) apparent historical errors in the Gospels when compared with other ancient sources, both biblical and secular, (2) references to Jesus' life by non-Christian writers at the beginning of the Christian era, (3) the pictures of Jesus painted by non-canonical Christian writers during the earliest stages of church history, and (4) the corroborative testimony of Acts, the epistles and Revelation to the words and works of Jesus' ministry.

Apparent historical errors

Compared with the number of apparent discrepancies among the four Gospels themselves, the problems created by seeming conflict with evidence from other sources are very few. This is largely due, of course, to the sheer lack of any information in those sources either to corroborate or to contradict the details of the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Sometimes events in the Gospels are alleged not to correspond to rabbinic legislation, a more indirect sort of conflict. The most famous example by far involves the irregular proceedings at Christ's trial before the Sanhedrin: undertaken at night, during high holy days, without allowing Jesus a defence attorney, accepting false witness and so on. But it is difficult to know how relevant Mishnaic teaching from about AD 200 is, not *demonstrably* in existence in Jesus' day. Even if it were in existence, desperate or enraged people often break the law in extraordinary circumstances (witness the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:57–60, in violation of Roman laws against the Jews exercising their own right of capital punishment: John 18:31).² But the examples treated in more detail here involve four especially well-known problems of seemingly conflicting testimony to one and the same event. One seems to pit Matthew against Acts, two involve the Evangelists appearing to contradict the Old Testament, and one questions the accuracy of Luke, in the light of the evidence of ancient, secular historians.

The death of Judas

The only portion of the Gospels longer than a sentence or two to be paralleled elsewhere in the New Testament is the description in the first chapter of

2. Cf. esp. Carson, 'Matthew', p. 550.

Acts of Jesus' resurrection appearances and ascension and the disciples' return to Jerusalem (Acts 1:1–26; cf. Luke 24:36–53). In this context, Luke adds a description of Judas' death (1:16–20), which is paralleled only by Matthew (Matt. 27:3–10). Still, the details of the two accounts diverge. According to Luke, Judas bought the field in which he died (subsequently nicknamed the 'Field of Blood'), and he took his life by 'falling headlong' (another possible translation is 'swelling up') and bursting open in his midsection. In Matthew, Judas hanged himself, while the chief priests used the money he returned to buy the 'Field of Blood' as a cemetery for foreigners. Taken by itself, Luke's account is the more puzzling of the two. What kind of fall would have killed Judas and caused his bowels to spill out? And why would he have bought a field in the first place just in order to kill himself in it? If the information Matthew supplies is accepted as the background required to make sense of Luke, then the two accounts may be combined in a fairly natural way. I. H. Marshall, who consistently resists all but the most plausible of harmonizations among Gospel parallels, explains:

the following possibilities arise: (1) Judas hanged himself (Matt.), but the rope broke and his body was ruptured by the fall (possibly after he was already dead and beginning to decompose); (2) What the priests bought with Judas's money (Matt.) could be regarded as his purchase by their agency (Acts); (3) The field bought by the priests (Matt.) was the one where Judas died (Acts).³

Marshall prefaces this harmonization by cautioning that 'it is quite possible that Matthew or Luke is simply reporting what was commonly said in Jerusalem, and that we are not meant to harmonize the two accounts'. But since both Evangelists elsewhere distinguish popular but unreliable reports from trustworthy ones (e.g. Matt. 28:11–15; Acts 9:11–14), this seems less likely. Alasdair Gordon's conclusions are worth quoting in full:

There is no doubt that there are difficulties in this question but none of these seems irreconcilable. One could agree with the great Princeton scholar, J. A. Alexander, when he points out that Matthew wrote 'for a wide circle of readers, many of whom had no previous knowledge of the case; he therefore states the main fact, and according to his usual custom passes over the minute details. Peter, orally addressing

3. Marshall, *Acts*, p. 65. Similarly, Kistemaker, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 62; Stott, *Message of Acts*, pp. 55–56. Cf. Polhill (*Acts*, p. 92, n. 60), who notes that elements of this harmonization date at least as far back as the time of St Augustine.

those who knew the facts as fully as himself and less than six weeks after their occurrence . . . assumes the main fact as already known, and naturally dwells upon those very circumstances which the Evangelist, many years later . . . leaves out altogether’.

In magisterial tones Alexander concludes: ‘there is scarcely an American or English jury that would scruple to receive the two accounts as perfectly consistent, if the witnesses were credible, and any cause could be assigned for their relating two distinct parts of the same tradition.’⁴

Abiathar or Ahimelech?

In Mark 2:25–26 and parallels, Jesus defends his disciples’ ‘working’ on the Sabbath (by plucking ears of grain) with an appeal to the Old Testament example of David disobeying the Jewish law when he ate the sacred show-bread reserved exclusively for priests (cf. 1 Sam. 21:1–6). Mark alone includes the detail that the incident with David occurred ‘when Abiathar was high priest’. Yet 1 Samuel clearly states that Ahimelech, Abiathar’s father, held that office then. The best solution to this problem arises from the recognition of the unusual meaning of a prepositional phrase found in Mark 2:26, *epi Abiathar archiereōs*. The preposition *epi* usually means ‘upon’, but in this context it makes no sense to translate ‘upon Abiathar the high priest’. Nevertheless, since in eighteen of the twenty-one places Mark uses this preposition with the genitive case it does refer to location rather than to time, the translation ‘when’ is not very likely. John Wenham notices a close parallel in Mark 12:26 where Jesus cites the story of God appearing to Moses at the burning bush, in which he translates *epi tou batou* with the explanatory paraphrase ‘in the passage of Scripture concerning (or, entitled) the Bush’. Similarly, Mark 2:26 makes good sense if translated ‘at the passage of Scripture concerning (or, entitled) Abiathar the High Priest’, for the passage referred to comes in the chapter (1 Sam. 21) that immediately precedes the record of the first exploits of Abiathar. Since Abiathar is the more noteworthy of the two priests throughout the larger context of 1 Samuel, as the man who first brought the priesthood to David’s side in his struggle against Saul, it would be natural to refer to several chapters under his name. A further clue suggesting that *epi* means ‘in

4. Gordon, ‘Fate of Judas’, pp. 99–100, citing J. A. Alexander, *Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 27–28. If Acts 1:18–19 be taken as Luke’s and not Peter’s words, a reminiscence of Luke 12:46, where the wicked servant is punished by being ‘cut in the middle’ (*dichotomeō*), may be intended, in order to hint at the nature of Judas’ eternal punishment (O. Betz, ‘Dichotomized Servant’, pp. 50–51).

the passage about' in Mark 2:26 and 12:26 is that both are preceded by the rhetorical question 'have you never/not read . . . ?' Wenham's translation thus preserves the more common use of the preposition *epi* as referring to location, even if the specific location in view is a passage of Scripture rather than a place on the globe.⁵

Bart Ehrman describes his experience of writing a paper on this topic while a theological student at Princeton, trying to defend Mark's accuracy, only to have his professor ask him if Mark could not have just made a mistake. This question, Ehrman explains, marked a liberating turning point in his life, as he proceeded to reject his evangelical convictions regarding Scripture and ultimately any kind of Christian faith.⁶ It is hard to imagine one such error producing so drastic a paradigm shift all by itself, given the countless Christians throughout history who have remained strong believers even while allowing for minor errors in Scripture that do not affect its overall teachings on faith and practice.⁷ Indeed, Ehrman's narrative suggests he had been looking, whether consciously or unconsciously, for just such an 'out', given a building frustration with the monolithically ultraconservative education of his bachelor's and master's degree programs.⁸ Ironically, Ehrman's story *does* reinforce the convictions of those who build 'slippery slope' hypotheses

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5. J. W. Wenham, 'Mark 2:26', p. 156: So also, apparently independently, Roure, *Jesús y la figura de David*, p. 14, n. 1. France (*Gospel of Mark*, p. 146, n. 52) demurs, because 'it is not obvious in what sense 1 Sa. 21:1–9 could be regarded as belonging to a section of Scripture entitled "Abiathar the High Priest"'. But Jewish lectionary readings, especially outside the Pentateuch, often embraced *multi*-chapter portions of Scripture. Hooker (*Gospel according to Saint Mark*, p. 103) believes Mark simply made a natural mistake, since Abiathar 'was much better known' than Ahimelech, but by this very rationale Abiathar's name would more likely be used for a multi-chapter segment involving both characters. J. A. Brooks's (*Mark*, p. 66) rejection of an approach similar to Wenham's depends on the observation that Abiathar does not appear until 1 Sam. 22, but this again ignores the multi-chapter nature of the Jewish lectionary segments.
 6. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, p. 9.
 7. Indeed, it is this latter view that evangelical scholar C. A. Evans ('Patristic Interpretation of Mark 2:26', pp. 183–186) adopts, following Jerome, *Letters* 57.9. Evans prefers the term 'inexactness' to 'falsification', because Mark is trying to make a point that remains the same whether he correctly remembers the name of the high priest in question or not.
 8. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, pp. 1–15.

about how the admission of one minor error anywhere in Scripture opens the door to the almost inevitable rejection of all things Christian, notwithstanding the fact that countless Christians over the centuries have held intermediate positions between these extremes without ever ‘sliding’ anywhere! I am perfectly happy acknowledging that the cases for resolving some of the apparent discrepancies in the Gospels are stronger than others, and I am not in the least bothered if readers prefer to adopt a different *Christian* perspective on the nature of Scripture. I just hope that this volume may prod some of them to consider certain options for various problems that they may not have previously encountered. I, at least, see no insuperable objections to any of them.

Zechariah son of Berachiah

In the middle of his woes on the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, Jesus refers to the sins of their forefathers ‘all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar’ (Matt. 23:35). Zechariah the son of Berachiah was the prophet whose book now stands second from the end of the Old Testament. But the Old Testament says nothing about this Zechariah being murdered, and the location of this murder – in the temple court – calls to mind the account of the death of the priest, Zechariah son of Jehoiada, in 2 Chronicles 24:20–22. Has Jesus (or Matthew or earlier Jewish tradition on which one of these men draws) simply confused the two Zechariahs? Several alternatives have been suggested and it is hard to know which is best.⁹ The most common view is that the priest of 2 Chronicles 24 is in view because then the saying refers to the first and last accounts in the sequence of the Hebrew canon (which ends with Chronicles) of righteous martyrs that the Jewish leaders’ ancestors murdered. But that would miss out the last 800-plus years of Jewish history and not account for why Jesus’ generation should suddenly receive all of God’s

9. See Gundry, *Use of the Old Testament*, pp. 86–88. Most prominent are hypotheses about (1) a primitive textual error, (2) Berachiah as the unnamed father of Jehoiada, (3) an otherwise unknown martyrdom of the father of John the Baptist, and (4) a murdered Zechariah *after* the time of Christ of whom Josephus speaks. Position 1 is unlikely since virtually all the textual evidence weighs against it. Option 4 would be anachronistic on the lips of Jesus. Approaches 2 and 3 have no evidence for or against them but require taking ‘Zechariah son of Berachiah’ to refer to someone other than the one person Scripture positively identifies in that way.

judgment stored up from the distant past.¹⁰ But if we opt for Zechariah the prophet as Jesus' referent, then we shrink that period by more than 300 years and we have the chronologically last righteous Jew martyred by his leadership, named in the Hebrew Scriptures. If Jesus adopted the common Jewish belief in the cessation of prophecy after Malachi,¹¹ he could easily have jumped over the remaining interval of time to the generation that was again hearing from God directly, first through John the Baptist and now through Jesus.

The fact that some rabbinic traditions (e.g. the Targum to Lam. 2:20 and the *Midrash Rabbah* on Ec. 3:16) also refer to Zechariah the prophet as being killed in the temple makes the suggestion very attractive that Jesus is following extra-biblical tradition here. The coincidence of having two Zechariahs killed in a similar way leads many Jewish commentators to reject their traditions as also confused or in error, but the coincidence is certainly not that impossible. After all, there are thirty Zechariahs in the Old Testament, prophets and priests were not infrequently murdered by their rivals, and it is not clear that the locations within the temple complex referred to by Matthew and Chronicles are identical.¹² One might object that the traditions for the murder of Zechariah the prophet are not well attested, but Matthew's account of Jesus' belief must be considered as attestation too. There is an unfortunate tendency in modern scholarship to prefer any ancient testimony to that of the Gospels when it seems to conflict with them, while refusing potential corroboration from extra-biblical sources unless they pass the most stringent tests of historicity. But it is hard to imagine that Jesus, the Jewish teacher, would not have known

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10. Peele, 'Blood "from Abel to Zechariah"', pp. 583–601. Peele still thinks it is Zechariah son of Jehoiada who is in view but, like Abel, as a paragon of particularly heinous murder, in this case right in the holy temple, of an exemplary servant of God.
11. On which, see Sommer, 'Did Prophecy Cease?', pp. 31–47.
12. Cf. Liefeld, 'Luke', pp. 957–958. For the various Jewish traditions, see Blank, 'Death of Zechariah', pp. 327–346. Keener (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 556) notes that Jewish tradition at times conflated Zechariah the son of Jehoiada and the prophet Zechariah son of Berechiah, thinking that Christians could have done the same thing, perhaps by assuming the identity of the two men based on reading 'son' in a more general sense in one of the passages. For a plausible case for the view that this is an otherwise unknown Zechariah martyred just prior to Jesus' lifetime, see Ross, 'Which Zechariah?', pp. 70–73. For a full range of interpretative options, see Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, pp. 1123–1124.

reliable traditions about Jewish history that have been preserved in few, if any, other sources.

Quirinius

When Joseph and Mary headed for Bethlehem to be registered in the empire-wide census, Luke tells us that Quirinius was governor of Syria, under whose jurisdiction Israel would have fallen (Luke 2:2). Unfortunately, the information that can be pieced together from the ancient Jewish and Roman historians lists other men as governors of Syria in the years leading up to Christ's birth and dates Quirinius' term of office from AD 6 to 9. However, some ancient sources also speak of Quirinius leading military expeditions in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire a decade earlier in a manner most naturally explained if he held some official post in Syria (Tacitus, *Annals* 3.48; Florus, *Roman History* 2.31). Since various forms of 'joint rule' were common in the ancient world, it is quite possible that Quirinius was some type of 'governor' (the word Luke uses, *hégemonēō*, is a very general term meaning 'to rule' or 'to lead') before his more formal, later term of office. Others prefer to translate Luke 2:2 as 'this census was *before* one under Quirinius, governor of Syria',¹³ though this is not the most natural rendering of *prōtē* in this context.

A related issue surrounds the possibility of regular empire-wide censuses. We know that after the turn of the century, the Romans counted the inhabitants of Egypt every fourteen years. There is some evidence to suggest they did the same throughout the empire and had begun the process already at an earlier date, in which case, because one of those censuses occurred in AD 6–7, then the previous one would have begun in 9–8 BC. But given the lack of technology in antiquity, registering as many people as possible in the empire would easily have taken two to three years. If Herod's massacre of the infants in Bethlehem up to two years of age means that Jesus is already two years old, and if this occurred shortly before Herod died in 4 BC, Jesus could easily have been born and the census taken place in 6 BC, with the chronology dovetailing from both directions.¹⁴ Augustus himself refers to a census he ordered in 8 BC (*The Deeds of the Divine Augustus* 8.2–4). There is not enough evidence yet to *prove* that Luke was right on every detail concerning either Quirinius or the

13. For the most compelling version of this proposal, see Pearson, 'Lucan Censuses, Revisited', pp. 278–282.

14. See esp. Lawrence, 'Publius Sulpicius Quirinius', pp. 193–205; cf. D. L. Jones, 'Luke's Unique Interest', pp. 379–380; Wiseman, 'There Went Out a Decree', pp. 479–480.

census, but there is certainly enough to make it very presumptuous to argue that Luke must have been wrong.¹⁵ And since the evidence for Quirinius' activities recoverable from other sources is not always consistent, one must also allow for the possibility that the extra-biblical historians have got some of their information wrong.¹⁶

The testimony of non-Christian writers

Graeco-Roman sources

None of the Graeco-Roman historians of the first generations of the Christian era has much to say about the life of Jesus. But several important passages provide brief, independent testimony to Jesus' existence. The third-century historian Julius Africanus cites an interesting statement from the historian Thallus who wrote a chronicle of world history in Greek in the first century, in which the author refers to the darkness that occurred at the time of the crucifixion.¹⁷ Pliny the Younger, the Roman legate of Bithynia-Pontus (now a part of north-central Turkey) in the early second century, wrote to the emperor Trajan, requesting advice on how to deal with Christians who refused to reverence Caesar's image. Pliny noted that these Christians met regularly and sang hymns 'to Christ as if to a god' (*Letters* 10.96.7). The phrase 'as if to a god' suggests that Pliny knew Jesus had been a person who had lived on earth but was reluctant to call him divine.¹⁸ Arguments that Pliny is simply reporting an erroneous Christian claim fail on the grounds that he explains that he received this information from those who had denied their Christian faith (10.96.6).¹⁹

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15. For a full list of options, with discussion, see Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, pp. 903–909. On the issue of presumption, cf. esp. M. C. Williams, 'Veracidad histórica de Lucas-Hechos', pp. 23–35.
 16. Hemer ('Luke the Historian', p. 50) makes this point more generally, with respect to the frequent scholarly comparisons of Luke and Josephus. In many cases, Josephus seems somewhat less credible.
 17. For all eight extant fragments of Thallus, see Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 1156–1158.
 18. From the larger contexts of the quotation it may also be inferred that worship of Christ was both central to these services and distinctive in form from both pagan and Jewish antecedents. See Stanton, 'Early Christian and Jewish Worship', pp. 84–98. For the broader meaning and significance of Pliny's testimony, see Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective*, pp. 17–26.
 19. M. J. Harris, *3 Crucial Questions about Jesus*, p. 18.

A third source of evidence for Jesus' human career is the Roman writer Tacitus, the most consistently reliable ancient Roman historian,²⁰ who wrote early in the second century. He describes Christians as those who had received their name from 'Christ who had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius' (*Annals* 15.44). These details mesh perfectly with the information found in the New Testament but are unlikely to have been derived from it.²¹ Writing about five years later than Tacitus, another Roman historian of the day, Suetonius, refers to the expulsion of Jews from Rome in the time of the emperor Claudius (AD 41–54). The cause for this imperial edict he attributes to rioting 'at the instigation of Chrestus' (*Claudius* 25.4). Many scholars view this as a variant or mistaken spelling of the Latin *Christus* (Christ) and believe that it was turmoil among non-Christian Jews and Jewish Christians in Rome to which Suetonius refers: mistakenly thinking that Christ himself was present to instigate it.²² The reference nevertheless 'points to Jesus as the leader of a band of dissident Jews, if not the founder of Christianity'.²³

In the Greek world, Lucian of Samosata, a second-century writer of satires, poured scorn on Christians for, among other things, worshipping a *man*: the distinguished person who instituted their novel rites and who was therefore crucified. He goes on to call Jesus a 'sage' (*Death of Peregrine* 11–13). Mara bar Serapion, a Syrian who probably lived during the second century, wrote a letter to his son urging him to imitate wise teachers like Socrates. In this context, he twice refers to a 'wise King' whom the Jews executed, which led to their most recent exile from the land and dispersion around the empire. Only Jesus qualifies for such a description and bar Serapion goes on to stress that the wise King lived on in the teaching that he had given. This kind of label for Christ may reflect Jesus' own teachings about himself, or at least convictions as old as the narrative of the titulus Pilate had nailed to the cross, which declared in three languages that Jesus had claimed to be king of the Jews.²⁴ Finally, one may include Origen's reference to the pagan apologist Celsus'

20. *Ibid.*, p. 21. Cf. Syme, *Tacitus*, p. 469.

21. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 39–53.

22. See *ibid.*, pp. 29–39; contra the view that *Christus* and *Chrestus* would not have been confused. Cf. M. J. Harris, 3 *Crucial Questions about Jesus*, pp. 22–24.

23. M. J. Harris, 'References to Jesus', in Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5, p. 356. The rest of Harris's article (pp. 343–368) gives a more detailed discussion of the passages noted in this section and provides the translations adopted here.

24. Habermas, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 206–208.

work, which attacks Christian beliefs on numerous fronts. But he never denies that Jesus was a historical figure. Instead, Celsus disparages Jesus' lineage and socio-economic status, calls his mother Mary an adulteress, attributes his miraculous powers to sorcery that he learned in Egypt, and charges that he used these powers erroneously to claim his own divinity (Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.28).

Combining the evidence of these various Graeco-Roman writers, one can clearly accumulate enough data to refute the fanciful notion that Jesus never existed,²⁵ without even appealing to the testimony of Jewish or Christian sources. But apart from these references to his crucifixion, being worshipped as a god, working miracles, having an unusual birth, and being viewed as a sage, king and an instigator of controversy, one discovers nothing else explicit from Graeco-Roman sources. This should not be too surprising, though, in view of the humble beginnings of Christianity, the remote location of Palestine on the eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire, the small percentage of the works of ancient Graeco-Roman historians that have survived, and the lack of attention paid by those extant to Jewish figures in general.

Jewish sources

When one considers how quickly Christianity became a predominantly Gentile religion and how relationships between Christians and Jews deteriorated, it is not quite as surprising that the Jewish traditions should also make little mention of Jesus. But they do supply more data than the Graeco-Roman sources offer. And the references that remain have regularly been censored, with later copies or parallel accounts omitting Jesus' name or domesticating the more radical traditions about him.²⁶ At times information about Jesus seems to have been transferred to accounts of other apostate Jewish

25. Contra esp. Wells, *Historical Evidence for Jesus*; and M. Martin, *Case against Christianity*, pp. 36–72. The allegation that Jesus never existed is briefly but adequately refuted in van Voorst, *Jesus outside the New Testament*, pp. 6–16. Cf. also Habermas, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 27–46.

26. See esp. the passages tabulated in Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, pp. 131–144. Kalmin ('Christians and Heretics', pp. 155–169) shows how the Babylonian Talmud turned earlier, more disparate traditions about Jesus into ones that made him just another (apostate) rabbi. There is no reason, on the other hand, to adopt any of the occasional sensationalizing claims that one of the characters in the Dead Sea Scrolls is a cipher for Jesus, not least because the vast majority of these documents are pre-Christian. See Yamauchi, 'Jesus Outside the New Testament?', pp. 208–211.

leaders.²⁷ So it is entirely likely that the Jewish tradition knew much more about Jesus' earthly life than what is recorded in the documents that have survived.²⁸ The significance of that which does remain, however, remains somewhat opaque.²⁹

Rabbinic traditions

None of the testimony of the ancient rabbis perfectly matches the information recorded in the four Gospels about Jesus, but most of it becomes intelligible when viewed as developments and distortions of the historical facts. Several traditions do not specifically mention Jesus' name, even though he is clearly in view. For example, in the Palestinian Talmud, the third-century Rabbi Abbahu says, 'If a man says to you "I am (a) God", he is a liar; "I am (a) Son of Man", he will regret it; "I go up to heaven", he has said it but he will not be able to do it' (*p. Ta'anith* 65b). This tradition reflects no first-hand acquaintance with Jesus' life, only knowledge of the Christian claims for him. The same is true of references in the Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 104b, to Jesus as 'ben [son of] Stada [from *Satana?*], such as one which alleged that he brought "spells from Egypt" and that his mother was Miriam (Mary), the hairdresser' (*megaddela* = Magdalene, in a confusion of the two Marys?).³⁰ Yet the interesting feature of this and similar rabbinic traditions is that these claims are never disputed as inventions of his followers; they are merely rejected as errant. Unlike modern sceptics, the rabbis apparently never denied that Jesus made such allegations for himself; instead, they called one who makes such claims a liar. Surely if Jesus had been a simple teacher whose self-understanding was greatly distorted by Christians of subsequent generations, some recollection of this fact would have remained for those opposed to Christianity to exploit. Instead, the most common rabbinic explanation is that Christianity was founded by a sorcerer who deceived Israel (see p. 255).³¹

27. E.g. the story about the blasphemous Messianic claim, trial and execution of bar Kochba in the *b. Sanbedrin* 93b. None of the details fits the other known traditions of bar Kochba's life, while all can be seen to correspond reasonably closely to those of Jesus' life. See O'Neill, 'Mocking of bar Kokhba', pp. 39–41.

28. Less commonly, an independent saying or anecdote is later attached to the name of Jesus. See esp. Gero, 'Stern Master', pp. 287–311.

29. For many of the following details, see Twelftree, 'Jesus in Jewish Traditions', pp. 289–341, from which the translations given here are also adopted.

30. See C. A. Evans, 'Jesus in Non-Christian Sources', p. 445.

31. Cf. Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, pp. 155–156.

Other rabbinic traditions refer to Jesus more directly. In the fifth-century Babylonian Talmud a rebellious disciple is compared to one ‘who publicly burns his food like Jesus of Nazareth’, using a metaphor that refers to the distortion of Jewish teaching (*Sanbedrin* 103a). A few columns further on, the claim is made that ‘Jesus the Nazarene practised magic and led Israel astray’ (*Sanbedrin* 107b; cf. 43a; Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 7.3). Both of these traditions reflect Jesus’ disputes with the prevailing Jewish interpretations of the Law, and the second one seems to admit that he worked some kinds of miracles or wonders as well, even if it explains them differently than do most Christians. Again the Christian claims are not denied but simply given a different interpretation.³²

In several places Jesus is called ‘Jesus ben (son of) Pandera’, and the second-century Christian writer Origen explains that the Jews believed that Jesus was the child of Mary by an adulterous relationship with a Roman soldier by that name (*Against Celsus* 1.32). The name and hence the legend could come from a corruption of the Greek word *parthenos* for ‘virgin’ and reflect knowledge of the Christian doctrine of the virgin birth. It is impossible to know how old this Jewish allegation is, but charges that Jesus was born out of wedlock are apparently alluded to already in John’s Gospel (John 8:41). Both the Christian and the Jewish traditions imply that Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father.³³

The two items in the rabbinic traditions most widely believed to contain a core of independent testimony to genuine, historical information about Jesus refer to his death and his disciples. In the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanbedrin* 43a, Jesus is said to have been hanged on the eve of the Passover. On the assumption that crucifixion could be termed ‘hanging’, this tradition would provide powerful support for John’s account of Christ’s death, in which the Jews seem not to have begun celebrating the Passover when Jesus was crucified, and it would fly in the face of the reconstruction of the last day of Jesus’ life adopted above (see pp. 221–225), in which Jesus died on the day following the evening of the main Passover meal. This rabbinic tradition goes on, though, to claim that ‘for forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, “He is going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy.”’ Since the Jews generally hanged the dead bodies of criminals whom they stoned, as a public deterrent and disgrace, it is more natural to interpret this passage as a reference to a true hanging, which would then not apply to Jesus. Moreover, the notion of a forty-day period of heralding an execution

32. Cf. esp. Stanton, ‘Jesus of Nazareth’, pp. 164–180.

33. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, pp. 96, 107, n. 48.

contradicts Jewish criminal procedure, so this whole tradition becomes historically suspect.³⁴ It does, however, demonstrate early Jews' conviction that at least some of their leaders were involved in the death of Jesus, whatever the precise details, and no ancient traditions ever dispute this claim.³⁵

In the same section of the Talmud, the rabbis go on to teach that 'Jesus had five disciples, Mattha, Naqai, Nezer, Buni and Todah'. Scholars have conjectured that Mattha, Naqai and Todah are alternate or corrupt spellings of the Hebrew for Matthew, Nicodemus and Thaddaeus, and that Nezer refers to a Nazarene or follower of Jesus more generally. Buni might just conceivably be a corruption of the Hebrew for John. Still, all of this is guess work. At the end of the day, one must admit that the rabbinic traditions offer precious little independent testimony to the ministry of Jesus.³⁶

Josephus

At first glance, the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote during the second half of the first century AD, would seem to offer much more promising material. In his *Jewish Antiquities*, he makes passing mention of 'James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ', who he claims was delivered up to the Sanhedrin to be stoned some time in the decade of the 60s (20.200). Josephus also tells of John the Baptist, whom Herod killed even 'though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism' (18.117). But the most striking and significant passage occurs in 18.63–64:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these

34. So also Silberman, 'Use of Rabbinic Material', pp. 153–155.

35. R. E. Brown, 'Babylonian Talmud on the Execution of Jesus', pp. 158–159.

36. For a book-length treatment of these and related texts, see J. Maier, *Jesus von Nazareth*. Maier concludes that none of the rabbinic traditions about Jesus can be dated with any probability to the first two centuries of the Christian era. Schäfer (*Jesus in the Talmud*) argues that they were deliberate distortions of the Gospels' contents to counter Christian claims.

and countless other marvellous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.³⁷

If this passage, in its entirety, were an authentic part of the original text of Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*, it would provide dramatic corroboration of the main contours of the Gospel testimony about Jesus by one who otherwise shows no signs of biasing his history in favour of Christianity. But it is precisely because Josephus was not a Christian that it is hard to attribute all these words to him. Some scholars have therefore rejected the whole passage as a later interpolation by a Christian scribe copying Josephus' work. Many recent studies of Josephus, however, agree that much of the passage closely resembles Josephus' style of writing elsewhere, so that if it were tampered with, probably only the details about Christ's dubious humanity, his Messiahship and his resurrection were added.³⁸ A few are willing to leave the passage almost entirely intact, supposing that the original varied only by including phrases something like 'the so-called Christ' (as in the passage about James) and 'some said he appeared . . .'.³⁹ The fact that later quotations and versions of Josephus do vary on some of these details makes the hypothesis of minor interpolations of some kind fairly probable, although scholars will continue to dispute their exact nature. But most of the passage seems to be authentic and is certainly the most important ancient non-Christian testimony to the life of Jesus that has been preserved.⁴⁰

Josephus also provides more indirect corroboration of the Gospel narratives about Jesus. To begin with, he narrates the uprisings of numerous messianic pretenders and other Jewish rabble rousers and their followings, making the Jewish and Roman jitteriness about Jesus and his entourage very plausible.⁴¹ He also makes reference to John the Baptist, with testimony about John's

37. *Jewish Antiquities*, pp. 49–51.

38. See esp. Meier, 'Jesus in Josephus', pp. 76–103; Martínez, 'Reevaluación', pp. 84–118.

39. Even these changes can be omitted if one understands Jesus to be writing with biting irony. See Cernuda, 'Testimonio flaviano', pp. 355–385, 479–508.

40. For a full history of approaches to this passage since the first century, see Wheatley, *Josephus on Jesus*. For the most thoroughgoing recent defence of this position, see Paget, 'Some Observations', pp. 539–624.

41. The disparate nature of these individuals is nicely captured in the title of the book by Horsley with Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus*.

message, ministry and execution that is potentially compatible with the Gospels' accounts.⁴² More intriguingly, he describes the message, arrest, trial, release and murder of one Jesus ben Ananias, in the 60s AD, with details and sequencing that match those of the Gospel passion narratives (except, of course, that Jesus was never released). The historical verisimilitude of these narratives is further enhanced when one canvasses the evidence for a custom similar to that depicted in the texts in which Pilate tries to release Barabbas, even if we have yet to find corroboration of this exact practice.⁴³

Extra-biblical Christian traditions

The earliest non-canonical Christian literature that has survived falls into three main collections. First come the 'Apostolic Fathers': a group of second- or very late first-century writings, largely epistolary in nature, which stem from individuals or communities that saw themselves as faithfully preserving and transmitting the public teachings of Jesus' twelve apostles but without claiming the type of inspiration or infallible authority they ascribed to their predecessors.⁴⁴ Second appears the Nag Hammadi library: an extensive collection of writings discovered in Egypt shortly after the Second World War, most of them Gnostic in origin,⁴⁵ a few possibly contemporary with or even predating

42. C. A. Evans, 'Josephus on John the Baptist', pp. 55–63. Cf. Peek, 'Death of John the Baptist', pp. 208–235, esp. 210–221.

43. For these two points, see C. A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, pp. 175–179, and 174–175, respectively.

44. For an introduction to each work, followed by the Greek text and a good English translation, see Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*.

45. Gnosticism embraces so many diverse movements that it is impossible to summarize it adequately in a sentence. The word comes from the Greek *gnōsis* (knowledge) and refers to various sects that often combined elements of pagan, Jewish and Christian belief, claiming that they had received some secret revelation about the nature of true religion and that salvation was achieved through that knowledge. They normally adopted a dualist philosophy, in which matter was inherently evil and only the immaterial was redeemable. Thus they denied the resurrection of the body and looked forward only to the immortality of the soul. The vast majority were 'docetist' (from the Greek *dokeō*, meaning 'to seem'), believing that Jesus only *seemed* to be human, since a perfectly holy God could not really take on an irredeemably corrupt body. The modern-day legacy of Gnosticism can be seen in its selective

the birth of Christianity but most stemming from the second, third and fourth centuries. These works usually presented themselves as Christian but came to be rejected by the early church as heretical. They include Gospels, epistles, apocalypses, diatribes and various other genres. Where the teachings of Jesus are cited, they are usually described as private or secret revelations given only to certain disciples, thus 'explaining' why they were not known by the church at large.⁴⁶ The third category of literature is the New Testament apocrypha: works that also imitate all the New Testament genres but that have been known for much longer than the Nag Hammadi library. This is the most diverse collection of the three, but like the Gnostic writing, seems to reflect small Christian or quasi-Christian sects or communities that valued them at least for their theological teachings.⁴⁷

To the best of our current knowledge, however, in all of the discussions of which books belonged in the New Testament canon, none of these latter two categories of documents were ever endorsed. Indeed, the only ones that were ever actually proposed for inclusion but were eventually rejected were several of the largely orthodox Apostolic Fathers' writings (most notably the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*). One or two early Christian writers mention the *Gospel of Thomas* or the *Gospel of Peter* as not being accepted, but never actually say that anyone was lobbying for their inclusion.⁴⁸ Otherwise, the very fact that the writers of the Gnostic literature and the New Testament apocrypha try to gain credibility for themselves by fictitiously appealing to first-generation followers of Jesus as their authors or main characters shows that they did not have the confidence that the church on any large-scale basis would accept either the 'history' or the theology their documents contained without this form of deception.⁴⁹

appropriation by various branches of the so-called New Age movement and perhaps most fully in Christian Science or Theosophist churches. For an excellent primer, see Markschies, *Gnosis*; in more detail, cf. esp. Logan, *Gnostics*.

46. The standard English translation is Robinson and Smith, *Nag Hammadi Library in English*. Quotations of Nag Hammadi documents throughout this chapter follow this translation.
47. The standard English translation is that of R. McL. Wilson in *New Testament Apocrypha*.
48. For a full catalogue of the various lists of books proposed for inclusion in a New Testament during the first four centuries of church history, see McDonald, *Canon Debate*, pp. 591–597.
49. It has often been argued that pseudonymity would have been viewed as an acceptable literary device in the early church, but the most recent detailed studies of the phenomenon suggest otherwise. See esp. Wilder, *Pseudonymity*.

The Apostolic Fathers

The seven most important of the Greek works that comprise the collection known as the Apostolic Fathers, and that include references to the Gospel traditions about Jesus, are (1–2) two epistles ascribed to Clement, bishop of Rome: one to the Corinthians, and one of a more general, homiletic nature, probably written by someone else in Clement's name; (3) a group of short epistles by Ignatius to churches and individuals as he passed on his way from Antioch to Rome to be martyred there; (4) an epistle of Polycarp, the disciple of the apostle John, to the Philippians; (5) the *Didache*, or *The Teaching of the Apostles*, an early handbook on practical matters in Christian ethics and church order; (6) a general epistle attributed to Barnabas, probably wrongly, with harsh polemic against those who would not radically reinterpret the Jewish Law in the light of its fulfilment in Christ; and (7) the *Shepherd of Hermas*, named after its main character who receives a series of visions, commands and parables of Christian doctrine from an angel of the Lord. 1 *Clement*, the *Didache*, and *Barnabas* probably come from the end of the first century, Ignatius and Polycarp from the early second century, and 2 *Clement* and *Hermas* from the middle of the second century.⁵⁰

The Apostolic Fathers all quote the Old Testament as authoritative Scripture, often in great detail. They also include frequent references to the teachings of the New Testament, though only rarely with a specific introduction labelling them as Scripture. In the case of passages that parallel the Gospels, it is usually very difficult to know whether the Fathers were citing or paraphrasing written, canonical texts, or whether they had access to earlier written sources or oral tradition that preceded the final composition of the Gospels. A third possibility is that they relied on oral tradition as it developed or was rephrased after the Gospels had been written. Although the written documents of the New Testament quickly began to assume an authoritative position in the early church, even in the first half of the second century, Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis, could claim that he trusted the oral tradition delivered to him by the successors of Christ's apostles more than any written texts (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*

50. All these dates are debated. For details, see Hagner, 'Sayings of Jesus', pp. 233–268, and the literature there cited. This article also informs much of the rest of this chapter's discussion of the Apostolic Fathers. The fullest study of this topic is Köster, *Synoptische Überlieferung*. Köster consistently discounted the possibility that the same traditions underlay both the Gospels and the Apostolic Fathers, but more recent research has proved less sceptical. The opposite extreme, that partial parallels almost *always* demonstrate literary dependence, was argued by Massaux, *Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew*.

3.39.3–4).⁵¹ In most cases where the wording of a Gospel tradition in the Apostolic Fathers very closely parallels that of the written texts of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, the natural assumption is that the fathers knew the canonical form of the passages they cite. The best case for this procedure can be made for *2 Clement*, which quotes teachings of Jesus in at least twelve of its twenty paragraphs, and explicitly introduces its first quotation, ‘I did not come to call the righteous but sinners’, with the words, ‘another Scripture says’ (*2 Clement* 2.4; cf. Mark 2:17 for the identical Greek wording). Yet the author of this homily also knew of sayings attributed to Jesus not found in the Gospels. The most famous of these, which recurs in several Gnostic writings, speaks of the kingdom coming ‘when the two shall be one, and the outside as the inside, and the male with the female’ (*2 Clement* 12.2; also found in the *Gospel of Thomas* 23 and ascribed by early Christian writers to the lost gospels of the Egyptians and of the Ebionites). So it is possible that *2 Clement* also relied on non-canonical sources for some or all of the traditions paralleled in the canonical Gospels.⁵²

For the rest of the Apostolic Fathers, conscious quotation of the canonical New Testament, however probable in theory, is even harder to prove in practice.⁵³ The question here, though, does not concern how reliably the New Testament was cited by later Christian authors but is about the reliability of the Jesus-tradition *before* the written Gospels took their final form. So attention should focus on those passages in which it seems most probable that the Apostolic Fathers depended on oral or written traditions that predated the composition of the four Gospels. The most objective method for identifying such passages involves a careful analysis of the quotations in the fathers in the light of New Testament source criticism. Three possible applications of this method will be considered.

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51. For the view that Papias’ apparent disparagement of written texts applies only to non-apostolic sources, see Walls, ‘Papias and Oral Tradition’, pp. 137–140. At the same time, Papias also preferred primary to secondary sources, so gospels written by apostles or followers of apostles would take precedence over all oral tradition except that which itself came directly from apostles or their direct disciples. Cf. Baum, ‘Papias, *Viva Vós*’, pp. 144–151.
52. The most detailed defence of this thesis is Donfried, *Setting of Second Clement*, pp. 56–81. The same ambiguity characterizes the rather infrequent allusions to the Jesus-tradition in Hermas.
53. For a representative example, with judicious assessment avoiding the extremes of complete dependence and complete independence, see Hvalvik, *Struggle for Scripture and Covenant*, pp. 32–34.

Didache and Q

The *Didache* begins with a detailed contrast between the ‘way of life’ and the ‘way of death’ (secs. 1–6). The description of the way of life contains numerous parallels to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount/Plain. The lengthiest such passage reads as follows:

First, ‘you shall love God, who made you’; second, ‘your neighbour as yourself’; and ‘whatever you do not wish to happen to you, do not do to another’ . . . ‘Bless those who curse you,’ and ‘pray for your enemies,’ and ‘fast for those who persecute you.’ ‘For what credit is it, if you love those who love you? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?’ But ‘you must love those who hate you,’ and you will not have an enemy. Abstain from physical and bodily cravings. ‘If someone gives you a blow on your right cheek, turn to him the other as well,’ and you will be perfect. If someone ‘forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles’; if someone takes your cloak, give him your tunic also’ . . . (*Didache* 1.2–5)⁵⁴

The rest of the book deals with instructions on baptism, fasting, prayer, the eucharist, church leadership and teaching, and the return of Christ. In these contexts occur parts of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19), the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13; with only a few words varying from Matthew’s Greek text), the command not to give what is holy to dogs, the principle that a worker is worthy of his food, and the warning to be ready with lamps not quenched and loins girded, since one does not know the hour in which the Lord will come.

Except for this final reference, which appears to come only from Luke 12:35, every quotation or allusion to Jesus’ teaching in the *Didache* is paralleled in Matthew. Not surprisingly, older commentators generally held that the *Didache* had simply cited selections from Matthew’s Gospel.⁵⁵ In the late 1950s, Richard Glover challenged this consensus by pointing out that only certain portions of Matthew’s information about Jesus appear in the *Didache*. Specifically, the *Didache* never includes traditions also found in Mark, but only those Matthew acquired from other sources. Several of these passages are paralleled in Luke (the so-called Q material) and some are peculiar to Matthew. Glover therefore suggested that the *Didache* did not depend on canonical Matthew but on a source Matthew and Luke shared, perhaps Q

54. Lightfoot and Harmer, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 251.

55. See esp. Massaux, ‘L’influence littéraire’, pp. 5–41; cf. idem, *Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, pp. 3–6.

itself.⁵⁶ These conclusions did not go unchallenged,⁵⁷ but they have for the most part prevailed, especially thanks to research by Jonathan Draper.⁵⁸ But if the *Didache's* quotations predate the canonical Gospels, then they provide powerful testimony in support of the reliability of the Gospel tradition at that early date, since the details of those quotations are very close to their canonical counterparts. The words of Jesus are excerpted, rearranged, joined with other exhortations, and applied to new situations. But, as Draper concludes, the *Didache* 'largely supports the evidence of Matthew and Luke concerning the teaching of Jesus', and 'the differences are rather a matter of wording than of substance, and the same authentic, challenging voice of Jesus rings through the sayings'.⁵⁹

Ignatius and M

In the epistles of Ignatius, only brief excerpts of the Gospel tradition are either alluded to or quoted. Three examples are (1) 'A tree is known by its fruit' (Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 14.2; cf. Matt. 12:33b), (2) 'In everything be as shrewd as the serpents and forever as innocent as the dove' (Ignatius, *To Polycarp* 2.2; cf. Matt. 10:16b), and (3) 'for there is (only) one teacher' (Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 15.1; cf. Matt. 23:8). Virtually all of the excerpts again find parallels in Matthew's Gospel. This is not surprising, since Matthew was the most popular Gospel from early on in the history of the church. What is surprising is that nearly three-quarters of the references in Ignatius are found in M material, that is, in passages peculiar to Matthew, even though such material comprises only about one-quarter of the Gospel. Smit Sibinga has examined these

56. Glover, 'Didache's Quotations', pp. 12–29. The *Epistle of Barnabas* contains a shorter version of the teaching on the ways of life and death, which most scholars believe predates the *Didache*. So the *Didache* may have relied on more than one pre-Synoptic source or it may have depended in part on *Barnabas's* form of the tradition as well.

57. See esp. Butler, 'Literary Relations', pp. 265–283. Butler argues that the *Didache* depended on canonical Luke and a Greek source of Matthew's non-Marcan material indistinguishable from the canonical form. Cf. Tuckett, 'Synoptic Tradition in the Didache', pp. 92–128.

58. See esp. J. A. Draper, 'Commentary on the Didache'. Cf. J. A. Draper, 'Jesus Tradition in the Didache', in D. Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5, pp. 269–289; 'Jesus Tradition in the Didache', in J. A. Draper, *Didache in Modern Research*, in Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5, pp. 72–91; and Rordorf, 'Does the Didache Contain Jesus Tradition?', pp. 394–423.

59. Idem, 'Jesus Tradition in the Didache', pp. 284, 287, n. 48.

passages in detail and concludes that there is no convincing explanation for this phenomenon if Ignatius were depending on the entire Gospel of Matthew. Instead, he must have been following different sources, including those distinctive traditions on which Matthew alone, of the four Evangelists, relied.⁶⁰

The significance of this conclusion, if correct, is even greater than that of the *Didache's* use of a Q-like source. Many scholars doubt whether Matthew relied on actual sources for his canonically unparalleled sections, whereas here is strong evidence that he did. What is more, some of Ignatius' quotations of Matthew excerpt material almost universally attributed to Matthew's editorial modification of his sources. For example, in the story of Jesus' baptism, only Matthew quotes Jesus as saying to John, 'Let it be so for now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness' (Matt. 3:15). Most redaction critics assume this statement to be Matthew's own unhistorical addition to Mark's version of the baptism (Mark 1:9–11). But Ignatius also knows this saying of Jesus; in his epistle to Smyrna he writes that Jesus was 'baptized by John in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him' (Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 1:1). So if Ignatius did not know the final form of Matthew's Gospel, then Matthew could not have invented this saying. It must have come from an earlier source to which both Matthew and Ignatius had access. All other things being equal, the earlier its pedigree the more confident one can be of its authenticity.⁶¹

1 Clement, *Polycarp* and early catechesis

1 Clement contains only two clear passages with Gospel excerpts of at least a sentence in length. One of these combines in a very stylized pattern a number of teachings reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain, along with some unparalleled exhortation:

Show mercy, that you may receive mercy; forgive, that you may be forgiven. As you do, so shall it be done to you. As you give, so shall it be given to you. As you judge,

60. Sibinga, 'Ignatius and Matthew', pp. 263–283. Cf. Trevett, 'Approaching Matthew', pp. 59–67.

61. Cf. Bauckham, 'Study of the Gospel Traditions', p. 395. Bauckham endorsed Sibinga's general approach but concluded that the differences between Ignatius and M suggest that M represents the oral tradition on which Matthew drew and is hence somewhat flexible in its wording. Cf. C. T. Brown, *Gospel and Ignatius of Antioch*, pp. 1–11.

so shall you be judged. As you show kindness, so shall kindness be shown to you. With the measure you use, it shall be measured to you. (1 *Clement* 13.2)⁶²

A shorter, rearranged version of this passage occurs in Polycarp's letter to the Philippians (2.3) in conjunction with the beatitude 'Blessed are the poor and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God' (cf. Matt. 5:10). Since there is no evidence that Clement or Polycarp knew each other's work, it is unlikely that both would independently create such similar pastiches of Jesus' teachings. The parallel, rhythmic form of the passage suggests that in the oral tradition the teaching was deliberately phrased this way for easy memorization and accurate preservation. The New Testament epistles (especially Ephesians, Colossians and 1 Peter) also share hortatory material they probably acquired from a common source, perhaps from the early church's instruction for new converts, possibly at baptismal services, or from a simple liturgy of worship. All this adds up to a plausible case for Clement and Polycarp depending not on Matthew or Luke, or even on Q, but on an oral tradition of the teachings of Jesus that goes back to a very early stage of the Gospel tradition.⁶³

As with Ignatius and the *Didache*, one's confidence in the reliability of the tradition can only be strengthened by these findings. Donald Hagner's conclusions apply to a broad spectrum of Gospel traditions in the Apostolic Fathers:

although the sayings of Jesus are reproduced freely and adapted to special purposes, the amount of significant variation between the same sayings in our sources is relatively small . . . [I]f the tenacity and relative stability of oral tradition in the first half of the second century was as impressive as we have seen it to be, the trustworthiness of that oral tradition in the middle decades of the first century was, if anything, even more substantial.⁶⁴

Moreover, although occasionally sayings of Jesus are presented that lack canonical parallels, such 'agrapha' (unwritten sayings) remain few and far between. The testimony of the Apostolic Fathers speaks strongly against the notion that the early church felt free to invent teachings Jesus never really uttered.⁶⁵

62. Lightfoot and Harmer, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 43.

63. For the most detail, see Hagner, *Use of the Old and New Testaments*, pp. 135–178.

64. Idem, 'Sayings of Jesus', pp. 256, 259.

65. Cf. esp. Hofius, 'Unknown Sayings of Jesus', pp. 336–360.

The Nag Hammadi library

Most of the Nag Hammadi documents, predominantly Gnostic in nature, make no pretence of overlapping with the Gospel traditions of Jesus' earthly life. A number claim to record conversations of the resurrected Jesus with various disciples, but this setting proves little more than an artificial framework for imparting Gnostic doctrine. The major exception is the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*, preserved in a fourth-century Coptic manuscript, but originally written in Greek probably in the late second century. Smaller numbers of Gospel parallels and agrapha occur in the *Apocryphon of James*, the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Truth*. Other documents only occasionally contain information about Jesus' earthly life and teaching, so attention will be limited to these four. Several of the scholars who have devoted themselves to the translation and critical analysis of these texts argue that they deserve to be considered at least as seriously as the canonical Gospels as sources of genuine information about Jesus. Perhaps no-one has campaigned as vigorously on behalf of the apocryphal gospels as the distinguished Harvard divinity professor, Helmut Koester. Koester maintains that 'at least four apocryphal gospels belong to a very early stage in the development of gospel literature: a stage comparable to the sources which were used by the gospels of the NT'.⁶⁶ These four include the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Apocryphon of James* along with two documents not found at Nag Hammadi, the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Unknown Gospel of Papyrus Egerton 2*.

Gospel of Thomas

The *Gospel of Thomas* is not a connected narrative of the events of Jesus' life, but a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, most of them introduced simply with the words 'Jesus said'. These were allegedly revealed in secret to

66. Koester, 'Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels', p. 112. Cf. throughout idem, *Ancient Christian Gospels*. Astonishingly, despite its intense scepticism of most things canonical, the Jesus Seminar *assumed* without argument and without even acknowledging the sizable body of scholarship to the contrary, that the *Gospel of Thomas* and Papyrus Egerton 2 derived from the mid-first century, predating (and thus independent of) the canonical Gospels (Funk, Hoover and Jesus Seminar, *Five Gospels*, pp. 16–19). Individual scholars who have proved influential in promoting this approach, each in numerous writings, include J. M. Robinson, R. Cameron, S. J. Patterson and M. W. Meyer. That the Jesus Seminar concluded that the *Gospel of Peter*, on the other hand, was dependent on the canon and historically unreliable is all the more significant as a result (Funk and Jesus Seminar, *Acts of Jesus*, p. 19).

the apostle Thomas, but no serious scholar believes this claim. Many of the sayings have a patently Gnostic flavour, and little can be said in support of their authenticity. One of the most striking of these is the final one (114), which forms a brief dialogue: ‘Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.” Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”’⁶⁷

This saying resembles the passage quoted from *2 Clement* earlier in this chapter (p. 259) and issues from an ascetic milieu in which expressions of sexuality were discouraged and an asexual or androgynous human being was looked upon as ideal (cf. *Gospel of Thomas* 22, in which Jesus makes the male and female into ‘one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female’).⁶⁸ Stanton comments, ‘As in many Gnostic writings, there is a misogynist streak: the female role in bearing more “imprisoned spirits” is deprecated.’⁶⁹ Clearly, there is no support from the New Testament Gospels for such a doctrine. Whatever debates may linger over the Gospels’ attitudes toward women, in comparison to Gnosticism, they prove radically liberating!

However, over half of the sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* resemble teachings of Jesus found in the canonical Gospels, though they seldom appear in identical form. A representative example is one of the longer sayings on the kingdom (*Gospel of Thomas* 3):

Jesus said, ‘If those who lead you say to you, “See, the Kingdom is in the sky,” then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, “It is in the sea,” then the fish will precede you. Rather, the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.’

The middle section of this passage resembles Luke 17:20b–21, in which Jesus says, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with observable signs; nor will they say, “Behold, here it is!” or “There!” for behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst, or, “within you”’ Both passages can be interpreted to mean that

67. Lambdin, *Gospel of Thomas*, p. 130.

68. Cf. Valantasis, *Gospel of Thomas*, p. 195.

69. Stanton, *Gospel Truth?* p. 88.

Jesus did not believe that the kingdom of God would arrive with the Messiah's spectacular display of power but with humble beginnings in the more ordinary events of his ministry and the ministry of his disciples. This segment of the *Gospel of Thomas* may have preserved within it an otherwise unknown, authentic saying of Jesus. On the other hand, the sentence about coming to know oneself can very easily be seen as a later creation, in view of Gnosticism's emphasis on salvation by knowledge, so at least part of the passage seems inauthentic. But if it were thoroughly Gnostic, then one would not have expected it to declare that the kingdom was external as well as internal to the individual. What is perhaps most likely is that the passage is a combination of authentic and inauthentic bits.⁷⁰

It is probably impossible to determine with any confidence which of the previously unknown sayings of the *Gospel of Thomas*, if any, are authentic. Two that are widely cited as strong candidates, because of their similarity to the memorable form and contents of the Gospel traditions, are logion 82, 'He who is near Me is near the fire, and he who is far from Me is far from the Kingdom', and 77b, 'Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.'⁷¹ But where Thomas parallels the four Gospels it is unlikely that any of the distinctive elements in Thomas predate the canonical versions. In a number of cases, these distinctives reappear in the Coptic translation of the New Testament, which no scholar would claim reflects independent sources of information about Jesus. Others are paralleled by late textual variants of the Greek New Testament or by Tatian's late second-century harmony of the Gospels, the *Diatessaron* (see pp. 28–29). When one realizes that parallels also appear to every source-critical layer of the Synoptic tradition (i.e. Mark, Q, M and L), and even to the parable of the seed growing secretly (*Gospel of Thomas* 21; Mark 4:29), one of the rare examples of a tradition found only in Mark, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the author of the *Gospel of Thomas* knew the New Testament Gospels as they now stand, even

70. For further discussion of this and other 'kingdom' passages in the *Gospel of Thomas*, see Chilton, 'Gospel according to Thomas', in Wenham and Blomberg, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5, pp. 155–175. Cf. DeConick, *Original Gospel of Thomas*, pp. 52–53.

71. These are two in a list of eighteen sayings of Jesus found in various sources other than the canonical Gospels that Jeremias (*Unknown Sayings of Jesus*) thinks may be authentic. For a critical analysis of these agrapha by one who thinks that only three or four are probably authentic, see Hofius, "'Unknown Sayings" of Jesus'. Cf. also Charlesworth and Evans ('Jesus in Agrapha and Apocryphal Gospels', pp. 479–545), who are just a little more optimistic.

if he may have quoted them fairly loosely.⁷² Indeed, Nicholas Perrin has made a persuasive case that Thomas consistently knew and relied on the Diatessaron, making claims for any significant measure of independence from or earlier forms than the canonical Gospels improbable in the extreme.⁷³

One important further observation thus emerges. The parable is the one type of passage in Thomas that recurs frequently enough and that contains sufficient detail to enable patterns of modification to be detected. Thomas recounts thirteen narrative parables of Jesus, eleven of which are paralleled in the Synoptics. Of these eleven, nine are noticeably abbreviated and less detailed than their biblical counterparts. The most dramatic example is the parable of the wheat and the tares (*Gospel of Thomas* 57; cf. Matt. 13:24–30), which reads:

The Kingdom of the Father is like a man who had [good] seed. His enemy came by night and sowed weeds among the good seed. The man did not allow them to pull up the weeds; he said to them, 'I am afraid that you will go intending to pull up the weeds and pull up the wheat along with them.' For on the day of the harvest the weeds will be plainly visible, and they will be pulled up and burned.

Far from displaying a tendency to elaborate, embellish or allegorize the parables, in the way in which so many scholars believe the Gospel tradition developed, the tendency in Thomas is to eliminate and to streamline. Where details not found in the Synoptics do appear, they can usually be explained either as conscious, Gnostic redaction or secondary developments in the

72. For further evidence and relevant literature, see Blomberg, 'Tradition and Redaction', in Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5, pp. 177–205, of which the following paragraph is also a summary. The dependence of Thomas on the canonical Gospels remains hotly disputed, but see esp. Tuckett, 'Thomas and the Synoptics', pp. 132–157; Snodgrass, 'Gospel of Thomas', pp. 19–38; Fieger, *Thomas-evangelium*; and Sevrin, 'L'interprétation', pp. 347–360.

73. Nicholas Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian*; 'Thomas: The Fifth Gospel?', pp. 67–80. Cf. also C. A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, pp. 52–77, esp. 73–76. DeConick's dismissal of Perrin's hypothesis in her *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas*, pp. 48–49, amazingly alleges that Perrin has no explanation for Thomas' structure, when in fact his entire book defends the thesis that catchwords most apparent when Thomas' Coptic is translated back into Syriac provide precisely that structure. She also ignores Perrin's point that we know of no other source in Syriac but the *Diatessaron* to account for the distinctive parallels in wording we find between Thomas and Tatian.

continuing oral tradition.⁷⁴ Pheme Perkins has come to much the same conclusions for the pronouncement stories in Thomas, just as Risto Uro does cautiously for the entire Gospel, while still insisting that each saying be examined on a case-by-case basis.⁷⁵ There is thus little evidence for the theory that the oral tradition behind the canonical Gospels expanded and embellished the original testimony on which it was based on any significant scale.

Apocryphon of James

Like the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Apocryphon of James* purports to be the secret revelation of the risen Jesus, this time to his brother James. Unlike Thomas, this apocryphon appears in the form of a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples en route to his ascension, with which the sixteen columns of Coptic text culminate. Nowhere does an undeniable parallel with the Gospel tradition emerge, but neither is most of the document demonstrably Gnostic or unorthodox. Jesus responds to his disciples' questions by discussing the need to protect the kingdom of God, to guard against Satan and the desires of the flesh, to practise love and the other manifestations of the Spirit, and to await his glorious return. In several places, new parables and kingdom sayings appear, which a number of studies have claimed are mostly authentic.⁷⁶ In the three new parables Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a palm shoot, a seed of wheat and an ear of grain. The last of these, for example, reads, 'The kingdom of heaven is like an ear of grain after it had sprouted in a field. And when it had ripened, it scattered its fruit and again filled the field with ears for another year' (*Apocryphon of James* 12.22–27).⁷⁷ The similarity with the agricultural parables of the Gospels (e.g. the sower, mustard seed, or wheat and tares) is inescapable.

At the same time, the *Apocryphon of James* also describes Jesus rebuking his disciples for not having understood earlier parables. Whereas John and the Synoptics agree that parables or other enigmatic sayings helped to sift Jesus' followers from his opponents, in the *Apocryphon of James* 6.30–7.10, they

74. Cf. esp. Lindemann, 'Zur Gleichnisinterpretation im Thomas-Evangelium', pp. 214–243; Blomberg, 'Orality and the Parables'.

75. Perkins, 'Pronouncement Stories', pp. 121–132; Uro, 'Thomas and Oral Gospel Tradition', pp. 8–32. On the complexities involved in this kind of analysis, see idem, Thomas: *Seeking*, pp. 106–133.

76. See esp. Hedrick, 'Kingdom Sayings and Parables', pp. 1–24; Cameron, *Sayings Traditions*.

77. 'Apocryphon of James', p. 34.

distinguish immature believers from initiates into true spiritual understanding, a clear sign of a later, distorting development.⁷⁸ Shortly afterwards, Jesus laments that

you have compelled me to stay with you another eighteen days for the sake of the parables. It was enough for some [to listen] to the teaching and understand 'The Shepherds' and 'The Seed' and 'The Building' and 'The Lamps of the Virgins' and 'The Wage of the Workmen' and 'The Didrachmae' and 'The Woman'. (*Apocryphon of James* 8.1–10)

Not only does this chronology contradict the canonical Gospels (this apocryphon also claims that the Lord appeared for 550 days after his resurrection, compared with only 40 in the New Testament), but the references to parables by means of a short title suggest that they have already become so widely known in the church that no further detail is necessary. This suggestion, coupled with the fact that the parables cited seem to come from all strands of the Synoptic tradition, again including even the peculiarly Marcan material (assuming 'The Seed' equals 'the seed growing secretly'), makes it more probable that this apocryphon is at least in part later than and dependent on the canonical Gospels.⁷⁹ And while there is not much in this work that must be interpreted in a Gnostic fashion, there is little, including the additional parables, that does not readily yield itself to such an interpretation.⁸⁰ One can therefore deduce very little with any degree of confidence from this document about the development of the Gospel tradition in earlier, more orthodox, circles.

Gospel of Philip

The *Gospel of Philip* is the most obviously Gnostic of the three texts so far discussed. It does not claim to be the revelation of the Lord but is merely a manual of Gnostic theology and ethics that occasionally refers to the words and works of Jesus. It is preoccupied with the sacraments and espouses the ideal of the androgynous human noted earlier in the *Gospel of Thomas*. All but one of the *Gospel of Philip*'s allusions to the Synoptic tradition are to Matthew, including material Matthew has acquired from Mark, Q and his distinctive source(s), as well as that which Matthew has added editorially to his sources.

78. Brakke, 'Parables and Plain Speech', pp. 187–218.

79. Sevrin, 'Paroles et paraboles de Jésus', p. 524.

80. Rouleau, 'Paraboles', pp. 181–199.

Some examples include ‘already the axe is laid at the root of the trees’ (81.12; cf. Matt. 3:10; Luke 3:9), ‘let them feed from the crumbs that fall from the table, like the dogs’ (82.21–23; cf. Matt. 15:27; Mark 7:28) and ‘go into your chamber and shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father who is in secret’ (68.10–12; cf. Matt. 6:6). The one exception is the saying that speaks of ‘the Samaritan’ who ‘gave nothing but wine and oil to the wounded man’ (78.7–9; cf. Luke 10:34). Christopher Tuckett rightly concludes that Philip is dependent primarily on Matthew’s Gospel for his information about Jesus and that he reveals next to nothing about the pre-Synoptic stages of the Gospel tradition.⁸¹

Thanks to Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, the *Gospel of Philip* became instantly famous among millions of people who had never previously heard of it. One of the book’s fictional characters, Sir Leigh Teabing, cites Philip 63.32–36 to support his claim that Jesus was actually married to Mary Magdalene: ‘And the companion of the [Saviour is] Mary Magdalene. [But Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [mouth].’ Teabing goes on to allege that the word for ‘companion’ in Aramaic means spouse. At least eight observations combine to disprove this claim. (1) The *Gospel of Philip* was written in Coptic, not Aramaic. (2) Where Coptic texts from the Nag Hammadi library represent translations, Greek is the original language in which they were written. (3) There is no word in Aramaic that is translated as ‘companion’ in English that ever means ‘spouse’ anyway. (4) The Coptic word here is a loan word from the Greek *koinōnos*, a person with whom one has ‘fellowship,’ a common term with decidedly non-erotic connotations. (5) The words for ‘love’ and ‘mouth’ in the quotation are conjectural emendations of a mutilated text; we cannot even be certain what the text read at these junctures. (6) Even if the conjectures are correct, kissing, including a gentle ‘peck’ on the lips, was often a standard greeting among ordinary friends in the ancient Mediterranean world (cf. the older Russian practice of men kissing men on the lips as a greeting). (7) The immediate context makes clear what kind of love this gospel is attributing to Jesus. *Philip* 64.1–10 continues with the disciples asking Jesus:

‘Why do you love her more than all of us?’ The Saviour answered and said to them,
‘Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both

81. Tuckett, ‘Some Nag Hammadi and Related Texts’, pp. 173–178. Cf. M. L. Turner, *Gospel according to Philip*, p. 166. Segelberg (‘Gospel of Philip’, pp. 204–212) believes that Philip is dependent on both Matthew and John but cannot determine whether he knew them in their canonical form.

together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness.’

In other words, Mary has the spiritual insight to recognize Jesus as the Light, whereas the disciples are still struggling in this area. (8) Finally, spiritual insight for the Gnostics behind the *Gospel of Philip* involved asceticism that manifested itself in celibacy rather than marriage (cf. 64.31 – 65.1)⁸²

Gospel of Truth

The *Gospel of Truth* is an even more esoteric Gnostic treatise, which includes portions of the Gnostic salvation myth. In the myth, the creator God remains distant and remote from the world. Between the creator and his creation emanate a series of divine beings or ‘aeons’, one of which falls out of the ‘fullness’ or ‘godhead’ and brings error and darkness to the world. Another emanation must therefore descend to redeem the world. This redeemer imparts secret knowledge to those who discover the divine spark within them. In ‘Christian’ forms of Gnosticism this saviour quite naturally becomes Jesus. A feature that distinguishes the *Gospel of Truth* from many of the other Nag Hammadi writings that elaborate the Gnostic myth of salvation is its frequent allusion to New Testament passages and to the Gospel tradition. Undoubtedly the most striking reference is its interpretation of the parable of the lost sheep:

He is the shepherd who left behind the ninety-nine sheep which were not lost. He went searching for the one which was lost. He rejoiced when he found it, for 99 is a number that is in the left hand which holds it. But when the one is found, the entire number passes over to the right (hand). Thus (it is with) him who lacks the one; that is, the entire right which draws what was deficient and takes it from the left-hand side and brings (it) to the right, and thus the number becomes 100. It is the sign of the one who is in their sound; it is the Father. (*Gospel of Truth* 31.35 – 32.17)⁸³

82. For most of these points and for a reliable introduction to and commentary on this document, see R. McL. Wilson, *Gospel of Philip*. Teabing likewise appeals to the *Gospel of Mary* 18.12–15, which has Levi declaring, ‘Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us.’ But again the immediate context of teaching on spiritual maturity, like the overall context of asceticism, gives the lie to theories of Jesus marrying Mary. See further de Boer, *Gospel of Mary*, pp. 60–100. For help in separating ‘The Mary Magdalene of Myth and Legend’, see the chapter so-entitled in Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?* pp. 27–51.

83. MacRae, ‘Gospel of Truth’, p. 44.

Here the Synoptic parable is reinterpreted with reference to an ancient form of counting on one's fingers, in which hands were switched when passing from 99 to 100. And since left-handedness was a sign of deficiency, the lost sheep had to be found in order to make the number complete. Similarly, the good Gnostics become complete or whole when they come to know themselves properly (cf. 32.38–39, where the text addresses its readers as 'sons of interior knowledge').⁸⁴ The original meaning of Jesus' parable, about God's gracious compassion for one lost individual regardless of the number already saved, has entirely disappeared from sight! Tuckett aptly sums up, 'there is no evidence for the use of sources other than the canonical Gospels for synoptic material' in the *Gospel of Truth*, and it throws 'little light on the history of the synoptic tradition prior to its incorporation in the canonical Gospels'.⁸⁵ Indeed, Tuckett's subsequent monograph on Synoptic tradition in the Nag Hammadi library more generally makes much the same point for the entire corpus of literature.⁸⁶

Other apocryphal gospels

The Greek and Latin church Fathers of the first four Christian centuries frequently refer to spurious writings, including gospels, that different individuals and sects used. Copies of some of these apocrypha were rediscovered in the nineteenth century; some have been known for much longer. Some have never been found, and only their names and selected excerpts that other ancient writers chose to quote remain.⁸⁷ The *Gospel of Judas*, unearthed in the 1970s, was finally translated into English and published in 2006, creating short-lived but intense international interest. Compared with the Apostolic Fathers and the Nag Hammadi library, the New Testament apocrypha form the collection of works least often appealed to in the search for authentic information

84. Hultgren (*Parables of Jesus*, p. 52, n. 19) adds that the Gnostics would recognize left and right as the two (negative and positive) sides of the enthroned Jesus filling the role of the 'Demiurge' (a lesser divine power who created the universe).

85. Tuckett, 'Synoptic Tradition in Gospel of Truth', p. 145. See also throughout J. A. Williams, *Biblical Interpretation*.

86. Tuckett, *Nag Hammadi and the Gospel Tradition*. Cf. also Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions*.

87. For an excellent introduction to all of these various categories of texts, plus the gospels and Dialogues with the Risen Saviour from Nag Hammadi, plus assorted later literature of a similar genre, see Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels*.

about the Jesus-tradition. But, as noted earlier, several voices have called for a reconsideration of the value of the *Gospel of Peter* and Papyrus Egerton 2, and at least one study has pleaded that the so-called Infancy Gospels should be taken more seriously.⁸⁸ So these various documents require a brief survey, along with the newly released *Gospel of Judas*.⁸⁹

Infancy Gospels

Most of the New Testament apocrypha show little overlap with the information found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This fact alone is significant; it means that even in those circles where early Christians apparently felt free to invent stories about Jesus, they almost never tried to deny the truth of the canonical accounts. Instead, they went about ‘filling in the gaps’ in the historical record, imagining what Jesus’ childhood was like, describing his correspondence and travels to other lands, and adding adventures of his disciples, primarily involving their later Christian ministries. Most of these stories, however, differ so radically from the portraits of Christ in the Gospels and of the apostles in Acts that it is hard to believe they could rest on any secure historical foundation. Nevertheless, one can often point to details in the New Testament that would have given rise to the legends, however warped they may have become.

For example, in the infancy gospel attributed to Thomas (not to be confused with the Coptic Gnostic work already discussed), the child Jesus appears as a prodigy. He can fashion sparrows out of clay and breathe life into them or confound his teachers by explaining to them the true meaning of the letters of the alphabet. In one notorious instance, Jesus turns on a playmate who is pestering him and withers him up like a barren tree. One might think of the withered fig tree in Mark 11:14 as a parallel, but the purpose and object of Jesus’ wrath there is entirely different (see p. 131).⁹⁰ Tellingly, the miracle with the birds is the one account of Jesus working a miracle that found its way into the Qur’an (Surah 5.110), further confirming what historians have demonstrated in various other places: that Muhammad had encountered

88. C. Drury, ‘Who’s In, Who’s Out’, pp. 223–233.

89. Cf. esp. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, pp. 112–166.

90. In fact, close scrutiny discloses more affinities between the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the Nag Hammadi literature attributed to Thomas than a superficial reading suggests. So the pseudonymous ascription of Thomasine authorship may point to origins in a similar milieu. See Chartrand-Burke, ‘Authorship and Identity’, pp. 27–43.

certain sectarian forms of Christianity but did not always have accurate knowledge of orthodox Christian beliefs.⁹¹

The *Protevangelium of James* begins with an account of the special birth of Mary, Jesus' mother. According to this apocryphal book, Anna and Joachim, Mary's parents, were unable to have children until the Lord sent his angel to promise a miraculous conception. As a result, they dedicated the child-to-be to the service of the Lord's temple. The protevangelium (which means 'before the gospel') goes on to narrate an expanded version of Luke 1 – 2 combined with Matthew 1 – 2, including such details as Jesus' birth in a cave, the motionlessness of the nearby animals and river at the moment of birth, and Mary's subsequently unspoiled virginity. There are portions of the *Infancy Gospels* that are not objectionable in principle, but with so many obviously fanciful embellishments it is difficult to give much credence to the rest of the narratives.⁹²

Gospel of Peter

Several fragmentary texts from the first few centuries of the Christian era expand the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection. The most famous of these is the *Gospel of Peter*. Most of the Gospel's additions to the canonical accounts display no apparent purpose except to fill out the story. But in some places it reveals a 'docetic' tendency: supporting the view that Christ, while fully divine, was not fully human and thus did not truly suffer during his execution. The *Gospel of Peter* 4:10b, for example, states that 'he held his peace, as if he felt no pain'. In the account of Jesus' resurrection, more obviously legendary elements appear: three men emerge from the tomb, 'two of them sustaining the other, and a cross following them, and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was led of them by the hand overpassing the heavens' (10.39–40).⁹³ It is conceivable that the pre-resurrection portion of Peter contains historical reminiscences even if the post-resurrection segment inspires no such confidence. But even at the outset of this 'gospel', historical inaccuracies occur.

91. Cf. Braswell, *Islam*, pp. 247–252. For the similarities and differences between the Jesus of the New Testament and the Jesus of the Qur'an, see pp. 278–285. For a chart of all the references to Jesus in the Qur'an, see pp. 280–281.

92. Nor does the kind of embellishment found in the *Infancy Gospels* support allegations of similar creative rewriting of history in the canonical infancy narratives. On close inspection, the genres and methods of composition prove quite different. See esp. Quarles, '*Protevangelium of James* as an Alleged Parallel', pp. 139–149.

93. Maurer, 'Gospel of Peter', p. 223.

Pilate, for example, has to request Jesus' body from Herod even though the latter had no jurisdiction over legal proceedings in Judea. So it is doubtful that any new facts about Jesus' death emerge even in this part of the work.⁹⁴

'Unknown Gospel'

In 1934, a fragment of an ancient Egyptian papyrus containing four passages, three with Gospel parallels, was purchased and analysed by officials in the British Museum in London, where it is now on display. Known as Papyrus Egerton 2, and dating to before AD 150, the document contains portions of several accounts: a dialogue between Jesus and the Jewish rulers similar to those in John 5 and 9 – 10; the cleansing of a leper reminiscent of Mark 1:40–44 and parallels; the question about paying taxes (cf. Mark 12:13–15 pars.), introduced in a manner similar to Nicodemus' approach to Jesus (John 3:2) and answered with a quotation of Isaiah 29:13 (as in Mark 7:6–7 par.); and an apparent miracle of quickly growing seed on the bank of the Jordan, which has no clear canonical counterpart. Close verbal parallels with Mark, Luke and John all occur, and the various passages seem to be linked by similarities in wording or theme. This suggests that the text's unknown author drew on the traditions of the Gospels as they now exist, so that he provides no independent testimony to the earliest stages of the Gospel tradition. Although certain scholars have argued that some of the papyrus's distinctives are to be preferred to its canonical parallels, the evidence is scarcely strong enough to overturn the initial presumption in favour of the New Testament accounts.⁹⁵ More importantly, the papyrus is simply too short and mutilated to permit confident conclusions about the origin of its contents.⁹⁶

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94. Cf. further D. F. Wright, 'Apocryphal Gospels', in Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5, pp. 221–227; Foster, 'Any Early Fragments?', pp. 1–28. On the improbability of any sources later than the New Testament providing additional, accurate information about Jesus' death, see van Voorst, 'Extracanonial Passion Narratives', pp. 148–161. The other main 'gospel' that resembles the *Gospel of Peter* is the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, containing an account of Christ's passion and of his descent into hell. The first part of this work is also called the *Acts of Pilate*. On its worthlessness as a historical document, see Lampe, 'Trial of Jesus in *Acta Pilati*', pp. 173–182.
95. An intermediate option, at least for lines 35–47, is defended by Webb, 'Jesus Heals a Leper', pp. 177–202. Webb finds both Mark and Egerton representing compatible but independent traditions to a historical event from the life of Jesus at this juncture.
96. Cf. further D. F. Wright, 'Apocryphal Gospels', pp. 210–221; Neiryneck, 'Papyrus Egerton 2', pp. 153–160; Poirier, 'Interiority of True Religion', pp. 180–191. Pryor

Secret Gospel of Mark

In 1958, Morton Smith of Columbia University reported his discovery in the library of the Mar Saba monastery near Jerusalem of a two-and-a-half-page manuscript in the back of an edition of the genuine letters of the second-century bishop of Antioch, Ignatius. The edition was printed in 1646, and the manuscript contained a letter supposedly from Clement of Alexandria (d. AD 215). This letter, addressed to one Theodore, denounces the misrepresentation of a variant edition of the Gospel of Mark by a second-century hedonist sect known as the Carpocratians. ‘Clement’ explains that Mark wrote two gospels, one for public consumption, and a fuller version that included secret teachings intended only for initiates into ‘the great mysteries’ of the Lord. As an example of its contents, this letter proceeds to ‘quote’ Secret Mark’s account of Christ raising from the dead the brother of a woman in Bethany (Lazarus?), who is described as a youth. Because the young man who was raised so loved Jesus, six days later the Lord tells him what he should do. So the youth remains with Jesus that night, wearing nothing but a linen cloth over his naked body, as Jesus teaches him the mysteries of the kingdom of God.⁹⁷ Apparently, the Carpocratians were using this passage to support homosexual behaviour by claiming that the text referred to ‘naked man with naked man’, so that ‘Clement’ has to deny vigorously that the document contained these words. The letter breaks off with Clement just about to tell Theodore the true meaning of the secret gospel!

Because Smith did not receive permission to remove any manuscripts from the monastery, he photographed these fragments. Formal publication of his book-length studies about them would not take place for another fifteen years. The only other time the manuscript was available for viewing to biblical scholars was when it was moved to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate Library in Jerusalem and photographed again in 1976. After this, the document was allegedly misplaced and has never since been found. Nevertheless, various scholars already inclined to give more credence to non-canonical traditions than to canonical ones voiced support for Smith’s hypothesis that there really was a *Secret Gospel of Mark*, at times, even speculating that it was earlier and more

Footnote no. 96 (*cont.*)

(‘Papyrus Egerton 2 and Fourth Gospel’, pp. 1–13) finds the parallels to the Synoptics to be the product of an ongoing, independent trajectory of oral tradition but believes the papyrus to be dependent on and thus secondary to the Fourth Gospel. This still does not inspire much hope of its yielding more reliable versions of incidents than what appear in the canonical texts.

97. For full details, see M. Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*; cf. idem, *Secret Gospel*.

authentic than the canonical Mark. A majority, nevertheless, even among quite liberal traditions, remained somewhat suspicious. After all, Carpocratian ‘Christianity’ formed part of the hedonistic wing of Gnosticism, notorious for its sexual licence and other perversions of the gospel. Although ‘Clement’ believed that this gospel came from Mark and had been misinterpreted by the Gnostics, it was more likely that, if authentic, it arose in Gnostic circles from the start.⁹⁸ But lack of physical examination of any part of the manuscript for scientific dating tests left more cautious scholars sceptical about the entire story. The distinguished patristic scholar Henry Chadwick evaluated Smith’s claims with the remarks ‘marvellously implausible, delightful to read; and there is not the slightest chance that it is true’.⁹⁹

Stephen Carlson and Peter Jeffrey have now provided seemingly conclusive evidence for attributing the entire documentary fragment to Smith himself. In other words, it was an elaborate scholarly hoax. Carlson highlights odd expressions in ‘Clement’s’ wording that make perfect sense as subtle hints left by Smith that he was in fact this document’s author and provides copies of other handwritten notes in Greek by Smith showing striking similarities to the Greek orthography of ‘Clement’. Jeffrey points out various anachronisms in the document, suggesting that Smith composed it under the influence of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* and his own rejection of the sexual ethics of traditional Christianity.¹⁰⁰ Even the caustic sceptic Robert Price leans strongly in the direction of deeming *Secret Mark* a hoax, observing that Smith’s story remarkably parallels a scene from Irving Wallace’s novel *The Word*, recently released when Smith published his ‘findings’ only after the fifteen-year delay.¹⁰¹ For those who remain convinced that there was such a secret gospel, Scott Brown’s study shows that the description of its supposed contents belies any attempts to make them predate canonical Mark.¹⁰² Indeed, Brown speculates that Mark did himself later produce the longer, more spiritual Gospel to clarify earlier ambiguities.¹⁰³ A recent series of articles in *Expository Times* continues the conversation between Carlson and Brown and involves Paul Foster as a sort of

98. France, *Evidence For Jesus*, p. 83. For a report on the history and state of the discussion by 2003, see Hedrick, ‘Secret Gospel of Mark’, pp. 133–145, with responses by Stroumsa (pp. 147–153) and Ehrman (pp. 155–163).

99. Cited by Dunn, *Evidence for Jesus*, p. 52.

100. Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*; Jeffrey, *Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*.

101. Price, ‘Second Thoughts’, pp. 127–132.

102. S. G. Brown, ‘On the Composition History’, pp. 89–110.

103. S. G. Brown, *Mark’s Other Gospel*.

moderator as well.¹⁰⁴ But the days of any significant number of scholars believing in a pre-Markan, more authentic ‘Secret Gospel’ are probably past.

Gospel of Judas

A genuinely ancient document, unearthed in Egypt in the early 1970s, written in Coptic and dating to the fourth century, was finally translated into English and published in 2006. Creating a brief but animated worldwide sensation, the *Gospel of Judas* aroused as much interest as it did doubtless due to the nefarious nature of its putative author. Previous to this document’s discovery, we knew of it only from the testimony of Irenaeus in about 180 AD, who condemned it as a fabricated work of heresy from the Cainite sect of the Gnostics, and from a passing allusion attributed to Tertullian from a slightly later date. As with most of the other Gnostic ‘gospels’, we have only the barest hints of a narrative here. Most of the document juxtaposes successive scenes of Jesus disclosing secret revelation to Judas. In it, Jesus laughs at the disciples because, in worshipping Yahweh, they are following a false god! But Judas emerges as the least timid of the Twelve, so Jesus decides to teach him esoteric eschatology. Jesus appears clearly as God but not as fully human: classic Gnostic docetism. Jesus promises Judas that, although his role as betrayer will appear to leave him cursed, in the end of days he will enjoy a more exalted heavenly role than the rest of Jesus’ followers.¹⁰⁵

Among recent scholars, few have delighted to promote the fanciful hypothesis that orthodox Christianity is little more than the ‘winning side’ in ancient theological and political controversies as much as Bart Ehrman. Thus Ehrman’s ‘additional commentary’, appended to the English translation of Judas, speaks of this Gospel’s ‘exclusion’ from Scripture (as if someone had actually put it forward as a candidate for inclusion) and of its ‘damning portrayal not only of Jesus’ disciples, but also of the proto-orthodox Christians living at the time the Gospel of Judas was produced’. This censure stemmed from their frustration as ‘one of the competing groups in Christianity’, which orthodoxy ‘succeeded in overwhelming’.¹⁰⁶ All this makes it sound as if there were equally viable interpretations of the historical Jesus from the outset of the Christian faith, competing for adherents, until one bullied all the others into submission.

104. See Foster, ‘*Secret Mark*’, pp. 46–52; S. G. Brown, ‘Reply to Stephen Carlson’, pp. 144–149; and Carlson, ‘Reply to Scott Brown’, pp. 185–188. Cf. also S. G. Brown, ‘Question of Motive’, pp. 351–383.

105. For the full text in English, see Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, *Gospel of Judas*, pp. 19–45.

106. Ehrman, ‘Christianity Turned on Its Head’, pp. 91, 103, 114, 118.

Nothing could be further from the truth. At most, the first century discloses only precursors to Gnosticism (what scholars often call incipient or proto-Gnosticism). Full-blown anti-Semitism of the form found in a variety of second-century writings, and particularly Gnostic ones, does not yet emerge, nor are docetic circles the places in which to look for more reliable information about the *human* Jesus. There have been political manoeuvrings, to be sure, as well as theological controversies in every century of church history. But Gnostic thought took Greek philosophy and mixed in Christian concepts in such a way that a work like the *Gospel of Judas* is parasitic or dependent on Christianity for its combination of claims. The proper way to ask the historical question is why a handful of late second-century individuals, wanting to retain the title 'Christian', rejected so much of previous tradition and practice, not why orthodox believers suppressed 'heresy', as if the latter had preceded the former. The vast majority of biblical scholars quickly conceded that there was nothing about the historical Jesus or his followers to be learned from the *Gospel of Judas* and nothing as old or reliable as what is found in the canonical texts.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

After widely scanning a broad panorama of ancient sources outside the New Testament, little has been uncovered that impinges on the historical reliability of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The probability that any of the extra-biblical sources preserve accurate information, otherwise unknown, about the life and teaching of Jesus is very slight, apart from the possibility of a few unparalleled sayings surviving.¹⁰⁸ Where information parallels the four Gospels and where no obviously sectarian theology has intruded into the texts, one is amazed at how faithfully the wording matches that of Scripture. There are variations to be sure, often due to the flexibility of oral tradition, but the substance usually remains unchanged. Perhaps the most significant observation relates to what does not appear. There is scarcely any evidence to support the contention that anyone in the early church put forward their teachings, inspired by the risen Lord, as sayings of the pre-Easter Jesus. Even the more outlandish Gnostic sayings and dialogues are explicitly claimed to be revelations of Jesus to his

107. Including Kasser, Meyers and Wurst, in their respective chapters, *Gospel of Judas*.

For two entire books further demonstrating this conclusion, see N. T. Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus*; and Porter and Heath, *Lost Gospel of Judas*.

108. For a detailed survey of virtually all the known sayings attributed to Jesus in ancient non-canonical documents, see Charlesworth and Evans ('Jesus in the Agrapha and the Apocryphal Gospels'), who come to similar conclusions.

disciples after his resurrection. It would seem that anyone who wished to augment or challenge the canonical traditions knew that the latter's historicity could not be impugned; all one could hope to do was to claim additional knowledge that went beyond what the New Testament had recorded. Even then, it seems that few in the ancient world were convinced by the new claims, apart from the sects supporting them. That anyone should give greater credence to the apocrypha today in a more sceptical age proves highly incongruous.¹⁰⁹

More recent fiction concerning Christian origins merits even less credence. The so-called *Gospel of Barnabas* is a medieval or Renaissance-era composition teaching all kinds of explicit Islamic doctrine and even contradicting the Qur'an in places (in, e.g., denying Jesus' Messiahship).¹¹⁰ In still more recent centuries, works have been pawned off on unsuspecting publics purporting to tell how Jesus actually travelled to India to study with Hindu or Buddhist sages, or how he came from outer space as an alien to teach humanity 'new age' doctrine. More orthodox texts purport to disclose never-before-seen records of the Jewish or Roman leaders who participated in the proceedings against Jesus (most notably in a collection of works called *The Archko Volume*). The Book of Mormon addresses a particularly pressing theological issue of the early nineteenth-century (the question of whether native Americans had any chance to hear and respond to the gospel before the European conquerors/settlers arrived) by narrating an appearance of Jesus to the 'Indians' in the New World. Per Beskow helpfully discusses these and similar stories, disclosing what can in fact be known about their origins, in his helpful work *Strange Tales about Jesus: A Survey of Unfamiliar Gospels* (1983).¹¹¹ But again, if one is inclined to argue that the New Testament Gospels at times yield inadequate historical corroboration, then consistency demands that these later, wholly unsubstantiated accounts be given no historical credence whatsoever.

The Jesus-tradition in Acts–Revelation

It has been argued that good reasons existed for non-Christian writers in the ancient world not to say more than they did about Jesus. It is not surprising

109. Cf. further Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*. Contra esp. the various works of Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels.

110. See esp. Leirvik, 'History as a Literary weapon', pp. 4–26; cf. Joosten, 'Gospel of Barnabas', pp. 73–96.

111. Cf. Groothuis, *Jesus in an Age of Controversy*, esp. pp. 64–214.

that sectarian Christians, wishing to dispute the growing consensus as to what was ‘orthodoxy’, should play down or distort the authentic teachings of Christ. One might have expected a more evenly distributed use of the Gospel traditions by the Apostolic Fathers, with Matthew and his sources less dominant. Yet Matthew’s Gospel was by far the most popular of the Gospels in the early church, because it included so many of Jesus’ famous sermons, his teachings about the church and its worldwide mission, and frequent quotations and links with the Old Testament.

When one turns to the final topic for consideration in this chapter (the Gospel traditions in Acts, the Epistles and Revelation) a much more remarkable phenomenon occurs: the rest of the New Testament only rarely quotes an explicit teaching of Jesus or refers back to some incident in his life, apart from the complex of events surrounding his death and resurrection.¹¹² Surely if all that the Gospels relate is historically accurate, the writers of the Epistles, the Acts and the Apocalypse would include more evidence to corroborate the Gospels’ testimony. It is little wonder, then, that some question the age and reliability of that testimony. On the other hand, the paucity of corroborating evidence is often overstated. If there are few direct quotations from the

112. As noted below, one (but only one) unambiguously new saying of Jesus from his earthly life appears in Acts 20:35: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ Codex Bezae (abbreviated as D) after Luke 6:10 adds another new saying, one that many scholars believe may be authentic even if it was not in what Luke originally wrote: ‘When on the same day he saw a man doing work on the Sabbath, he said to him, “Man! If you know what you are doing, you are blessed! But if you do not know it, you are accursed and a transgressor of the law.”’ See Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels*, pp. 9–10, 20. The famous story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11) does not appear in almost all the oldest and most reliable manuscripts. Later manuscripts that do contain it sometimes copy only a portion of it, asterisk it or add marginal notes representing doubts about its authenticity or inset it after John 7:36, at the end of the Gospel or even in Luke’s Gospel, after either 21:38 or 24:53. All this makes it extraordinarily unlikely that it was something John himself wrote. But the story satisfies many of the criteria of authenticity, so it may well be something Jesus actually did, preserved in the oral tradition, and eventually added by scribes in various formats and locations. See esp. Burge, ‘Special Problem’, pp. 141–148. On the other hand, the longer ending of Mark (16:9–20) is not only most likely *not* how Mark originally concluded his Gospel, but probably also a mixture of fact and fiction. The most suspect is that portion of v. 18 that promises that believers will handle snakes and drink their venom without being harmed.

Gospel tradition, there are numerous allusions. And there are probably very good reasons why these other New Testament documents do not refer back to Jesus' earthly life more often than they do.

The Acts of the Apostles

In Acts, nearly every sermon of Peter, Stephen, Philip or Paul refers to Jesus of Nazareth. But the events of his life, if mentioned at all, are summarized very briefly, with attention concentrating on his death and resurrection. This pattern of early Christian preaching provided the model followed throughout the rest of the New Testament. With the flourish of a rhetorical hyperbole, Paul can go so far as to say that in Corinth he determined to 'know nothing' among them 'except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2). The reason for this concentration is easy to discover: Christians believed that apart from his sacrificial death, Jesus' life would have no permanent significance. Yet, in at least three places in the book of Acts, Luke can refer to further details. In 13:24–25, he recounts Paul's reference to John the Baptist in his sermon in Antioch and recalls the specific teaching of John about his unworthiness even to untie the sandals of the one coming after him (cf. Luke 3:16 pars.). In 20:35, Luke relates how Paul quoted to the Ephesian elders an otherwise unknown saying of Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'¹¹³ In more detail, 10:36–41 includes among the words of Peter to Cornelius and his friends this summary of Jesus' life:

You know the word which he [God] sent to the sons of Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), the word which came to all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: Jesus of Nazareth – as God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of everything that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem, who also killed him by hanging him on a tree. This man God raised up on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to witnesses who

113. Witherington (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 626) observes that the variant form of this saying in *1 Clement* 2.1 could support authenticity, by the criterion of multiple attestation, as could its 'sapiential' form (cf. Sirach 4:31). Walton (*Leadership and Lifestyle*, p. 179) highlights the parallel language and usage of the Jesus-tradition in Acts 20:35 as in the undisputed Pauline epistle of 1 Thessalonians (4:16–17). Though he is not dealing with the question of authenticity, the similar usage certainly supports it.

were previously selected by God – to us – who ate and drank together with him after he rose from the dead.

In an influential little book, C. H. Dodd suggested that this outline of the life of Christ provided the framework for the narrative of the first Gospel writer, Mark, which Luke in turn followed.¹¹⁴ Whether or not the link is this close, this excerpt of early Christian preaching at the very least shows that Luke believed that the church knew and taught more about Jesus' life than his abbreviated, summary statements might otherwise suggest. More importantly, Luke also wrote a Gospel. Herein lies the fatal flaw in the argument that the silence of the rest of the New Testament proves that its writers knew little about the details of Jesus' life. Whatever may be surmised about the other New Testament authors, one cannot escape the fact that the author of Acts also penned a Gospel. Luke knew all manner of information about Jesus but chose not to repeat it in his history of the life of the early church. That was not his purpose. Early Christian preaching dwelt at length on topics Acts omits or treats in barest outline form, and Luke had no need to repeat them because he had already recorded them in his first volume. The argument from the silence of Acts collapses after only momentary probing.¹¹⁵ The lack of reference to Jesus' teaching to solve some of the major controversies narrated in Acts further supports the conservative nature of the Jesus-tradition. Solving issues like the role of the Law, and especially circumcision, among Gentile Christians without recourse to teachings of Jesus suggests that the first Christians knew of no such teachings and did not feel free to invent any (recall above, p. 63).¹¹⁶

The epistles of Paul

Paul too undoubtedly knew much more of the Jesus-tradition than his epistles reflect. All his letters address communities or individuals who had already learned about Jesus; Paul's purpose in writing was not to retell the gospel story but to elaborate on key theological and ethical matters and to counter the opposition he faced in various places. As Martin Hengel puts it, 'In the ancient world it was impossible to proclaim as Son of God and redeemer of the world a man who had died on the cross . . . without giving a clear account of his activity, his

114. Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, esp. pp. 54–56. Cf. Bruce, *Book of the Acts*, pp. 212–213.

115. For thorough discussion, cf. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 67–85, 113. More generally, cf. Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, pp. 25–88.

116. Cf. esp. Strange, 'Jesus-Tradition in Acts', pp. 59–74.

suffering and his death.¹¹⁷ But this had already happened; now Paul was moving on to further considerations. Moreover, if Paul had been writing to those who had not heard the gospel message, it is doubtful if an epistle would have been the vehicle by which he would have conveyed detailed information about Jesus' life. The evidence already discussed in this and previous chapters suggests that this information was passed along orally in relatively fixed and memorable form.¹¹⁸ On almost any theory of the composition of the Johannine literature, it is typically agreed that the epistle of John came later than the Fourth Gospel and was written by someone who had full knowledge of the Gospel, yet one finds no quotations or even unambiguous allusions to Jesus' words in 1, 2 or 3 John. Nor do the standard proposals for the various sources preceding the Gospel suggest that any of them took the form of a letter. The genres of epistle and Gospel must thus be distinguished one from the other.¹¹⁹

While one must therefore not expect abundant quotations of Jesus in the epistles, neither must the extent to which the Jesus-tradition has permeated them be underestimated. Paul in fact displays a fairly detailed knowledge of the Gospel traditions if one reads him carefully. And because most, if not all, of Paul's letters predate the composition of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the awareness of these details is a significant confirmation of the early existence of the traditions that went into the formation of the Gospels. A summary of the biographical information about Jesus that can be pieced together from the Pauline epistles would include his descent from Abraham and David (Gal. 3:16; Rom. 1:3), having a brother named James (1 Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19); upbringing in the Jewish law (Gal. 4:4); gathering disciples, including Cephas (Peter) and John; impeccable character and exemplary life (e.g. Phil. 2:6–8; 2 Cor. 8:9; Rom. 15:3, 8); Last Supper and betrayal (1 Cor. 11:23–25); and numerous details surrounding his death and resurrection (e.g. Gal. 3:1; 1 Thess. 2:15; 1 Cor. 15:4–8).¹²⁰ More widespread are signs of a fairly detailed knowledge of the teachings of Jesus, especially in Romans, 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians.

117. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, pp. 43–44.

118. With respect to Paul's access to this tradition, often perhaps collective and/or liturgical in nature, see Keightley, 'Christian Collective Memory', pp. 129–150.

119. Stuhlmacher, 'Theme: Gospel and Gospels', pp. 18–19. Cf. further Blomberg, *Making Sense*, pp. 84–88.

120. Cf. S. E. Porter, 'Images of Christ', pp. 98–99. See also Arnold, 'Relationship of Paul to Jesus', pp. 256–288. For additional possible allusions, see Blomberg, *Making Sense*, pp. 82–84, and the literature there cited.

Romans

After a systematic presentation of the theology of the Christian gospel in chapters 1–11 of his epistle to the Romans, Paul turns his attention to the ethical implications of that theology. Chapters 12–16 thus contain numerous commands, several of which are similar enough to passages in the Gospels to allow one to conclude that they probably come from the traditions or sources that supplied the Evangelists with their material as well. Romans 12:14 commands one to ‘Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse’ (cf. Luke 6:27b–28a par.); 12:17, ‘Do not repay anyone evil for evil’ (cf. Matt. 5:39); and 13:7, ‘If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour’ (cf. Mark 12:17 pars.). In 13:8–9, Paul sums up the whole of the Law in the commandment to love one’s neighbour (cf. Gal. 5:14; Mark 12:31 pars.); in 14:10, he condemns judging one’s brother because all will be judged (cf. Matt. 7:1–2a par.); and in 14:14, he declares, ‘I am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean by itself’ (cf. Luke 11:41; Mark 7:19b). Finally, in 16:19, he encourages wisdom concerning the good and innocence as to evil, an apparent allusion to Matthew 10:16b.

Commentators disagree as to which of these allusions most probably derive directly from the Gospel tradition rather than from sayings of other ancient Christian and non-Christian teachers, a disagreement that recurs in studies of the rest of the epistles and Revelation. But nearly all agree that at least some of these allusions disclose Paul’s dependence on the tradition, and some would make the list noticeably longer.¹²¹ And even where apparent parallels occur in other religious literature, including the Old Testament, it is still a priori likely that Christian writers would have derived their information most directly from Christ’s teachings. Paul’s vigorous exposition of his independence from the Jerusalem apostles during the earliest stages of his Christian life (Gal. 1–2) makes him no exception, since he elsewhere makes explicit his indebtedness to the tradition (1 Cor. 15:3–7).¹²² His need to demonstrate the authority he received directly from God, however, does offer another explanation for the comparatively few references he makes to the Jesus-tradition regularly circulating in other apostolic circles.

121. The fullest study is M. B. Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*.

122. Galatians 1–2 in fact implies a fundamental agreement between Peter and Paul, since their dispute was not over the contents of the Gospel tradition but over its application. This provides, according to Ridderbos (*Paul and Jesus*, p. 52), ‘one of the most powerful counter arguments against the opinion that Paul introduced an entirely new proclamation of Jesus as the Christ’.

It is possible to say even more about the allusions in Romans. David Wenham has noted that Romans 12:17–20 actually contains several phrases reminiscent of the teaching of Jesus (all from the Sermon on the Mount/Plain and in the order in which they occur in Matt. 5:38–43) not to return evil for evil, to live at peace with all, to take no revenge and to feed/love one's enemy. The command in 12:14 to bless one's persecutors, however, more closely parallels Luke's version of the sermon (Luke 6:27b–28a). Wenham therefore suggests that Paul knew of at least this portion of Jesus' sermon as a connected account, which formed one of the sources for Matthew's and Luke's later Gospel-writing activity. That source could even have been Q. This evidence would then call into question the view that the individual verses of the sermon all 'floated' in the oral tradition independent of each other and were only assembled artificially by the Evangelists at a later date.¹²³

1 Corinthians

Three of Paul's four explicit quotations of Jesus occur in this epistle, perhaps because it devotes more attention to issues of practical theology and to ethical disputes than do the rest of his letters. In 1 Corinthians 7:10, Paul supports his views on marriage and divorce by giving the charge '(not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife'. Later in the same chapter he gives commands to partners in mixed marriages, speaking as 'I, not the Lord' (7:12), while nevertheless affirming that what he says comes from the Spirit of God (7:40). Although some have tried to distinguish between different levels of inspiration or forms of revelation,¹²⁴ the most natural way of interpreting this passage is to understand Paul to be quoting a teaching of the historical Jesus when he refers to 'the Lord'. On some issues Paul knows no tradition on the topic and so must depend on less mediated guidance. Because there are several Synoptic passages that contain instructions closely paralleled by 1 Corinthians 7:10 (Mark 10:10–12 pars.), but none that mirrors verse 12, this interpretation seems

123. D. Wenham, 'Paul's Use of the Jesus Tradition', in Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5, pp. 15–24.

124. One of the most innovative and well reasoned of these approaches is found in Richardson ('"I Say, Not the Lord"', pp. 65–86), who sees the word of 'the Lord' as referring to established Christian practice and Paul's 'I' as his own principles developed from that practice. But see Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 519–527.

preferable.¹²⁵ In that event, there once again emerges powerful confirmation of the care with which the first Christians distinguished the words of the historical Jesus from later instructions inspired by his Spirit.¹²⁶

In 1 Corinthians 9:14, Paul refers to another saying of Jesus as part of his argument that the full-time Christian minister should receive pay for his services: 'In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.' The past tense, 'commanded', points even more clearly than the present tense verbs of chapter 7 to a word from the Gospel tradition: 'workers deserve their wages' (Luke 10:7; cf. Matt. 10:10). Paul at times refuses to avail himself of this privilege of receiving financial support, since Jesus' original saying is not phrased as an absolute imperative but as a matter-of-fact statement of what the ministry of the gospel is worth.¹²⁷ But Paul charitably insists on it with respect to others.

Of great interest is the recurrence of Luke 10:7 in 1 Timothy 5:18, where it is cited along with an Old Testament text (Deut. 25:4). The two quotations are introduced with the formula 'for the Scripture says . . .' In view of the reluctance of the Apostolic Fathers even in the second century to refer explicitly to New Testament quotations as Scripture, this juxtaposition is astonishing, all the more so if, as seems quite possible, Paul himself wrote 1 Timothy.¹²⁸ In that case, the letter would have been written in the early or mid-60s of the first

125. For a detailed consideration of how the pre-Synoptic traditions may have been phrased, see D. Wenham, 'Paul's Use of the Jesus Tradition', pp. 7–15. Cf.

Catchpole, 'Synoptic Divorce Material', pp. 92–127.

126. Dungan (*Sayings of Jesus*, p. 92) argues that while Paul relied on a traditional saying of Jesus, he felt free to disregard it, because he added the more lenient, unparalleled clause 'but if she does [divorce]'. This entirely misunderstands Paul's remarks. He is not granting permission to divorce, but dealing with what should happen if someone disregards, or has already disregarded, his first command. It is possible too that he is thinking of the legitimate exception by which Christ permits divorce in the case of adultery (Matt. 19:9; 5:32), and this would further confirm his knowledge of the details of Jesus' teaching. Cf. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, p. 282.

127. Dungan (*Sayings of Jesus*, p. 25) again argues, without warrant, that Paul feels free to set aside a direct command of the Lord. But see Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 692–698.

128. Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus) is widely disputed. But see the detailed defence in L. T. Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, pp. 55–90. Cf. Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, pp. 9–26; W. D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, pp. cxviii–cxxxix; and Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, pp. 21–52.

century, just a few years after the completion of the Gospel of Luke.¹²⁹ Not surprisingly, most commentators of all theological persuasions offer alternate explanations: perhaps ‘Scripture’ (*graphē*) should be translated simply as ‘writing’, perhaps it refers only to the Old Testament quotation, or perhaps a Q-like source gained an authority equal to that of the Old Testament in certain early Christian circles. But serious problems beset each of these alternatives and none is easily deduced from the text itself. If Paul and Luke were close companions, why might Paul not have known of his friend’s Gospel and recognized its inspired nature quite soon after it appeared, even if the church as a whole did not embrace this view as quickly?¹³⁰ Regardless of the explanation chosen, one is a long way from the view that the rest of the New Testament does not know of or substantiate the Gospel traditions, though here it would be the final form of Luke on which Paul relied rather than the pre-Synoptic oral tradition.¹³¹

The third quotation of a Synoptic-like passage in 1 Corinthians is clearest of all. In his discussion of the Corinthian abuses of the Lord’s Supper, Paul enunciates what have become known in Christian liturgy as the ‘words of institution’ (1 Cor. 11:23–25). They read:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread, and after he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Keep on doing this in my remembrance.’ Likewise also the cup, after eating supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Keep on doing this, as often as you drink, in my remembrance.’

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129. Luke and Acts fit together so well that most scholars assume they were composed within a short time of each other. But Acts covers events up to approximately 62 AD, so Luke was probably not written much before then. Many scholars hold that both Luke and Acts were written much later, in which case 1 Timothy could not be citing Luke, unless it too was written later. But in that case, Paul could not have written 1 Timothy, since he died in the mid-to-late 60s. These latter alternatives are overall less convincing.
130. This becomes even more probable if Paul used Luke as his amanuensis for 1 Timothy and gave him freedom to write a certain amount of the material in his own style, as argued, most recently, by Witherington, *Letters and Homilies*, vol. 1, pp. 49–75. Witherington, however, does not appear to take ‘Scripture’ as referring to more than 1 Tim. 5:18a.
131. For the various options, see W. D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 311. For the view proposed here, cf. Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 234.

These words are almost entirely paralleled in the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper (Mark 14:22–24; Matt. 26:26–28; Luke 22:19–20), and a number of expressions parallel Luke where he differs from Matthew and Mark; for example, ‘which is for you’, ‘keep on doing this in my remembrance’, ‘after eating supper’, ‘cup’, and ‘in my blood’. This demonstrates that Luke’s variations do not stem from his own creative modification of the tradition but from older sources to which Paul also had access. Confidence in their authenticity is thus similarly strengthened.¹³²

In addition to these explicit quotations, 1 Corinthians contains a number of apparent allusions to teachings of Jesus,¹³³ but none are as clear cut as the allusions in Romans. 1 Corinthians 13:2, on faith moving mountains, might well hark back to the tradition behind Mark 11:23 and parallels. A number of Paul’s metaphors (the stumbling block, the faithful steward, the good foundation, the sower, and the leaven) could easily have originated from Jesus’ own use of such imagery, especially in his parables, but none is certain.¹³⁴ What is certain is that there were plenty of controversies that Paul would doubtless have liked to have been able to settle by means of an authoritative teaching of Jesus but did not: the correct use of spiritual gifts, the role of women in the church or the problem of meat sacrificed to idols. Apparently, the church knew of no Jesus-traditions on these topics and did not feel free to invent any.

1 Thessalonians

While Romans and 1 Corinthians were written in the mid-to-late 50s, the Thessalonian epistles probably stem from the first year or two of that decade. Depending on when Galatians is dated, 1 Thessalonians is either the oldest or second oldest of the Pauline epistles. Paul’s knowledge of the words of Jesus this early in his literary career therefore reflects the state of the Gospel tradition only twenty years after Christ’s death. Interestingly, 1 Thessalonians has several apparent references to that tradition.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16, Paul compares the persecution the Thessalonian Christians endured with that of the Judean Christians at the hands of

132. For more detail, including a discussion of the important textual variants in the Lucan passage, see esp. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord’s Supper*, pp. 30–56. Cf. B. D. Smith, ‘More Original Form’, pp. 166–186.

133. For a survey of their relative merits, see Richardson and Gooch, ‘Logia of Jesus’, pp. 39–62.

134. See the (too?) full discussion of possible allusions in Fjärstadt, *Synoptic Tradition in 1 Corinthians*.

their kinsfolk who executed Christ. These verses contain numerous echoes of Matthew 23:29–38, Jesus' woeful invective against the Jewish leaders shortly before his execution. Most noteworthy are the parallel phrases about persecuting and killing the prophets in times past, about filling up the measure of Israel's sins, and about the wrath that has come upon her at last. Strictly speaking, these details are unnecessary elaborations of the point Paul is making, but they would make good sense if he were simply rounding off a reference to the teaching of Jesus that he knew.¹³⁵

In 4:15–5:4, even clearer parallels emerge. Paul introduces his description of the return of Christ in 4:16–17 as 'the word of the Lord' (v. 15). No single connected passage in the Gospels parallels all this teaching, so some commentators attribute it to later Christian prophecy or revelation. But most of the details find a parallel of some sort in Jesus' eschatological discourse (Mark 13 par.), so it is possible that Paul derived his imagery from that source. In 5:2–4, the double reference to the day of the Lord coming like a thief in the night almost certainly harks back to Jesus' parable of the thief (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39), because this imagery appears nowhere else in earlier sources.¹³⁶ Numerous other passages in both letters to the Thessalonians also contain reminiscences of the Synoptic apocalypse. David Wenham notes how these parallels appear not only in that part of the discourse that all three Synoptics share but also in sections peculiar to Matthew. Wenham consequently employs this observation in his larger argument that Paul must have known a unified, pre-Synoptic version of this sermon of Jesus, which included more detail than is found in any one of the Gospels as they now appear (see pp. 183–185).¹³⁷ As with the parallels in Romans to the Sermon on the Mount, this evidence seems to contradict the pure form-critical hypothesis of disconnected teachings of Jesus circulating for a long time before being artificially grouped together by the later church.

Conclusion

The evidence from the rest of Paul's letters proves more ambiguous. Does the language of Paul's description of his conversion ('not by flesh and blood') and of his dispute with Peter (whom he otherwise calls Cephas) in Galatians 1–2 reflect a knowledge of Peter's apostolic commission in Matthew 16:17–18?

135. Cf. further D. Wenham, 'Paul and the Synoptic Apocalypse', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2, pp. 361–363.

136. Cf. S. Kim, 'Jesus Tradition in 1 Thess 4.13–5.11', pp. 225–242.

137. D. Wenham, 'Paul and the Synoptic Apocalypse', pp. 345–375; cf. also his *Rediscovery of Jesus' Eschatological Discourse*, pp. 54–55, 176–180, 295–296, 351–352.

Does the reference to Peter, James and John as ‘pillars’ (literally, the ‘ones standing’) allude to their distinctive role in the transfiguration (cf. Mark 9:1 pars.)?¹³⁸ Does the ‘law of Christ’ (Gal. 6:2) refer to a collection of Jesus’ teachings that had become authoritative for the early church?¹³⁹ Do the frequent references in 2 Corinthians to the poor and to humility, almsgiving and forgiveness betray familiarity with the details of Christ’s very human concern for the outcasts of his society?¹⁴⁰ These and many other suggested allusions are all plausible, but none is demonstrable. When one adds broader theological and conceptual parallels between Jesus and Paul, it is possible to write entire books on the similarities between the two men. In recent years, the best and most thorough of these has been David Wenham’s *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (1995).¹⁴¹ There is no question that the number of parallels can be exaggerated,¹⁴² but gone are the days in which scholars can declare with any credibility that Paul knew little or nothing of the Jesus-tradition.¹⁴³

Perhaps the most spectacular example of Paul’s early familiarity with the historical Jesus appears in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7, with his knowledge of Jesus’ death and resurrection in the ‘creed’ that he would have been taught as basic Christian catechesis shortly after his conversion, and thus within about two years of the events themselves (see above, pp. 147–148). Whatever the precise number of additional Pauline parallels to the Gospels, one may heartily endorse the conclusion of a systematic survey of the problem by Dale Allison: ‘the persistent conviction that Paul knew next to nothing of the teaching of Jesus must be rejected’.¹⁴⁴ What is more, as Allison also argues, it is likely that

138. So Wenham and Moses, ‘There Are Some Standing Here . . .’, pp. 146–163.

139. See esp. the influential article of Dodd, ‘*Ennomos Christou*’, pp. 134–148. Cf. Brinsmead (*Galatians – Dialogical Response to Opponents*, pp. 174–175), who develops the view that Gal. 5–6 is an exposition of the law of Christ with reference to the traditions behind Matt. 22:34–40; 18:15–20; 11:28–30.

140. Tasker, ‘St Paul and Earthly Life’, pp. 557–562.

141. Cf. also D. Wenham, *Paul and Jesus*.

142. As may perhaps be the case with a few of the thirty-one items listed in S. Kim, ‘Jesus, Sayings of’, p. 481.

143. Of course, that never stops incredible claims. Cf., e.g., throughout Lüdemann, *Paul: Founder of Christianity*.

144. Allison, ‘Pauline Epistles and Synoptic Gospels’, p. 25. D. M. Stanley (‘Significance for Paul’, pp. 279–288) argues that the more one admits the validity of form- and redaction-critical findings about the flexibility of the wording of the Gospel traditions in the early church, the more likely Paul’s terminology reflects those

Paul knew connected blocks of Jesus' teaching, including most probably the traditions behind Jesus' great sermon (esp. Luke 6:27–38), his missionary instructions (Mark 6:6b–13 pars.), the teaching on discipleship (Mark 9:33–50 pars.), and portions of the narrative of the last week of Jesus' life.¹⁴⁵ The Gospel narratives were already beginning to take shape and become widely known when Paul was writing. They were scarcely the product of well-meaning Christians too far removed from the original events to know what Jesus actually said and did.¹⁴⁶

The rest of the New Testament

Of the remaining New Testament writings, the three that have most often been searched in the hope of gleaning allusions to the Gospel tradition are James, 1 Peter and Revelation.

Epistle of James

Of all the New Testament epistles, none contains as many passages that verbally resemble the teaching of Jesus as does James. One need look no further than the first main paragraph of his letter to observe a pattern of allusions that remains constant throughout the work. 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds' (1:2; cf. Matt. 5:11–12 ['Blessed are you when people insult you . . . Rejoice and be glad'] and Luke 6:23); 'that you may be mature and complete' (1:4; cf. Matt. 5:48 ['that you may be mature and complete']); 'you should ask God, who gives generously to all . . . and it will be given to you' (1:5; cf. Matt. 7:7 ['ask and it will be given to you'] and Luke 11:9); 'But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt' (1:6; cf. Matt. 21:21 ['if you have faith and do not doubt'] and Mark 11:23). These allusions embrace all three of Matthew's main sources, Mark, Q and M, and three of the four come from the Sermon on the Mount/Plain. Both of these trends continue throughout the rest of the epistle.

As a result, many scholars have argued that James must have known the canonical Gospels, or at least Matthew. But there are good reasons for dating James very early, in the mid-to-late 40s, making it the earliest of all the New

Footnote no. 143 (*cont.*)

traditions even when it does not verbally parallel the Gospels. Cf. also M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal*, p. 41: 'We should not imagine that we can convert our ignorance of the extent of Paul's knowledge into a knowledge of the extent of his ignorance.'

145. Allison, 'Pauline Epistles and Synoptic Gospels', pp. 10–17.

146. Cf. also N. H. Taylor, 'Paul and the Historical Jesus Quest', pp. 105–126.

Testament writings.¹⁴⁷ If this dating is correct, then the allusions to Jesus' teaching afford the most abundant and convincing evidence so far considered that the Gospel traditions were known and applied very soon and very widely in fledgling Christianity. James's form of the Jesus-tradition proves consistently closer to what scholars generally label the Q-form of the material unique to Matthew and Luke, rather than to Matthean or Lucan redactional distinctives of those sayings, further suggesting that James predates the written form of the Synoptics.¹⁴⁸ The oral transmission was fluid enough to permit variations in phraseology but the meaning was not distorted. That this letter is couched in the form of wisdom literature means that its author functions as a sage, and 'the role of a sage is to express *as his own wisdom in his own formulation* the wisdom he has gained from his intensive study of the tradition'.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, Peter Davids argues persuasively that the allusions to Jesus' teaching form the backbone around which James's entire epistle is structured. Thus Jesus' words were not only carefully preserved but commanded great respect, playing a central and authoritative role in the life of the early church.¹⁵⁰

1 Peter

Echoes of the Gospel tradition in 1 Peter are not nearly as clear as in James, but there is no lack of candidates for the label 'allusion'. Robert Gundry and Merrill Tenney both produced impressive lists.¹⁵¹ Ernest Best, on the other hand, challenged the significance of such lists, arguing that almost all the proposed allusions could be accounted for in other ways; for example, as ethical traditions that Christians shared with Jewish or Graeco-Roman sources, early catechisms or creeds, or liturgy used in worship.¹⁵² Gerhard Maier catalogued this debate

147. See esp. Davids, *Epistle of James*, pp. 2–22. Cf. Hartin, *James and the Q T Sayings of Jesus*, p. 240 *et passim*; Moo, *Letter of James*, pp. 25–27.

148. Wachob and Johnson, 'Sayings of Jesus', pp. 431–450; repr. in L. T. Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God*, pp. 136–154.

149. Bauckham, 'James and Jesus', p. 114.

150. Davids, 'James and Jesus', in Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5, pp. 63–84. For a chart of parallels, see pp. 66–67. A more exhaustive but probably exaggerated list appears in Mayor, *Epistle of St James*, pp. lxxxv–xc. For a discussion of the theological and conceptual similarities between James and the Sermon on the Mount, see V. V. Porter, Jr., 'Sermon on the Mount', pp. 344–360, 470–482.

151. Gundry, "'Verba Christi" in 1 Peter', pp. 336–350; cf. idem, 'Further Verba in Verba Christi', pp. 211–232. Tenney, 'Some Possible Parallels', pp. 370–377.

152. Best, '1 Peter', pp. 95–113. Cf. Elliott, *1 Peter*, p. 25.

and favoured Peter's more direct dependence on the Jesus-tradition. For Maier, what is most significant is that several of the apparent allusions refer back to John's Gospel as well as to the Synoptics; for example, being born anew in 1 Peter 1:2 (cf. John 3:3); loving Jesus without having seen him in 1:8 (cf. John 20:29); or being called out of darkness into light in 2:9 (cf. John 8:12).¹⁵³ But many of the allusions Maier perceived reappear regularly in ancient writings, so it would be wise in this instance not to make too much of the similarities.¹⁵⁴ Peter Davids may have captured the correct balance when he concludes, 'What we have in 1 Peter is a person who has absorbed [his] teacher [i.e. Jesus] and breathes his teachings naturally into his writing.'¹⁵⁵

Book of Revelation

That Revelation relies heavily on Old Testament imagery for its many visions and symbols is universally accepted. Not as widely noticed are its parallels to New Testament books, including the Gospels. Louis A. Vos, in *The Synoptic Traditions in the Apocalypse* (1965), identified twenty-five passages in Revelation that he believed demonstrate knowledge of the traditions incorporated into Matthew, Mark and Luke. G. K. Beale argues that Revelation's use of the famous 'Son of man' passage in Daniel 7 is more extensive than is usually recognized and was inspired by Jesus' own use of that Scripture in his eschatological discourse.¹⁵⁶ Regardless of the date of the composition of Revelation, which might well be late enough to allow its author to know of the Synoptic Gospels in their final form, Vos and Beale believe that the wording of the Gospel traditions in Revelation betrays a pre-Synoptic origin. As with the debate on the Jesus-tradition in 1 Peter, the arguments on both sides seem too evenly balanced to yield a confident verdict one way or the other. Tellingly, in the most detailed section on source criticism in a Revelation commentary in nearly a century, David Aune devotes no discrete subsection to the possible influence of the Jesus-tradition at all.¹⁵⁷

153. G. Maier, 'Jesustradition im 1. Petrusbrief?', in Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5, pp. 85–128.

154. The analyses of the description of the transfiguration of Jesus in 2 Pet. 1:16–18 prove similarly inconclusive. Bauckham (*Jude, 2 Peter*, pp. 205–212) argues for literary independence from the Synoptic tradition; R. J. Miller ('Independent Attestation?', pp. 620–625), for dependence.

155. Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, p. 27.

156. Beale, 'Use of Daniel', pp. 129–153; cf. also idem, *Use of Daniel*.

157. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, pp. cv–cxxxiv.

Conclusion

A vast terrain has been covered in surveying the whole of the New Testament outside the Gospels, the most relevant of the other earliest Christian writings, and Jewish and Graeco-Roman traditions about Jesus as well. Each of the issues introduced poses unsolved questions for further investigation. The data of the Gospels themselves, on which the rest of the book has focused, have been much more carefully scrutinized than most of the collateral areas covered in this chapter. One may well wonder, even after this whirlwind tour of the evidence for the Jesus-tradition outside the Gospels, why more was not recorded about the details of Christ's earthly life. Imagining the influence of that tradition where it does not exist will not help. But many genuine references do exist and their significance must not be minimized. In the words of the French scholar F. Prat, 'C'est peu et c'est beaucoup' (It is, at one and the same time, little and much).¹⁵⁸ The external evidence for the Gospel traditions reinforces the confidence in their historical reliability, which the internal evidence has been building in previous chapters.

158. Cited, endorsed and elaborated by M. J. Harris, 'References to Jesus', pp. 343, 356–360.

7. FINAL QUESTIONS ON HISTORICAL METHOD

Many readers assume that the Gospels narrate historical events simply because they read as if their authors are attempting to recount things that actually happened. The narratives are vivid but uncluttered, full of incidental details, ordinary people and psychological realism, which set them apart from most ancient fiction and tendentious history.¹ Of the fifty-eight Palestinian Jewish names in the Gospels and Acts, fifty-four are attested (though not necessarily referring to the same individual) in at least one other ancient Jewish source or inscription, with most of them appearing multiple times.² Incidental details line up, even in largely independent accounts, in ways that would be almost impossible to fabricate.³ As we have seen, Luke endorses this impression by explicitly claiming to have followed all things closely for a considerable time in order to produce an accurate narrative (Luke 1:1–4).⁴ Indeed, the appeal to

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1. See esp. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 40–49. Cf. Blaiklock, *Jesus Christ: Man or Myth*, pp. 38–47, 68–78. On the nature of biblical historiography more generally, see esp. Kofoed, *Text and History*; cf. V. P. Long, *Art of Biblical History*.
 2. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 90–92.
 3. See, e.g., Wiarda, ‘Simon, Jesus of Nazareth’, pp. 196–209.
 4. On Luke 1:1–4, see esp. L. Alexander, *Preface to Luke’s Gospel*. On the genre(s) of Luke and esp. Acts more generally, cf. her *Acts in Its Ancient Literary Context*.

eyewitnesses and primary sources along with careful evaluation of subsequent tradition that Luke enunciates here characterizes the standards explicitly laid out for good history-writing in the ancient Mediterranean world, especially by Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Lucian and Josephus. And these historians themselves produced much of the most reliable of Jewish and Greek history from the first century or earlier.⁵ A close parallel to Luke's prologue in length and content appears in Dioscorides' first-century handbook on medicine, which for obvious reasons strives for a high level of accuracy:

Although many reports have been made, not only in the past, but also recently, about the production, effects, and testing of medicines, I nevertheless intend to instruct you, dear Areios, about them: the decision to undertake such a thing is neither needless nor injudicious, for some of my predecessors have not completed their works, and others have written most things down from hearsay.⁶

Some readers of Scripture would prefer to take all these impressions and claims at face value and bypass all the careful, critical analysis previous chapters have surveyed. This preference, however well motivated, is both naive and dangerous, since some fictitious narratives are couched in the guise of history, and many careful historians fail to achieve their objectives of complete accuracy.

In this chapter, however, it is proper to return to the Gospels' *prima facie* appearance. A wide variety of charges have been examined that would call into question the Gospels' reliability: allegations concerning the instability of the oral tradition that preceded the Gospel writers' editorial activity, the early church's lack of interest in preserving the details of Jesus' life, the redactional intentions of the Evangelists, the peculiar problems associated with miracles, the apparent contradictions among the Synoptics, the distinctive nature of John's Gospel over against the Synoptics, and the seeming lack of sufficient corroboration for the Jesus-tradition in other ancient writings both within and outside the New Testament. In every case, it has been concluded that an even-handed treatment of the data does not lead to a distrust of the accuracy of the Gospels in what they choose to report, even though many might wish they had reported more or related what they did in more precise or systematic fashion. Do any reasons remain, then, for rejecting an equation of the Gospels with

5. Mosley, 'Historical Reporting', pp. 10–26; Callan, 'Preface of Luke-Acts', pp. 576–581.

6. Quoted in Hooker, 'Beginnings and Endings', p. 186.

some kind of accurate, historical writing? How does one assess the historicity of all their details that have not been discussed, and for which there may be no other testimony to provide a comparison?

The final task of our study must therefore involve some concluding reflections about the genre of the Gospels and about a methodology for assessing the reliability of particular details within them. If one may presume that the Gospels represent genuine attempts at recording historical information, however selective that record may have been, then the standard procedures of historical research may be applied in evaluating the successfulness of those attempts. Historians freely admit that they are often unable to find corroborating or conflicting data for many of the events related in ancient narratives, but this does not prevent them from arriving at judicious assessments of the reliability of those data. They begin by forming a general presumption about the trustworthiness of a given document, deciding where the burden of proof is to be placed: whether on the person who would claim a certain detail to be factual or on the one who would claim it to be in error. Next they apply criteria of authenticity or inauthenticity to determine where the exceptions to their general presumption lie; that is, where errors have crept into otherwise reliable narratives or where truth has been preserved in otherwise dubious texts. Some sample applications of this methodology will illustrate how it should be applied to the Gospels.

The genre of the Gospels

The mere identification of a few errors in the writings of a given historian does not lead to the conclusion that his or her work belongs to an unhistorical genre,⁷ such as a legend, novel or historical fiction. So too with the Gospels; even if some of the apparent contradictions proved to be genuine, this would not necessarily discredit the rest of the narratives. The view held by some Bible students that admission of one error in a book makes all the rest of it equally suspect presupposes a method that no reputable historian would

7. Genre has traditionally been defined as a category of literary composition characterized by a particular style, form and content, although the whole question of whether or not literature can be so categorized is one of some debate. A balanced assessment appears in Osborne, 'Genre Criticism – Sensus Literalis', pp. 1–27. For a succinct definition, see Thatcher, 'Gospel Genre', p. 137: 'a certain group of writings sharing a certain set of conventions recognizable in a certain social matrix'.

adopt.⁸ If one is going to label the Gospels as something other than history, one must do more than point to seeming inaccuracies; an entirely different genre of writing into which the Gospels fit must be proposed.⁹ To this end, recent scholarship has proposed no fewer than six such genres, but in each case the parallels with the Gospels sooner or later break down.¹⁰ Only a seventh option withstands close scrutiny.

(1) A few scholars have compared the Gospel of Mark to an apocalypse¹¹ (an account of the events surrounding the end of the age in symbolic and usually unhistorical form) like the canonical book of Revelation or the second half of Daniel, as well as numerous intertestamental documents. But while much of the Gospels' teaching deals with apocalyptic themes, the Gospels themselves are not characterized *overall* by the bizarre visions and symbols, the glimpses of heaven and profusion of angelic beings, or the dualistic pessimism about the future of humanity so common in many apocalypses. Not surprisingly, this option has gained few adherents.¹²

(2) A second suggestion classifies the Gospels as aretalogies: accounts of

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8. Held, ironically, by fundamentalists of both the right and left wings of scholarship. Ehrman (*Misquoting Jesus*, pp. 8–10), e.g., in rejecting the trap of the former falls into the trap of the latter. Cf. Mandelbaum, *Anatomy of Historical Knowledge*, p. 172: where contradictions arise in presumably historical texts, 'they do not usually undermine the basic structure of the account that has been building; they often contradict only specific items that a historian has previously accepted, and do not force a change in the general outline of the account'.
 9. It is, of course, possible to argue that the Gospel genre is a brand new form, not comparable to other existing ones, in which case, the burden of proof still remains on the sceptic to demonstrate its incompatibility with historicity. See, e.g., Gundry, *Old Is Better*, pp. 18–48.
 10. A succinct survey of the topic appears in Guelich, 'Gospel Genre', pp. 173–208. The fullest treatment is that of Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*
 11. Most notably Norman Perrin, 'Historical Criticism, Literary Criticism', pp. 365–366. Vines (*Problem of Markan Genre*) uses a more truncated definition of genre that focuses primarily on ideology to argue from the parallel apocalyptic world views in Mark and the intertestamental Jewish novels that this Gospel should be viewed as a similar narrative.
 12. Robbins, 'Intertexture of Apocalyptic Discourse', p. 44: 'Markan discourse interweaves apocalyptic, miracle, wisdom, and suffering-death discourse into prophetic discourse. Interpreters who focus on one of these discourses in a

episodes from the life of a 'divine man', usually embellishing and exaggerating the feats of some famous hero or warrior of the past.¹³ But the viability of this classification depends heavily on the pre-Christian use of a clearly defined category of 'divine man', which probably did not exist (see p. 119). Though once commonly held, the popularity of this view has now dramatically waned.

(3) A few scholars apply to the Gospels the literary categories of 'tragedy' or 'comedy', well known from the study of various playwrights, depending on whether the events of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus are most emphasized or whether the resurrection narratives are seen to give the Gospels a more triumphant ending.¹⁴ Related to this is a recent suggestion that Luke-Acts, at least, be classified as a foundational, heroic epic story of Christian origins.¹⁵ More detailed formal and structural parallels may also be identified, but it is important to note that neither classification directly impinges on the question of historicity. Drama, both comic and tragic, can recount either historical or fictitious events, even if often in more stylized fashion than in some genres (recall above, pp. 238–239).

(4) The popular view that equates the Gospels with midrash has already been discussed (see pp. 75–87). There it was concluded that this term might apply, given careful definition, to component elements within the Gospels, but that it was not helpful as a way of classifying their overall genre. The same was true of attempts to view a particular Gospel as a kind of commentary on a canonical text other than the Hebrew Bible, such as Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey* (see p. 76, n. 73). It is, of course, necessary at one level to read both Matthew and Luke as the 'rewriting' and expansion of the Gospel of Mark, assuming Marcan priority,¹⁶ but this need not jeopardize historical accuracy unless one can show that the distinctive theological or literary emphases in the later Gospels distorted their portraits of the Jesus of history in the process.

Footnote no. 12 (*cont.*)

manner that excludes the others give a skewed view of the internal nature of Christian discourse during the first century, and after it to the present.'

13. See esp. M. Smith, 'Prolegomena', pp. 174–199; rebutted already by Kee, 'Aretalogy and Gospel', pp. 402–422. But see now Wills (*Quest of the Historical Gospel*), who finds the aretalogical *Life of Aesop* as the closest parallel to Mark.
14. For comedy, see esp. Via, *Kerygma and Comedy*; cf. Hatton, 'Gospel of Mark as Comedy', pp. 33–56. For tragedy, see Bilezikian, *Liberated Gospel*; and Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*.
15. Bonz, *Past as Legacy*.
16. Of many possible examples, see now O'Leary, *Matthew's Judaization of Mark*.

(5) More historically reliable Jewish precedents have often seemed attractive, however. Some have argued that the longer sections of the Old Testament dealing with one key figure or period of time offer the closest analogies to the Gospels; for example, the Exodus narrative focusing on Moses, or the lives and sufferings of some of the prophets.¹⁷ This is a more promising approach than the others so far noted, although it does not automatically enhance the case for the Gospels' historicity, because many of the same types of doubts as those surrounding the Gospels emerge afresh in Old Testament criticism. More to the point, the Old Testament historical narratives never seem to describe the events or teachings of God's spokespersons with an eye to focusing specifically on the nature of those prophets or leaders, as the Gospels do with Jesus. Instead, attention is diverted beyond the individual to God's dealings with his covenant people more generally, whereas in the Gospels all the material seems constantly designed to raise the questions of Jesus' identity (recall, e.g., Mark 1:1; John 20:31) and of allegiance to him.

(6) As noted in the discussion of certain forms of literary criticism, some analysts attempt to extrapolate from the form of the parable to conclude that the entire Gospel narratives are parabolic: stories designed to teach theological truth without reference to whether or not the events depicted within them actually happened (see p. 88–89).¹⁸ In addition to the criticisms of this view mentioned already, one should take notice of James Williams's critique of this theory, *Gospel against Parable*. While agreeing with many of the insights of the newer literary methods, Williams argues that the gospel genre came about by the combination or juxtaposition of two somewhat opposite fields of meaning: the parable ('realistic fiction based on the extension of a metaphor') and biography (a more historical structuring of 'the virtuous deeds and teachings of the hero').¹⁹ Thus the Gospels are significantly different from parables both in form and historical trustworthiness.

(7) This leads to the broadest and most widely proposed genre for the Gospels – biography.²⁰ To modern readers, this categorization might immediately seem to reinforce belief in the Gospels' historical reliability, but the matter is not so simple. In the ancient world, biographers often felt much freer

17. For the former, see Kline, 'Old Testament Origins of Gospel Genre', pp. 1–27; for the latter, Kraft, 'Evangelien und Geschichte Jesu', pp. 321–341.

18. See esp. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, esp. pp. 117–129.

19. J. G. Williams, *Gospel against Parable*, p. 213.

20. E.g. Votaw, *Gospels and Contemporary Biographies*; Shuler, *Genre for the Gospels*; and esp. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*

than historians did to manipulate and elaborate their sources with speculative details they believed would help to convey the character or personality of their subjects. The best-known attempt to link the Gospels with a relatively unhistorical type of biography is the work of C. H. Talbert.²¹ Talbert finds three key elements that the Gospels share with many ancient Graeco-Roman biographies: a mythical structure, an origin in the legends of the 'cult' or ritual of a religious community devoted to the traditions of its founder, and an optimistic 'world-affirming' perspective in spite of the many pessimistic philosophies of the day. The last of these three features seems valid and weighs against the identification of the Gospels with apocalyptic as under point 1 above. But the first two claims, if valid, would diminish the Gospels' historicity. In fact, however, Talbert has misrepresented both the Gospels and numerous Graeco-Roman biographies by lumping too many disparate texts into one broad category. Like those who see the Gospels as aretalogies, he relies too heavily on the notion of a fixed category of divine or immortal men in antiquity, into which he would place Jesus. He also bases too much on an older version of form criticism, which emphasized the origin of various Gospel forms in the ritual and worship of the early church, at the expense of the findings of more recent redaction criticism that play down this element.²²

One may certainly refer to the Gospels as biographies (perhaps better as *theological*/biographies) in the broad sense of focusing on one central historical character as the main subject of the narrative throughout. The Greek *bioi* (also translated as 'lives'), most noticeably with Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, like the New Testament Gospels, focused, in turn, on one great religious or philosophical teacher, selectively recounting events and teachings from his life, often arranging material thematically as well as chronologically and frequently focusing particularly on the manner and significance of his death.²³ The same is true, to varying degrees, of Plutarch's *Lives*, Lucian's *Demonax*, Porphyry's *Pythagoras* and Philostratus' *Apollonius*.²⁴ But this identification by itself does not point to any particular solution to the problem of historicity. Some of the Graeco-Roman *bioi* are noticeably less credible than others.

Here Martin Hengel's discussion proves instructive. Hengel maintains that

21. Talbert, *What Is a Gospel?*

22. For these and other criticisms in perhaps the most discerning analysis of Talbert's work, see Aune, 'Problem of the Genre', pp. 9–60.

23. Cf. Fitzgerald, 'Ancient Lives of Aristotle', pp. 204–221.

24. Hengel, 'Eye-witness Memory', p. 72.

the Gospels should be compared to that form of ancient biography that supplied a 'relatively trustworthy historical report'.²⁵ Colin Hemer notes no fewer than eight factors of the ancient Mediterranean world of the first century that would support this conclusion with respect to Acts and thus, by extension and with varying degrees, to Luke's *first* volume and then the other Gospels:

(1) the existence of a distinctive and rigorous theory of historiography; (2) the stress on eyewitness participation; (3) the importance of interviewing eyewitnesses; (4) the limitation of coverage to material where the writer has privileged access to evidence of guaranteed quality; (5) the stress on travel to the scene of events; (6) the prospect then (and for us) of checking details with contemporary documents; (7) the occasional insistence on the use of sources for speeches; and (8) the vigour of the concept of 'truth' in history 'as it actually happened'.²⁶

As Hengel sees it, the three main reasons a comparison with reasonably accurate history is often rejected are that (1) the Gospels are too selective in what they report, (2) similarities with unhistorical writings of antiquity suggest themselves, and (3) early Christianity showed little interest in preserving historical information apart from the Gospels and Acts. Hengel replies that 1 is a problem besetting almost all ancient sources but it does not prevent one from labelling other texts as historical, 2 is exaggerated as (we have repeatedly noted), and 3 underestimates the amount of corroborating evidence for the life of Jesus that does exist (much as chapter 6 pointed out).²⁷ In short, there is nothing in the consideration of the gospel genre that should lead us to reject the conclusions to which all previous chapters in this book have been pointing. The presumption of an intention on the part of the Gospel writers to record historically accurate information allows us to proceed and apply the valid canons of historical investigation to them.

The burden of proof

The theory

Once one accepts that the Gospels reflect attempts to write reliable history or

25. Idem, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, p. 16. Cf. Keener, *Gospel of John: A Commentary*, pp. 34–39 (who uses the term 'historical biographies').

26. Hemer, *Book of Acts*, p. 100.

27. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, pp. 3–34.

biography, however theological or stylized their presentations may be, then one must immediately recognize an important presupposition that guides most historians in their work.²⁸ Unless there is good reason for believing otherwise, one will assume that a given detail in the work of a particular historian is factual. This method places the burden of proof squarely on the person who would doubt the reliability of a given portion of the text. The alternative is to presume the text unreliable unless convincing evidence can be brought forward in support of it. While many critical scholars of the Gospels adopt this latter method, it is wholly unjustified by the normal canons of historiography. Scholars who would consistently implement such a method when studying other ancient historical writings would find the corroborative data so insufficient that the vast majority of accepted history would have to be jettisoned.²⁹ In the words of the historian G. J. Renier:

We may find . . . an event is known to us solely through an authority based entirely upon the statements of witnesses who are no longer available. Most of the works of Livy, the first books of the history of the Franks by Gregory of Tours, belong to this category. Since there is no other way of knowing the story they tell us, we must provisionally accept their version. This brings us back full sail to accepted history as the starting point of all historical investigation.³⁰

Of course, ‘revisionist’ historians in fields other than biblical research often adopt needlessly sceptical stances too, but this quotation describes the way most historians normally operate.³¹

28. For further details on this section, see Goetz and Blomberg, ‘Burden of Proof’, pp. 39–63. Cf. esp. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, pp. 15–24.

29. As McEleney (‘Authenticating Criteria and Mark 7:1–23’, pp. 446) puts it, this is ‘a presumption which one exercises in the reading of all history. Without it no historiography, ancient or modern, would win acceptance. Briefly, it is this, that one accepts a statement upon the word of the reporter unless he has reason not to do so.’ The application of this presupposition to the Gospels has been vigorously argued by conservative scholars but, as McEleney’s endorsement demonstrates, it is by no means limited to them. Cf. also Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 478–479; E. E. Ellis, ‘Synoptic Gospels and History’, pp. 52–53; Lührmann, ‘Frage nach Kriterien’, p. 70; Lentzen-Deis, ‘Kriterien für die Beurteilung’, pp. 95–112.

30. Renier, *History*, pp. 90–91.

31. For an incisive critique of revisionist tendencies among modern historians, see Handlin, *Truth in History*.

Some scholars attempt to adopt a mediating position between the ‘extremes’ of systematically doubting or trusting all unparalleled testimony. At first glance the position of Morna Hooker, speaking of the Gospel records of the teachings of Jesus, might seem fairest of all:

a debate about ‘the burden of proof’ is not very profitable, and is appropriate only if one takes the extreme position that the gospels represent historical reports of the words of Jesus, or the equally extreme view that Jesus himself said nothing sufficiently memorable to have come down to us . . . It is perhaps more appropriate to suggest that the ‘burden of proof’ lies upon each scholar who offers a judgement upon any part of the material, to give a reasonable explanation for the existence of that saying, and to suggest a suitable *Sitz im Leben* for every saying or pericope.³²

While undoubtedly well intentioned, this approach is unworkable in practice. It might prevent one from too hastily assuming as factual that which is not, but it would also leave one powerless to reject the obviously legendary, since frequently the rationale for the existence or use of fictitious material is too obscure to be recovered.³³ Moreover, as E. P. Sanders candidly admits, when one writes about Jesus this seemingly neutral attitude ‘has the effect of shifting the burden of proof to the shoulders of those who affirm the authenticity of a saying or group of sayings’. Sanders goes on to explain, ‘I find that I am not neutrally canvassing the material, assigning it as best I can to an appropriate place. I am . . . looking with a somewhat sceptical eye; I want to be *convinced* that a given saying is at least probably by Jesus before employing it.’³⁴

When the stakes are as high as they are with the biblical narrative, it is almost impossible for analysts to be completely detached and dispassionate. General presumptions about the trustworthiness or untrustworthiness of any document, moreover, prove crucial when one comes to evaluate its details that have no clear confirmation or contradiction elsewhere. Sanders’s thorough study of the historical Jesus tellingly neglects virtually all the evidence this book has surveyed in favour of the Gospels’ reliability and therefore eliminates a significant percentage of the Gospel material as inauthentic, and Sanders is only a little

32. Hooker, ‘Christology and Methodology’, pp. 485. Cf. Barbour, *Traditio-Historical Criticism*, p. 46.

33. Cf. Garraghan, *Guide to Historical Method*, p. 262: ‘to prove a tradition untrustworthy it is not by any means required that its origin be satisfactorily accounted for’.

34. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 13. For an incisive critique of Sanders’s important study, see S. McKnight’s review, pp. 219–225.

'left of centre' across the whole scholarly spectrum today.³⁵ In fact, the evidence he neglects actually creates an overall presumption of the Gospels' reliability, so that the proper approach should be to accept the specific details unless there is good reason for rejecting them.

Of course, many scholars believe there *are* good reasons for rejecting the authenticity of various passages and themes in the Gospels. Legitimate criticism must then proceed to evaluate the validity of each objection. Many studies could be cited that employ this method, but two excellent illustrations in *Gospel Perspectives* articles will have to suffice. The one deals with Jesus' view of his death as an atonement for sin (Mark 10:45), and the other examines his interpretation of the parable of the sower (Mark 4:13–20). The former passage supports one of the cardinal tenets of the Christian faith, while the latter influences the way one interprets the rest of Jesus' parables, which comprise a large percentage of his teaching in the Synoptics. Clearly, both issues merit attention.

Sample applications

Mark 10:45

Sydney Page lists four main reasons why many scholars have thought that Jesus never enunciated the doctrine of his death as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin,³⁶ as found in Mark 10:45, 'For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (1) The two clauses do not fit well together; the first speaks only of service rather than atonement. (2) The past tense 'came' is not appropriate for a pre-crucifixion saying, since it refers to an event that has not yet occurred. (3) The word and concept of 'ransom' is found nowhere else in the teaching of Jesus. (4) Luke's parallel to this verse, 'I am among you as one who serves' (Luke 22:27), shows no knowledge of the second clause concerning Jesus' death.³⁷

None of these four objections proves very weighty. The concepts of servanthood and sacrifice are surely more similar than dissimilar, so a transition

35. Sanders's later book (*Historical Figure of Jesus*) is both a simplification and an expansion of his earlier volume and moves slightly in the direction of greater optimism about what we can recover of the life of the historical Jesus.

36. The passage may contain additional implications for (at least partial) liberation from oppressive powers in this world, but it teaches *at least* this classic, more 'spiritual' doctrine. For an emphasis on the former that presupposes the latter, see Kaminouchi, 'But It Is Not So among You'.

37. Page, 'Authenticity of the Ransom Logion', pp. 137–161.

from the one to the other is quite natural. The very same combination appears in Isaiah's description of God's suffering servant (Isa. 53:10), which has often been seen as the background for Jesus' remarks here.³⁸ The Greek past tense (the aorist) employed in the clause 'The Son of man . . . came' refers to the overall purpose of Jesus' entire life. The Gospels frequently use this word 'came' (*ēlthōn*) to describe Jesus' mission, even before it is complete (as, e.g., in Luke 12:49, 'I came to cast fire on the earth and how I wish it were already kindled'), so it is scarcely inappropriate here. Jesus' lack of reference elsewhere to a 'ransom' is a particularly weak objection. If speakers had to say everything at least twice before historians would believe they had spoken on a topic, history books would have to be drastically rewritten. But in fact, Jesus does broach the *topic* elsewhere, if not in identical language, with his 'words of institution' at the Last Supper: 'this cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you' (Luke 22:20b; on the authenticity of these words, see p. 175).³⁹ Finally, it is not clear that Luke 22:27 refers to the same saying of Jesus as Mark 10:45. The contexts are different and Jesus makes similar statements about his role as servant elsewhere (e.g. Mark 9:33–37; Matt. 23:11). So it seems to have been a topic with which he dealt more than once, without repeating the identical information on each occasion. Even if the two verses were genuinely parallel, the priority of Mark would create the presumption that Luke had deliberately omitted the missing clause instead of Mark's having invented it.⁴⁰

Mark 4:13–20

Only a minority of scholars accept the authenticity of the interpretation of the parable of the sower. Yet Mark 4:13 claims that the interpretation of this parable supplies the key to interpreting all the parables of Jesus. Philip Payne itemizes no fewer than nine major reasons why Mark 4:13–20 has been labelled inauthentic, but they may be combined under three headings: (1) As a master of the art of telling parables, Jesus would not have had to explain them, any

38. This background has been strongly challenged. But see Hengel, *Atonement*, esp. pp. 59–60; Moulder, 'Old Testament Background', pp. 120–127; Watts, 'Jesus' Death, Isaiah 53', pp. 125–151.

39. For the latest lexical evidence to demonstrate the same complex of ideas in both passages, see A. Y. Collins, 'Signification of Mark 10:45', pp. 371–382.

40. Indeed, Riesner ('Back to the Historical Jesus', pp. 171–199) makes a plausible case for traces of the ransom logion in Luke 19:10 and Acts 20:35, as well as in a variety of pre-Lucan Pauline texts. For a full defence of the authenticity of the saying in this context, see Wilcox, 'On the Ransom-Saying', pp. 173–186.

more than a good joke teller explains his punchlines. Even if he did occasionally add a brief conclusion, he would hardly have allegorized a parable point for point as appears here. (2) This particular interpretation, by focusing equally on each of the four kinds of soil, misses the main point of the parable that emphasizes the amazing harvest of the seed that fell in good soil. (3) The language of the interpretation shows a high percentage of words not regularly found on the lips of Jesus, not easily derived from an Aramaic original and strikingly similar to the later vocabulary of a Hellenistic church.⁴¹

The most forceful of these objections is the first. Current parable research, however, while rightly rejecting the arbitrary explanations and allegorizations so often given to the parables in the past, is coming to recognize that the parables often do require some interpretation in order to be intelligible. Almost all the ancient rabbinic parables were given brief explanations and many ended with fairly elaborate allegorizations. The danger of misinterpreting Jesus' parables does not lie simply in perceiving detailed symbolism behind the key people and objects they describe, but in making equations no-one in Jesus' first-century Galilean peasant audience could have imagined.⁴² Equating different types of seed, soil and fruit with the reception of a message and the results it produces would have been as natural among ancient Jewish farmers as it is today for those who have heard the parable explained so often. Other details that seem foreign today may have been less so then. For example, birds are not commonly linked with the devil (v. 15) in modern Western thought, but Old Testament and intertestamental symbolism regularly used birds as harbingers of evil (e.g. 1 Kgs 14:11; *Jubilees* 11.5–24; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 13).⁴³

The fact that commentators cannot agree on what the main point of the parable is does not inspire much confidence in the claim that the interpretation is faulty as it stands. Probably most parables should be seen as making a cluster of two or three related points rather than being reducible to one brief summary statement.⁴⁴ As for the linguistic distinctives, some have been exaggerated while others are only to be expected as the Jesus-tradition was translated and applied. As Payne puts it, 'it is natural that the translation of

41. Payne, 'Authenticity of Parable of Sower', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2, pp. 163–207.

42. On the details of this paragraph and the next, see further Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp. 226–229.

43. On which, cf. esp. Knowles, 'Abram and the Birds', pp. 145–151.

44. See Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, *passim*. For applications to exposition, see *idem*, *Preaching the Parables*.

Jesus' teaching into Greek in the church community would use "church vocabulary" where that vocabulary faithfully expressed Jesus' teaching. *Greek* vocabulary statistics cannot determine the authenticity of Jesus' *Aramaic* sayings.⁴⁵

When one examines the objections that have been raised over the authenticity of the ransom saying and the interpretation of the parable of the sower, one can see that they fall into two broad categories. Some are based on the lack of a certain type of evidence expected (the language does not reflect a Semitic substratum or the concept does not reappear elsewhere), while others stem from apparent contradictions with parallel testimony or forms. Usually, only the latter type of objection merits close examination. As David Fischer nicely puts it, 'the nonexistence of an object is established not by nonexistent evidence but by affirmative evidence of the fact that it did not, or could not exist'.⁴⁶ More simply, arguments from silence usually prove little.⁴⁷ And since the most difficult cases of apparently contradictory testimony in the Gospels have already been examined, it is unlikely that further detailed consideration of objections to particular passages would undermine the evidence that has been accumulating for the Gospels' reliability. Virtually every portion of the Gospels has been analysed many times over by scholars of all theological perspectives, and coherent responses are available in the scholarly literature to almost every sceptical objection. Today, with the wealth of detailed commentary series on the Gospels, one often has only to turn to one or two well-chosen contributions to those series to find compelling solutions to objections to historicity.⁴⁸

45. Payne, 'Authenticity of Parable of Sower', p. 178.

46. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, pp. 62–63.

47. Cf. Lange, 'Argument from Silence', pp. 288–301.

48. For Matthew, see esp. Keener, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* and *Matthew 14–28*; Blomberg, *Matthew*; and Carson, 'Matthew'. For Mark, see esp. France, *Gospel of Mark*; Guelich, *Mark 1:1–8:26*; C. A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*; Gundry, *Mark*; Edwards, *Gospel according to Mark*; and W. L. Lane, *Gospel according to Mark*. For Luke, see esp. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* and *Luke 9:51–24:53*; Marshall, *Gospel of Luke: Historian and Theologian*; Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*; *Luke 9:21–18:34*; *Luke 18:35–24:53*; and Stein, *Luke*. Bock's two volumes contain sections under every passage helpfully addressing sources and historicity. For John, see esp. Köstenberger, *John*; Carson, *Gospel according to John*; Morris, *Gospel according to John*; and Keener, *Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. See also the quasi-commentary by Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, which focuses almost solely on such historical questions.

Criteria of authenticity

Theory

The proper procedure for evaluating the historicity of any portion of the Gospels is thus to assume from the outset that its testimony is reliable and then to consider the force of various objections that might cause a person to change his or her mind. Much critical scholarship, however, inverts this process altogether by assuming the Gospels to be unreliable unless powerful evidence can be brought forward in defence of specific passages or themes. The type of evidence accepted in this latter enterprise is that which passes stringent 'criteria of authenticity'. Not surprisingly, many scholars who adopt this method accept a much smaller percentage of the Gospel material as authentic. Clearly, much depends on one's starting point.

Nevertheless, even if for the sake of argument one adopts this more sceptical methodology, one should soon discover that critical scholarship is often *too* sceptical. With each passing decade since the 1950s, when a group of mostly German scholars, discontented with the wholesale historical scepticism of a previous era, embarked on 'the new quest for the historical Jesus',⁴⁹ more and more of the Gospel tradition has been acknowledged as authentic. The last twenty to twenty-five years-plus have produced what most today call the 'third quest'. Today many scholars view even miracles and a high Christology as possible both in principle and in reality. It is, of course, somewhat artificial to divide study of the historical Jesus via this kind of periodization, as Stanley Porter has shown in great detail.⁵⁰ But historical schematization always produces overgeneralizations, and there *are* broad trends that can be detected. This is what makes the Jesus Seminar and their sympathizers so incongruous (as throwbacks to the period of almost wholesale scepticism in the heyday of Rudolf Bultmann⁵¹), representing early twentieth-century thought rather than incorporating the findings of the huge amount of research into the historical Jesus of the last half-century of scholarship that calls into question their presuppositions.

The four criteria of authenticity most commonly employed in the search for

49. The title derives from J. M. Robinson's *New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, although this work had important predecessors beginning with Ernst Käsemann's Marburg address in 1954, later translated as 'The Problem of the Historical Jesus', in his *Essays on New Testament Themes*, pp. 15–47.

50. S. E. Porter, *Criteria for Authenticity*, pp. 28–59 (perhaps overstating his conclusions somewhat, however).

51. Best represented in his detailed work *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*.

authentic Gospel material are the criteria of multiple attestation or forms, of Palestinian environment or language, of double dissimilarity and of coherence.⁵² According to the first criterion, information or teaching that appears in more than one of the Gospel sources or in several of the different categories of passages identified by form critics may be accepted as authentic. The more independent testimony one has to an event, the more confident one may be of its accuracy. Second, if the Greek text of a portion of the Gospels seems to reflect a fairly literal translation of a Semitic original or if it describes events or concepts distinctive to early first-century Palestine, then one need not look to the later, more Hellenistic church for its origin. Third, the criterion of double dissimilarity maintains that where the Gospels' portrait of Jesus differs from the typical perspectives both of ancient Jewish belief and of early Christianity, then one may be sure of having authentic Jesus-tradition. Because Jesus seemed to stand out so much from his contemporaries and because his first followers so easily deviated from his very demanding requirements, this criterion has appealed to many as the most helpful. Yet it can point only to what was distinctive about Jesus, and many critics make the grave mistake of arguing that wherever the Gospels do not depict Jesus as noticeably different from both his predecessors and his followers then they must be rejected as inauthentic. They fail to realize that this use of the double dissimilarity criterion brings it into flat contradiction with the criterion of Palestinian environment, which assumes that Jesus was in part a product of his time.⁵³ Finally, the criterion of coherence argues that whatever fits well with material authenticated by one of the other three criteria may also be accepted.

The tension between the double dissimilarity criterion and the criterion of Palestinian environment has led N. T. Wright and a trio of German researchers independently to develop what Wright calls the double dissimilarity and similarity criterion⁵⁴ and what the Germans call the criterion of historical plausibility.⁵⁵ Although worded slightly differently, both are four-part criteria that

52. For an elaboration of these criteria under eleven headings, see Stein, "Criteria" for Authenticity', in France and Wenham, *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1, pp. 225–263. Cf. C. A. Evans, 'Authenticity Criteria', pp. 6–31; S. E. Porter, *Criteria for Authenticity*, pp. 63–102.

53. Thus Holmén ('Doubts about Double Dissimilarity', pp. 47–80) argues that only dissimilarity with subsequent Christianity is necessary as a criterion of authenticity, whereas dissimilarity also with Judaism undermines the criterion.

54. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 131–133.

55. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 116–118; Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, pp. 172–212.

boil down to looking for that which passes the double dissimilarity criterion without being so dissimilar as to make Jesus' actions or teachings incredible in his original context. Thus both criteria look for key distinctives of Jesus as over against both Judaism and the Christianity that followed him, but also key points of similarity with Jesus' Jewish milieu and key points of continuity with the Christianity that immediately succeeded him. When all four of these features are present in one and the same event or saying, it is unlikely that it is a creation of anyone other than Christ himself.

In recent years, it has increasingly been recognized also that the criteria cannot be applied atomistically to individual texts apart from their larger narrative contexts in the Gospels. Above all, one question must be answerable: why was Jesus executed? The cryptic sage of the Jesus Seminar would not have provoked such antagonism. Details in the Gospel tradition that *do* contribute to such hostility satisfy this criterion of authenticity. John Meier thus adds to the basic four what he calls the criterion of rejection and execution. His explanation merits detailed quotation:

A tweedy poetaster who spent his time spinning out parables and Japanese koans, a literary aesthete who toyed with 1st-century deconstructionism, or a bland Jesus who simply told people to look at the lilies of the field – such a Jesus would threaten no-one, just as the university professors who create him threaten no-one. The historical Jesus did threaten, disturb, and infuriate people – from interpreters of the Law through the Jerusalem priestly aristocracy to the Roman prefect who finally tried and crucified him. This emphasis on Jesus' violent end is not simply a focus imposed on the data by Christian theology. To outsiders like Josephus, Tacitus, and Lucian of Samosata, one of the most striking things about Jesus was his crucifixion or execution by Rome. A Jesus whose words and deeds would not alienate people, especially powerful people, is not the historical Jesus.⁵⁶

Applications

Using either the older or the newer criteria, even the person who is suspicious of the Gospel tradition may come to accept a large percentage of it as historically accurate. A fairly widespread consensus of scholars would accept most of the parables as authentic. They appear in all the Gospel sources and are based on a well-known Semitic form of speech. Yet Jesus' parables differ from those of the ancient rabbis by focusing primarily on the elucidation of the kingdom of God rather than the explanation of Jewish law. Virtually no

⁵⁶ Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, p. 177.

subsequent Christian teaching took the form of parables, even while reusing some of Jesus' parabolic imagery, so it is impossible to accept the notion that some anonymous church member invented these rhetorical gems and successfully passed them off as having come from Jesus.⁵⁷ Many of the sayings about God's kingdom are received with equal enthusiasm. Jesus' teaching delicately balances belief in the arrival of God's reign or rule in the mission and message of Jesus himself with promises about events still in the future that will consummate that kingdom in all its fullness. This 'inaugurated eschatology' marks Jesus off as different from other Jews, who saw the kingdom as still primarily future, and from the church, which from its inception has more often than not neglected the doctrine of the second coming in practice if not in theory. Some scholars believe that the future and present aspects of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God create an irresolvable tension so that one or the other must be jettisoned as inauthentic. The more tension one perceives between the two, however, the less likely it is that the first Christians would have invented either, thereby creating a problem where it had not previously existed.⁵⁸ Together the parables and other teachings on the kingdom comprise a sizable majority of Christ's words in the Gospels, so criticism has already gone a long way towards reaffirming the authenticity of the sayings tradition.

Equally widely attested, Semitic in language and content, and reasonably distinctive of the life and teaching of Jesus were the following: his concern for those rejected or looked down on by the various Jewish sects: the poor, the 'sinners and tax-collectors', women, lepers, Samaritans and even Gentiles;⁵⁹ his frequent conflicts with the various Jewish authorities over the interpretation and application of the Law, especially the Sabbath regulations;⁶⁰ and his stringent demands

57. For more detail, see Payne, 'Authenticity of the Parables of Jesus', pp. 329–344. Cf. further, Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*; Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*; McArthur and Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables*.

58. The most comprehensive study of the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus, which also comes to this conclusion, remains Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*. Cf. Chilton, *Pure Kingdom*; Beavis, *Jesus and Utopia*.

59. See the relevant sections of Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, and idem, *Contagious Holiness*. Cf. esp. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins*. For a succinct survey of texts, see Strathearn, 'Jesus and the Gentiles', pp. 286–317.

60. See esp. Banks, *Jesus and the Law*; and Westerholm, *Jesus and Scribal Authority*. Cf. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 3, pp. 313–330, 332–340, 411–444. For a good survey of the relevant passages and the intensification of the resistance to Christ, see J. C. Lane, 'From Opposition to Hostility', pp. 125–151.

for discipleship, involving total commitment to himself, with his enigmatic sayings about ‘letting the dead bury the dead’ (Matt. 8:21–22), ‘hating father and mother’ (Luke 14:26), or ‘selling everything’ to follow him (Mark 10:21 pars.).⁶¹ In each of these three areas, Jesus’ beliefs and practices were much more radical than that which most of his contemporaries could tolerate. And the history of the church in all ages has demonstrated that it is much easier to revert to prejudice, legalism and half-hearted discipleship than to follow in Christ’s steps.

Another substantial portion of the Gospel tradition widely accepted as authentic, at least in part, is the collection of sayings in which Jesus refers to himself as the Son of man. This expression is never used elsewhere in the earliest Christian literature except on the lips of Stephen just before he is stoned to death (Acts 7:56). It occurs in the Old Testament as a messianic title only in Daniel 7:13,⁶² and its meaning in intertestamental documents varies greatly, being applied for example to both Enoch and Melchizedek. As a result, while most scholars are ready to admit that some or all of the Son of man sayings in the Gospels are authentic, they differ sharply over the meaning of that title. An important school of thought holds that ‘Son of man’ was not messianic, but merely a Semitic figure of speech meaning ‘a man’, ‘a man in my situation’, ‘a vulnerable (or pitiable) man, or even simply ‘I’.⁶³ So, for example, when Jesus says that ‘foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head’ (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58), he means merely that someone in his situation, as an itinerant preacher, has no regular place to sleep from one day to the next. Sayings that use the title ‘Son of man’ to refer to a heavenly being going to or coming from the presence of God (e.g. Luke 12:8, ‘whoever confesses me before men, the Son of man will also confess him

61. See esp. Hengel, *Charismatic Leader and His Followers*. Cf. Wilkins, *Following the Master*; S. C. Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties*.
62. Some would dispute its use as a messianic title even here, but see Rowe, ‘Daniel’s “Son of Man”’, pp. 71–96. Despite many claims to the contrary, at least by the first century this interpretation was securely in place in one (probably minority) strand of Jewish thinking. See J. J. Collins, ‘Son of Man’, pp. 448–466; and Owen and Shepherd, ‘Speaking up for Qumran’, pp. 81–122.
63. Most recently in detail, see Wink, *Human Being*. For a full history of research, see Burkett, *Son of Man Debate*; for this collection of approaches, see pp. 82–96. Burkett observes that ‘this line of research has not led to a convincing solution’. Dogmatic theology often arrives at similar conclusions by assuming that Son of man and Son of God must be opposites – the one referring to Jesus’ true humanity and the other to his true deity. But there is no exegetical warrant for this opposition of the titles.

before the angels of God') are then often rejected as later developments of Christian theology.

Several considerations challenge this non-messianic interpretation of 'Son of man'. First, the evidence for the pre-Christian use of this expression, and even of just the word 'man', as a messianic title, is more widespread than many recognize.⁶⁴ Second, it is not as easy as many think to partition the Son of man sayings in the Gospels into messianic and non-messianic categories. Even those passages that make sense when 'a man like me' is substituted for 'Son of man' usually involve claims by Jesus that imply an authority transcending that of his contemporaries. Third, the non-messianic interpretation requires the belief that the Gospel writers universally mistranslated the Aramaic expression into Greek, since they use the definite article 'the' as if it were a title applicable to one person alone.⁶⁵ The best explanation for Jesus' use of this title, to the virtual exclusion of all other titles, is that the more common expressions for the Messiah were often linked in contemporary Jewish thinking with a nationalistic, militaristic figure. Jesus rejected this role and so preferred to use a form of self-reference that pointed to the prophesied heavenly representative of his people but that was sufficiently ambiguous to allow him to invest it with his own distinctive understanding of his mission.⁶⁶

When scholars turn to more explicit titles for Jesus' unique origin and identity, they often balk at acknowledging their appropriateness. Yet a fair application of the criteria of authenticity should lead to their acceptance as well. For example, the 'Son of God' is a title applied to Jesus by the Gospel writers to highlight his messianic and divine origin as the fulfilment of such Old Testament prophecies as Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14.⁶⁷ For years all but the most conservative commentators refused to accept the idea that Jesus could have understood himself to have such a supernatural origin and relegate this title to the creativity of the later church in its desire to exalt Jesus and embellish the traditions about his life.

64. See esp. Horbury ('Messianic Associations', pp. 34–55), who notes the following usually overlooked references: 11Q Melchizedek 1.18 (from Qumran), Ezekiel the Tragedian (quoted by Eusebius), the fifth Sibylline oracle, the Targum to Ps. 80, and the Septuagint's rendering of Num. 24:7.

65. For these last two points, see esp. S. Kim, '*Son of Man*'. Cf. also Caragounis, *Son of Man*.

66. Bruce, 'Background to Son of Man Sayings', pp. 50–70. Cf. Tuckett, 'Son of Man and Daniel 7', pp. 164–190.

67. See esp. Hengel, *Son of God*. Cf. Denaux, 'Q-Logion', pp. 163–199.

Then, in one of the smaller fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a document was discovered that seemingly treated the Son of God as a Messianic figure (4Q246).⁶⁸ This should not have caused so much surprise, given the frequent acceptance, via both the old double dissimilarity criterion and the new double dissimilarity and similarity criterion, that one of the most authentic data about Jesus' self-understanding was his unparalleled use of the intimate word for Father, *Abba*, in his prayers to God. By the criterion of coherence, however, it is only a short step from here to accepting the view that Jesus saw himself as the Son of God. Richard Bauckham traces the logical progression of reasoning that should be followed: if Jesus' use of *Abba* is authentic,⁶⁹ then his language about sonship in Matthew 11:27 and parallel should also be accepted ('All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him'). This passage, which has been often called a 'Johannine thunderbolt' in the Synoptic tradition, because of its remarkable similarity to many of John's otherwise distinctive discourses of Jesus, in turn permits one to accept much of the Fourth Gospel's teaching about Jesus' sonship, where he is most frequently referred to as the Son of God, despite the special scepticism often reserved for John's traditions (see chapter 5).⁷⁰ Or, in A. E. Harvey's words,

Jesus had indeed shown that absolute obedience to God, had spoken of God with that intimate authority, and had acted with the unique authorization that belonged to God's representative and agent on earth, which would be characteristic of one who was (in the sense usually ascribed to 'sonship' in antiquity) in very truth 'Son of God'; and the reversal of the world's judgment upon him, which was implied by the event his followers called the Resurrection, enabled them to describe Jesus with absolute confidence as 'the Son', a title that would certainly have been correct in his lifetime, and was presumably acknowledged by supernatural beings, but was too momentous to be openly acknowledged even by those of his followers who had found their way to faith in him.⁷¹

68. See esp. J. J. Collins, 'Background', pp. 51–62. Several other interpretations of this text have been proposed, but Collins defends the view that 'the messianic interpretation of 4Q246 remains overwhelmingly probable' (p. 61).

69. An argument that works even better with the double dissimilarity *and* similarity criterion, since there are Jewish parallels (despite earlier claims to the contrary) but they are partial and rare. See S. McKnight, *New Vision for Israel*, pp. 49–65.

70. Bauckham, 'Sonship of the Historical Jesus', pp. 245–260.

71. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, pp. 167–168. In Harvey's understanding of 'the sense usually ascribed to "sonship" in antiquity', there are of course no

The sense usually ascribed to sonship in antiquity was, of course, something less than the fully fledged ontological equality of Father and Son in later Christian binitarian and Trinitarian formulations of the person of Jesus and the nature of the Godhead. But Second Temple descriptors for exalted angels, patriarchs and other great heroes of old increasingly approached a metaphysical threshold so that the additional step taken by Christians to cross this boundary was not nearly as large as it might at first have appeared.⁷²

Indeed, Larry Hurtado has shown the astonishing pervasiveness of *worship* of Jesus from the earliest known Christian sources onward, representing belief in Jesus as divine.⁷³ And because, in Jewish circles committed to the resurrection of all humanity sooner or later, the resurrection of Jesus by itself could not have spawned the high Christology of the early church, explicit or implicit claims traceable to the historical Jesus himself must have prepared the way for such theological developments. The more implicit the claims, the easier the case can be made for their historicity, since later theological reflection would not have remained as subtle or cryptic. And this is precisely what we see, especially in the Synoptic Gospels: items of implicitly high Christology outweighing more explicit titular uses, but consistent with them. Here one can mention the nature of Jesus' relationships with John the Baptist, with his disciples and with his opponents, his sovereign authority as over against the Law, his use of *Amen* as a particularly solemn preface to numerous sayings, his symbolic enacted object lessons, the imagery applied to himself in the parables and other metaphors reserved for Yahweh in the Old Testament,⁷⁴ his claims that humanity's responses to him will determine their eternal destiny at the final judgment, his acceptance of worship, prayer and faith, his authority to forgive sins, the implications of the arrival of the kingdom not least through his exorcisms and other healings, his seemingly supernatural insight and his intimate relationship with his heavenly Father.⁷⁵

Illustrations could be multiplied. Chapter 3 has already been devoted to the authenticity of the miracle stories, and it was noted how well they cohere

metaphysical overtones of equation with deity.

72. See esp. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*.

73. Idem, *Lord Jesus Christ*. Cf. esp. Bauckham, *God Crucified*.

74. On which, see esp. Payne, 'Jesus' Implicit Claim to Deity', pp. 3–23.

75. Cf., succinctly, Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, pp. 402–405; in detail, Witherington, *Christology of Jesus*.

with Jesus' authentic teaching about the kingdom of God. One of the most doubted portions of Jesus' teachings in the Synoptic Gospels is his use of the word 'church' (*ekklesia*). Jesus' three references to founding a church, all in Matthew (Matt. 16:18; 18:17 [twice]), seem to put him at odds with his other teaching, which appears anti-institutional and envisages the near demise of this age. Thus plans for organizing a community of his followers into settled patterns of worship would be superfluous. Still, both the Greek and underlying Semitic words for 'church' need mean nothing more than an 'assembly', and the mere fact that Jesus appointed twelve apostles,⁷⁶ apparently corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel, with an inner core of three and a larger group of disciples who were not apostles, suggests that he intended that some kind of organization of people carry on his work after him.⁷⁷ The question of the imminence of the end is bound up with the faulty notion that Christ was convinced he would return within the lifetime of his disciples (see above, pp. 64–66). A criterion of 'necessary explanation' can be invoked here too. Some historical event must lie behind the rise of Peter to prominence as leader of the early church; Peter's record of unfaithfulness in discipleship would otherwise have disqualified him rather than promoting him. Without some commissioning from Jesus such as that found in the famous 'keys to the kingdom' passage, which includes the statement 'on this rock I will build my church' (Matt. 16:18), one is hard pressed to explain how the man who denied Jesus three times gained a position of such prominence in the church so soon afterwards.⁷⁸

In fact, patient application of the criteria of authenticity can itself eventually lead one to accept virtually all the Gospel tradition. I. H. Marshall's *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (1977) well illustrates the confident spirit with which one can approach the testimony of the Synoptics while utilizing the standard

76. A classic example of the value of the double similarity and dissimilarity criterion: Jewish rabbis regularly had disciples but typically chose from among those who wanted to study with them rather than taking the initiative to call them as Jesus did. The rest of the New Testament shows Christian leaders mentoring younger and/or less experienced co-workers, but not once is the term 'disciple' applied to them.

77. See esp. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 3, pp. 40–197.

78. For a full discussion of the arguments in favour of the authenticity of the 'church' passages, see Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, pp. 185–197; G. Maier, 'Church in the Gospel of Matthew', pp. 45–63. Cf. also Patzia, *Emergence of the Church*, pp. 58–69.

critical methodology, although Marshall did not attempt to canvass all the data.⁷⁹ René Latourelle displays even greater optimism and provides a long list of details in the Gospels that have been accepted as genuine by authors of major critical studies employing the criteria of authenticity. These include the linguistic, social, political, economic, cultural and religious environments depicted;⁸⁰ the great events of Jesus' life: baptism,⁸¹ temptation,⁸² transfiguration;⁸³ teaching on the kingdom, with its call to repentance (and, we should add, a 'greater righteousness'),⁸⁴ parables and beatitudes;⁸⁵ teaching on God as Father; the miracles and exorcisms as signs of the kingdom; the controversies with the scribes and Pharisees (particularly, we should add, over issues of national judgment and restoration⁸⁶); Jesus' attitudes of simplicity and authority, of purity and compassion; the Christology implied by the sign of Jonah, the sign of the temple⁸⁷ and the 'Son of man' title; the rejection of a space- or time-bound kingdom; and the calling and mission of the apostles, coupled with their initial enthusiasm, subsequent lack of understanding, final betrayal and desertion⁸⁸ (to which we should add Jesus' repeated *predictions* of his coming suffering, death and resurrection⁸⁹); his agony, trial and

79. Cf. in even more detail Witherington, *Christology of Jesus*.

80. On which, cf. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*; Skarsaune, *Shadow of Temple*; Stegemann, Malina and Theissen, *Social Setting*; Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*.

81. No Christian would invent an incident so susceptible to the interpretation that Jesus needed to repent from personal sin like all others, submitting to John's call. Cf. esp. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, pp. 10–16.

82. Again, it seems unlikely that early Christians would invent this narrative, since Christians ever since have struggled with the concept of Jesus having even the *potential* to sin.

83. Cf. S. Williams, 'Transfiguration of Jesus Christ', pp. 16–25.

84. See esp. Chilton, 'Jesus and the Repentance of E. P. Sanders', pp. 1–18; Condra, *Salvation for the Righteous Revealed*; and Hägerland, 'Jesus and the Rites of Repentance', pp. 166–187.

85. On which, cf. esp. 4QBeatitudes and the comments in Blomberg, *Matthew*, p. 98.

86. See esp. Bryan, *Jesus and Israel's Traditions*; Reiser, *Jesus and Judgment*.

87. On which, see esp. Chilton and Evans, *Jesus in Context*.

88. More predominantly unflattering portraits not likely invented in circles that quickly came to exalt these individuals instead.

89. See esp. Bayer, *Jesus' Predictions*. For a good survey of the texts, see R. D. Draper, 'Jesus' Prophecies', pp. 3–38.

crucifixion;⁹⁰ and the burial and resurrection. Latourelle sums up, ‘On each of the subjects enumerated, we can invoke the testimony of many exegetes. To the extent that researches [*sic*] go on, the material acknowledged as authentic grows ceaselessly until it covers the whole Gospel.’⁹¹ Royce Gruenler studies in detail the one area noticeably absent from Latourelle’s otherwise comprehensive list: the ‘high’ or explicit Christology that portrays Jesus as more than a man. Gruenler shows how even the small handful of sayings accepted as authentic by more radical critics contain within them claims for authority and power that make no sense for a merely human teacher to put forward. The criterion of coherence thus permits one to accept those portions of the Gospels that elucidate more explicitly Jesus’ divine origin.⁹²

Whatever perspective one adopts at the outset, then, the verdict that presses itself upon us remains the same. Whether by giving the Gospels the benefit of the doubt that all narratives of purportedly historical events merit or by approaching them with an initial suspicion in which every detail must satisfy the criteria of authenticity, the Gospels may be accepted as trustworthy accounts of what Jesus said and did. One cannot hope to prove the accuracy of every detail on purely historical grounds alone; there are simply not enough data available for that. But we may certainly speak of ‘general reliability’.⁹³ Moreover, as one’s investigation proceeds, the evidence becomes sufficient to declare that what can be checked is accurate, so that it is entirely proper to believe that what cannot be checked is probably accurate as well.⁹⁴ Other conclusions, widespread though they are, seem not to stem from even-handed historical analysis but from religious or philosophical prejudice. As the Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White once marvelled, ‘it is astonishing that while Graeco-Roman historians have been growing in confidence, the twentieth-century study of the Gospel narratives, *starting from no less promising material*, has taken so gloomy a

90. Showing how all the disparate information in the Gospel passion narratives can fit into a plausible, harmonious whole is Kiehl, *Passion of Our Lord*. For detailed reflections on authenticity and meaning of key portions of the Gospel passion narratives, see S. McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*.

91. Latourelle, *Finding Jesus through the Gospels*, pp. 238–239. Cf. throughout Chilton and Evans, *Studying the Historical Jesus*.

92. Gruenler, *New Approaches*, pp. 19–131. Cf. Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, *passim*.

93. Stanton, *Gospel Truth?* p. 193.

94. Palmer, *Logic of Gospel Criticism*, p. 34.

turn'.⁹⁵ Such gloom should be replaced by a radiant endorsement of the historical reliability of the four Gospels, and there are numerous encouraging signs that in various places this is in fact occurring. But far too many people still have heard only of the Jesus Seminar and not also of the more broadly-based third quest of the historical Jesus.

95. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law*, p. 187. For a brief overview of how major classical scholars have used the New Testament since Sherwin-White, see Nobbs, 'Ancient Historians', pp. 285–290.

POSTSCRIPT

Are the Gospels historically reliable? Some conservative readers would reply affirmatively simply because they believe their doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture requires them to. This overlooks the fact that God can communicate truth through a wide variety of literary forms; in fact, over half of Scripture is written in literary genres other than historical ones: poetry, proverbs, prophecy, epistles and apocalypses. Even within the Gospels, Jesus' teaching in parables highlights how narrative prose can communicate theological truth by means of realistic but fictitious stories. A superficial appearance of history therefore proves little. There is no short cut to valid biblical interpretation: detailed historical analysis with all its uncertainties must be employed.¹ And although Christians understandably emphasize the role of the Spirit in illuminating the interpreter, objective standards must be maintained against which apparent illumination may be measured (1 John 4:1–3; 1 Cor. 14:29). At the other end of the confessional spectrum, many radical critics would answer the question negatively, thinking that proper historical method requires them to disbelieve any narratives so thoroughly permeated by supernatural events, theological interpretation and minor variations among parallels as are the four

1. Indeed, that God became incarnate in Jesus is the very theological rationale that demands such an approach. See Pahl, 'Is Jesus Lost?', pp. 6–19.

Gospels. This approach misunderstands the role and methods of historical enquiry and often stems from a faulty view of the findings of philosophy and natural science as well (see chapter 3).

Against both of these extreme positions, it has been argued here that the Gospels must be subjected to the same type of historical scrutiny given to other writings of antiquity but that they can stand up to such scrutiny admirably. Admittedly, this conclusion represents a ‘minority report’ among biblical scholars worldwide, but the minority is not nearly as small as it was even twenty years ago. At the time of its publication, the *Gospel Perspectives* series, on which this study drew so heavily, commanded widespread approval among the five hundred or so members of two international, interdenominational societies of biblical and theological scholars: the British-based Tyndale Fellowship and its North American counterpart, the Institute for Biblical Research. Most of the series’ contributors belonged to one of these societies. Both organizations have continued to flourish and grow larger and more influential in the last two decades, so the support for viewpoints similar to those espoused here within the guild of New Testament scholarship would today represent a post-Second World War record high, both in terms of the total number of scholars involved and in terms of the percentage of total scholars represented.

If the general trustworthiness of the Gospels (or at least of a sizable portion of their multiply attested contours) represents a verdict that careful historical analysis can yield regardless of the specific theological or confessional perspectives of its practitioners and if we can know with considerable probability much of what the historical Jesus was all about,² why do so many still reflect such intense scepticism and/or produce such aberrant portraits of Jesus? The answers vary from one person to the next. Antisupernaturalism is still deeply entrenched in some circles, even where it is not explicitly affirmed. Some, more aware of the proper use of historical criticism, nevertheless implement that criticism inconsistently. Others seem merely to bow to the pressure of consensus in certain circles, reiterating what is most academically respectable in those circles without ever seriously grappling with unfashionable

2. For good non-evangelical examples, see Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, esp. pp. 90–124; Gnilka, *Jesus of Nazareth*, esp. 12–25; and Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism*, esp. 187–207. Cf. also Catchpole, *Jesus People*; Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean*; Keck, *Who Is Jesus?*; L. T. Johnson, *Living Jesus*; Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*; Schweizer, *Jesus, the Parable of God*; Stuhlmacher, *Jesus of Nazareth – Christ of Faith*; and Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 4 vols. (1991–).

alternatives. Surprisingly, many seem to remain unaware of a large number of the studies surveyed in this volume. Other individuals recognize the strength of our case, but realize the changes in their lives they would need to make if they took the religious steps that follow logically from an acceptance of the Gospels' message, and they are unprepared to make those changes. In still other cases, however, scholars appear genuinely convinced that the historical evidence points to different conclusions. One must sincerely respect their right to this opinion, but this book is offered in the hope of illustrating the types of arguments that would have to be countered successfully if such opinion is to be persuasively supported. More often than not, it seems that the full weight of the case for the Gospels' trustworthiness has not been felt and the full range of arguments left unaddressed.

The question of presuppositions remains equally crucial. At the lay level, too many conservatives summarily dismiss sceptical studies as merely developing the logical inferences of invalid assumptions. To be sure, this allegation has some force, but few works are so consistently deductive that they contain no discussion of hard data for others to take the time to sift through. Similarly, more radical critics regularly charge conservatives with concluding only what their beliefs about Jesus and the Bible already permit. This charge is also occasionally valid. Perhaps some will try to apply it to this book. In other words, the series on which it is based represents the research of committed evangelicals, so it surprises no-one that its conclusions are conservative. The crucial difference, however, is that this research has self-consciously tried to avoid presupposing the infallibility of Scripture or the deity of Christ, but has merely attempted to follow the standard methods of historical enquiry. It derives from a willingness to consider the possibility that these traditional beliefs might have to be abandoned if historical investigation were to demonstrate them to be unwarranted. No such demonstration has yet appeared. On the other hand, the critical scholarship that has already abandoned these beliefs virtually never considers where its investigations might lead if it questioned *its* starting point and took seriously the possibility of the divine origin of Scripture and of Jesus.

In the introduction to this volume, it was argued that C. S. Lewis's famous 'trilemma' overlooked an important fourth possibility. If Jesus was not the Lord as the Gospels claimed he was, he need not have been a liar or a lunatic; the stories themselves could have been legendary (see p. 22). Although the difficulty of trying to summarize so much detail in short compass has become obvious, an attempt has been made to look at all the *main* reasons why parts of the Gospels have been viewed as legendary or unhistorical. Those reasons all seem unconvincing. Conversely, there are numerous strong arguments for

trusting the portraits of Jesus that they paint. The Gospels may thus be trusted as historically reliable. Now Lewis's conclusion follows with relentless logic:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.³

Yet that is one thing biblical critics too often continue to say. If it is unfair to begin historical enquiry by superimposing a theological interpretation over it, it is equally unfair to ignore the theological implications that arise from it. It is thus the earnest desire of all of the contributors to the *Gospel Perspectives* series, and of many other recent researchers, that the growing openness to the reliability of the Gospel tradition in many scholarly circles will continue to increase and that the invitation to discipleship the historical Jesus extended to those who heard him will be heeded within the walls of academe and beyond. It is the aim of this book to bring the academic debate to a wider readership and to introduce its audience to the substantial body of literature that supports the historicity of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Readers ought not to stop with the conclusion of this book but to be encouraged to immerse themselves in the rich resources of modern Gospel scholarship surveyed here.

3. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 52.

APPENDIX A: ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE GOSPELS

On hearing that a book is on the historical reliability of a certain part of the Bible, some people immediately think that a large segment of it will discuss archaeology. There are certainly key portions of Scripture where archaeology plays an instrumental role in assessing trustworthiness. One thinks, for example, of the famous debates over the date and extent of Joshua's conquest of Jericho, or of the Israelites' settlement of Canaan more generally.¹ In the New Testament, excavations in some of the cities to which Jesus and Paul travelled have illuminated all kinds of issues of historical background.²

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1. An outstanding compendium of relevant Old Testament archaeology for the historicity of numerous portions of the Old Testament, as well as a very comprehensive treatment of Old Testament trustworthiness more generally, is Kitchen, *Reliability of the Old Testament*. See also, in order of decreasing size and technical nature, Long, Baker and Wenham, *Windows into Old Testament History*; and Kaiser, *Old Testament Documents*.
 2. See the works noted on p. 20, n. 3. In addition, cf. the updated version of Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller*; Fant and Reddish, *Guide to Biblical Sites*; and esp. Charlesworth, *Jesus and Archaeology*. For both testaments together, still helpful though a bit dated, is Blaiklock and Harrison, *Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. Less comprehensive but more recent is Laughlin, *Archaeology and the Bible*. An excellent, popular-level

With respect just to the Gospels, however, two somewhat opposite tendencies emerge. On the one hand, to the extent that the bulk of the contents of these documents contain claims about what Jesus *did*, especially his mighty deeds or miracles, and what he *said*, especially his Christological claims and ethical mandates, then archaeology will help little with establishing if Jesus in fact did or said these things. Short of some spectacular documentary find of new papyri or parchments of notes someone took of Jesus' messages or accounts of his deeds traceable to the first half of the first century (or to something Jesus himself penned!), archaeology will never help us demonstrate that Jesus really did or did not do or say something that the New Testament Gospels claim. That is why this book does not devote a discrete chapter or even a major subsection of a chapter to the topic.

On the other hand, archaeology can demonstrate that the places mentioned in the Gospels really existed and that customs, living conditions, topography, household and workplace furniture and tools, roads, coins, buildings and numerous other 'stage props' corresponded to how the Gospels describe them. It can show that the names of certain characters in the Gospels are accurate, when we find inscriptional references to them elsewhere. Events and teachings ascribed to Jesus become intelligible and therefore plausible when read against everything we know about life in Palestine in the first third of the first century. The 'city on a hill' that 'cannot be hidden' (Matt. 5:14) becomes all the more vivid when one looks across the Sea of Galilee from Tiberias to the ruins of Hippos that tower in the distance on the southern end of the Golan Heights. John's and Jesus' ministries of baptism were most likely immersions, in view of the many *mikwa'ot* or immersion pools for ritual purification that dot the Israeli landscape and appear in an intense cluster near the temple ruins. Jesus' famous saying about giving to Caesar what was his and to God what *his* (Mark 12:17 pars.) makes even more sense when one discovers that most of the Roman coins in use at this time had images of Caesar on them. The long, skinny-necked glass perfume jars that have been unearthed make it easy to visualize how one would break them and pour their contents over a person when anointing them (cf. John 12:3 pars.; Luke 7:38).

Some findings afford more insight into specific imagery Jesus used in his teaching. One thinks, for example, of the giant millstone used to crush grain in a birdbath-shaped structure, turned by a donkey as it slowly walked around in a circle hitched to a pole that turned the stone. Little wonder that having

overview, highlighting archaeology in particular but broader in overall scope, is Sheler, *Is the Bible True?*

such a stone hung around one's neck as one was thrown into the depths of the sea would refer to decisive, instantaneous drowning (cf. Matt. 18:6). Similarly, one can better envision Jesus' metaphors about receiving 'a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over' (Luke 6:38) after one has observed an ancient stone winepress, in which the grapes were crushed with the juice running out of the bottom. The solid foundation implied by a 'cornerstone' becomes powerfully clear when one views some of the massive 50-ton stones used at the base of the retaining wall that once surrounded the Jerusalem temple (cf. Mark 12:10).³ And while we are not sure if we have located the right site of Gabbatha (John 19:13) or if the paving stones there go back quite to the first century, the markings engraved into one of the stones for what was known as the 'king's game' make the account of the soldiers gambling for Jesus' garment entirely realistic (John 19:23–24).

In some instances, actual sites described in the Gospels *do* appear to have been located, some with ruins dating back, at least in part, to Jesus' very day: the synagogue in Capernaum (cf. Mark 1:21), with Simon Peter's home (v. 29) and that of the synagogue ruler, Jairus (5:22, 38); the pool of Bethesda with its five porticoes, near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem (John 5:2); and the pool of Siloam also in Jerusalem (9:7). A first-century tiled mosaic of a fishing boat with the inscription of 'Magdala' helped to identify the location of Mary Magdalene's home town (cf. Luke 8:2). An ancient Byzantine church near the eastern banks of the Sea of Galilee commemorates the site of Khersa, where the pigs probably ran over the cliff and drowned in the waters below (Mark 5:13 pars.). The location of Jacob's well at Sychar, where Jesus is said to have met the Samaritan woman in John 4:5–6, is well attested. Of course, the many Herodian structures around Israel that remain or have been reconstructed (the aqueduct and amphitheatre at Caesarea Maritima, the Western Wall that abutted the Temple Mount, the summer palace/fortress of Herodium [Herodion] south of Jerusalem and so on) all combine with literary accounts to demonstrate the power and ruthlessness of Herod's rule.⁴

Some finds remain comparatively recent, reminding us that there may yet be many more treasures to be discovered in Israel. A discovery in 1941 of ossuaries (bone boxes) in a Kidron Valley tomb in Jerusalem appears to have

3. Some translations render 'capstone', but that is a less likely meaning for an expression that literally reads 'head of the corner'.

4. For discussion of most of the examples in the last three paragraphs and numerous other similar ones, see Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee*; idem, *With Jesus in Jerusalem*; idem, *Wège des Messias*; and Echegaray, *Arqueología y evangelios*.

disclosed the small coffins of the family of Simon of Cyrene (cf. Mark 15:21).⁵ Not until 1961 did inscriptional evidence appear – at Caesarea Maritima – recording that Pontius Pilate was prefect of Judea during the reign of Tiberius Caesar (cf. Matt. 27:2; Luke 3:1). In 1968, an ossuary of a crucified man named Johanan proved what had previously been doubted: that the Romans actually nailed ankle bones of victims they crucified to the wood of the cross (which seems to be implied by a comparison of Luke 24:39 and John 20:25). In 1986, during a record-setting drought around the Sea of Galilee, a first-century fishing boat capable of holding twelve or thirteen people surfaced. Today it is housed in a museum and dubbed ‘the Jesus boat’, though of course we have no way of knowing if Christ ever used it. Still, it stands as a dramatic discovery from the right time and place to give the Gospels historical verisimilitude. In 1990, the coffin of what may well be the high priest Caiaphas was unearthed.⁶ As recently as 2002, another ossuary came to light, with an inscription that read ‘James son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.’ Scholars have debated if the words, ‘brother of Jesus’ were added by a later hand than that which carved the first part. If so, the likelihood of it being the same James that appears in the Gospels and Acts and who authored the letter of James diminishes notably. Barring new evidence, the current scholarly debate over its authenticity may remain deadlocked.⁷ Much less likely though just possibly authentic is the so-called cave of John the Baptist allegedly identified in 2004 not far from Ein Kerem.⁸

Other discoveries provide excellent ‘object lessons’ for the curious reader of the Gospels. Sites that may well not be the actual places where various events are said to have occurred nevertheless look similar enough to what the Gospels describe so as to make their canonical descriptions plausible. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is much more likely to have been the place, or very close to the place, where Jesus was buried, than ‘Gordon’s Calvary’. But the latter retains the rugged rocky appearance that once characterized much of the landscape around Jerusalem, with stone outcrops that make the side of

5. Skinner, *Golgotha*, p. 112.

6. The identification has been disputed by Horbury, ‘“Caiaphas” Ossuaries and Joseph Caiaphas’, pp. 32–48, though his scepticism seems to represent the minority position.

7. For the full account, see Shanks, ‘Remarkable Discovery’, pp. 1–87.

8. The case has been made by S. Gibson, *Cave of John the Baptist*. To date, however, he has garnered almost no followers. The evidence is simply far too meagre and circumstantial.

the hill look very much like a large skull (the meaning of Golgotha). The tourist site near Bethphage with its rolling-stone tomb may very well resemble even more closely the kind of burial cave in which Jesus was (temporarily!) interred than the more famous Garden Tomb near Gordon's Calvary in Jerusalem itself. Or again, one has to visit the Talmudic village of Qatsrin to see more than just the foundations of traditional small town houses. But the styles are relatively unchanged from Jesus' day. One can even see places where remnants of thatched roofs explain how, for example, the paralytic's friends could have dug through and lowered him to where Jesus was in the house below (Mark 2:4). The traditional Mount of Beatitudes is merely that – traditional. But it contains a large plateau not too far up from the Sea of Galilee where to this day hundreds, if not thousands, of people can hear a speaker who climbs up higher on the rocky hillside, knows how to project his or her voice and has favourable tailwinds. It is not at all difficult to imagine Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount/Plain in a location like this. Finally, James Charlesworth goes so far as to say that 'perhaps the new discoveries of a vineyard with walls, a winepress, and a tower just to the west of first-century Nazareth should be considered among the most important archaeological discoveries for Jesus Research' (confirming the accuracy of the imagery of Mark 12:3).⁹

Excavated artefacts can sometimes give insights into the meanings of specific *words or phrases* in the Gospels. The solitary word *corban* (dedicated to God; cf. Mark 7:10) has appeared on a Jewish sarcophagus, apparently to ward off grave robbers. We know from the shape of the temple and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem that there were no 'pinnacles' (steeple or spire), only 'porticoes' or porches (cf. the various translations of Matt. 4:5 and Luke 4:9), but the south-east portico still towered high enough over the Kidron Valley below to make the devil's tempting Jesus to throw himself off, so that angels could rescue him, a dramatic scenario indeed. The mysterious phrase in Matthew 26:50, translating Jesus' address to Judas in the garden (*epi ho parei*; literally, 'for what you are here') has been taken as a statement ('[This is] why you are here'), a command ('[Do] that for which you are here') and a question ('Why are you here?'). The discovery of these words inscribed on an early first-century Israeli drinking beaker, following the word 'Rejoice', which appear to mean, 'That's why you are here,' suggest that the first of these three interpretations of Matthew 26:50 is best.¹⁰

9. Charlesworth, 'Jesus Research and Archaeology', p. 38.

10. Klassen, 'Judas and Jesus', p. 506.

Frequently, extensive excavations at one particular site can help us get a general feel for certain aspects of culture or religion. The two largest cities in Galilee in Jesus' day never appear by name in the Gospels: Sepphoris, only four or five miles north of Nazareth, and Tiberias, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Because these were, in turn, the provincial capitals of Galilee, it has often been suggested that they would have been the most Hellenized of the communities in that region. Jesus, with his mission to reach the 'Jew first' might have avoided them for that reason. But extended digs, particularly at Sepphoris, have demonstrated plenty of artefacts reflecting Jewish culture, and the absence of pig bones in the ancient equivalent of our rubbish dumps (where in truly Hellenized cities one finds them in abundance). Jerusalem too had plenty of Hellenistic inroads into that bastion of Jewish orthodoxy, yet this did not keep Jesus away from all of Israel's capital. Unless it is mere coincidence, due to the Gospel writers' selectivity, the silence concerning Sepphoris and Tiberias probably has to do with Jesus avoiding premature political conflict with the Gentile authorities in those locations. Before his ministry, and in non-ministry-related contexts even after his baptism by John, he probably had a number of occasions to visit these towns.¹¹

These illustrations should suffice to indicate the kinds of help archaeology can provide for a study of the historicity of the Gospels. Had the results of excavation in Israel turned out quite differently, one might want to argue that the testimony of the stones and artefacts called into question significant portions of the Evangelists' accounts. But this is not at all the impression one gets when one surveys a broad swathe of study of the relevant sites. Indeed, the results remain quite confirming of the Gospels' historical verisimilitude. But, as we noted at the outset, this does not prove that Jesus actually did or said the things attributed to him at the various places that have been accurately described. At that point one has to investigate the issues described in the rest of this book.

11. For all of the points in this paragraph, see esp. Reed, *Archaeology and Galilean Jesus*, and Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean*. Contra significant portions of R. A. Horsley, *Archaeology, History and Society*.

APPENDIX B: TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND THE GOSPELS

Either Bart Ehrman or his editors have certainly developed the knack for producing sensationalized and potentially misleading titles for some of his scholarly books. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (1993) for the most part highlighted numerous small textual variants scattered throughout the New Testament produced over the centuries during which the Greek New Testament was copied by hand that reinforced orthodox Christian beliefs. For example, scribes would frequently turn a single name or title for Jesus into two or three. If the original text read 'Lord Jesus' the word 'Christ' might be added; if it read 'Jesus Christ', then 'Lord' might be inserted up front. No new beliefs about Jesus were being created; standard ones were merely reinforced. Technically speaking, these scribes were 'corrupting' the text of Scripture in the sense that they had inserted words that the original writers had not penned, but they were not distorting its overall meaning nor inventing doctrines their predecessors had not believed.

In a comparatively few instances, scribes might use a stronger term than the documents from which they were copying to reinforce orthodox belief, for example, in Jesus as God. Thus John 1:18 finds the manuscripts divided between calling Jesus 'the one and only Son' and 'the one and only God'. Actually, a good case can be made for seeing the latter as the original reading and the former as the product of later scribes conforming the text to John's

preferred language elsewhere. But even if Ehrman is right that the lines of ‘corruption’ run in the opposite direction,¹ it is not as if John did not believe in Jesus as God. His is the Gospel that most *affirms* that belief, in plenty of textually undisputed passages, from 1:1 through to 20:28.

Ehrman’s books *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* and *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (both published 2003) made it sound as if there were ‘Christian’ documents of at least as ancient a pedigree as the canonical Gospels, along with entire divergent branches of the faith originally just as old and credible as what came to be known as orthodoxy. Resurrecting Walter Bauer’s frequently refuted hypothesis that beliefs later deemed heretical at times even predated supposed apostolic doctrine,² Ehrman in essence created a pair of works that could have been combined and called ‘The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture, Part Two’. Only this time, the ‘corruption’ really did change central doctrines and transform the faith into something substantively different – or so goes the claim. In fact, as we have already seen, these non-canonical Gospels and non-apostolic doctrines were almost entirely second century or later in origin. *They* distorted first-century Christianity and its documents, not the other way around.³

With *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (2005) we come to the most misleading title so far. Here Ehrman focuses primarily on the most extensive and interesting of the textual variants within the New Testament and, for the most part, suggests plausible motives for those changes. What he fails to do is to put these variants in perspective by informing his readers that only two variants anywhere affect more than a couple of verses, that only eleven involve even a full verse or two, that the consensus among textual critics is that in the modern critical editions of the Greek New Testament we have, either in the text itself or the footnotes upwards of 97% of what the original authors wrote reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt, and that no doctrine of the Christian faith depends solely on one or more textually uncertain passages.⁴

Readers who want to see this for themselves can look at the small selection of textual-critical footnotes that appear in most modern translations of the

1. *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, pp. 78–82.

2. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*.

3. See, most recently and in massive detail, Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*.

4. See further Wallace, *Gospel according to Bart*, pp. 327–349; cf. my review of *Misquoting Jesus* in *Denver Journal* 9 (2006), accessible at www.denverseminary.edu.

Bible, including English translations, or, with a little Greek under their belts, the more extensive textual-critical apparatus that appears in the United Bible Societies and Nestle-Aland editions of the Greek New Testament. They can then also consult B. M. Metzger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (rev. 1994), which explains why the editors chose the specific textual variants they did at each juncture. Of course, even these works have omitted hundreds of inconsequential variants: variations of spelling, the insertion or omission of minor connective words, or readings for which the manuscript support is so paltry or late or obviously intended to harmonize parallels, clarify meaning or smooth out rough wording that it is easy to determine what the original writers first inscribed.

Three main reasons suggest themselves for not devoting a larger section, in the main text of this book, to the issue of textual criticism. First, there are already a plethora of excellent resources on this topic available, from David Black's tiny introductory primer⁵ all the way to the Alands' standard scholarly reference work.⁶ At an intermediate level, the works by Greenlee and Wegner answer almost every question most interested readers will have.⁷ Second, despite popular-level confusion on this topic in numerous contexts, textual criticism does not as directly bear on the question of historical reliability as the rest of the topics in this volume. If we had reason to suspect that we did not have a reasonably accurate reconstruction of the original text of the Gospels (or of any other document), then there would be little point assessing its historicity. The original 'autographs' might require a much different verdict than their 'corrupt' descendants. But even if we had the originals preserved intact without a single variation, all this would demonstrate is that we had flawless knowledge of what the original authors wrote. Nothing about the accuracy or truthfulness of what they wrote would yet have been determined.

Third, for the same reason, even the most sensationalized packaging of a discussion of the most dramatic textual variants proves nothing about the inaccuracy or unreliability of the originals. What is often forgotten is that the only way we know, for example, that the longer ending of Mark or the account of the woman caught in adultery were not in the autographs that Mark and John penned is because the oldest and most reliable copies do not contain them, and those manuscripts that do contain them display far more divergent versions of them than is true of any other comparable stretch of the Gospels.

5. D. A. Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism*.

6. Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*.

7. Greenlee, *New Testament Textual Criticism*; Wegner, *Student's Guide*.

Indeed, in the case of what has come to be known as John 7:53 – 8:11, a number of manuscripts that do include part or all of this passage add asterisks or obeli in the margins to indicate the scribes' doubt about whether it should be included, while a few manuscripts actually insert the passage after John 7:36 or 21:25 or even in Luke, after 21:38 or 24:43, rather than in John at all.⁸ Put another way, without all the variants, mostly uncovered in the last three hundred years or so, we *would* think that we had accurate originals almost everywhere but we would be wrong. With so many additional, earlier texts having come to light, the very process of discovering *more* variants has enabled us to reconstruct what the Gospel writers first authored with a much *higher* degree of confidence.

The logical conclusion of this discussion is that, given the current state of the data available to us, the only way that textual criticism could undermine confidence in our ability to reconstruct the original Gospels with an extraordinarily high degree of probable success is if there were reason to believe that there were numerous, substantive, theologically distorting textual variants that we have *not* yet discovered from the earliest period of transmission. Ehrman seems to suggest that we might have precisely such evidence, since the number and nature of significant variants in the late second and third centuries to which we do have access seem greater than in later centuries.⁹ But again this phrases things backwards and therefore misleads. The later the century, in general, the more texts there are that have been preserved, because the less time there has been for them to deteriorate and/or be lost or discarded. Plus, with the process of canonization virtually complete by the fourth century, and the respect for the texts as sacred that this accorded, there was even more of a concern among scribes for as flawless copying as possible. Both of these factors will lead to a smaller percentage of the available manuscripts being affected by substantive variants.

What the data do *not* demonstrate is that prior to canonization there was any higher percentage of variation among *all* manuscripts available at that time, precisely because we do not have the vast majority of those manuscripts any longer. The more manuscripts we have for a given period, the more we can reliably approximate the percentage of differences among all the texts of that era. The fewer texts we have, the more we must simply remain agnostic as to how much variation there was, rather than confidently positing a more 'fluid' period of transmission.

8. See the textual apparatus of the United Bible Societies Greek New Testament, ed. Aland et al., ad loc., for details.

9. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, pp. 72–74.

Nor does the smaller quantity of manuscripts we have from before the late fourth century demonstrate any *decreasing* amount of variation as the decades proceeded *prior to canonization*. So we cannot fairly extrapolate backwards and assume that in the very earliest decades following the appearance of the Gospels the greatest amount of variations should have been expected. Indeed, everything we know of Jewish and Graeco-Roman scribal practice in copying respected (even if not canonical) texts mitigates against this assumption, *even more* than in the case of oral tradition, where, as we have seen, some fluidity in transmission within fixed limits was common.¹⁰

An outstanding introductory-level refutation of Ehrman's distinctive theses about textual criticism and the history of early Christianity now appears in Timothy P. Jones's *Misquoting Truth* (2007). More thorough, but still quite readable, are the volumes by Komoszewski, Sawyer and Wallace, and by Darrell Bock,¹¹ which debunk the myths of uncontrolled textual transmission and of lost Gospels and lost Christianities ('myths' not least because Ehrman's theses are based on documents and data that *do* exist and are not lost, nor have their general contents *ever* been lost, even if certain specific documents have only again come to light in recent decades). Suffice it to say here that the value of textual criticism for either proving or disproving the *historical* accuracy of the original contents of the Gospels has been too often overestimated.

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10. Whatever lack of fit Gerhardsson, in his numerous writings produced by at times relying on scribal tendencies to explain the transmission of *oral* tradition, his works amply document this point for the copying of *written* texts.
 11. Komoszewski, Sawyer and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*; Bock, *Missing Gospels*.

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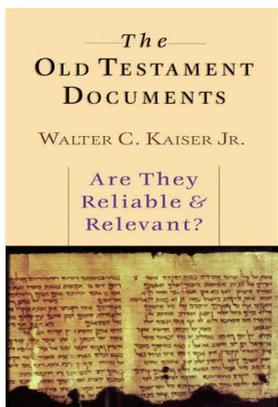
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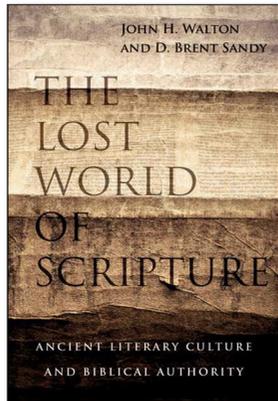
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