

# Synoptic Criticism and Evangelical Christian Apologetics<sup>1</sup>



ROBERT M. BOWMAN, JR.  
*Director of Research  
Institute for Religious  
Research (irr.org)  
Grand Rapids, Michigan.  
rob@irr.org*

## INTRODUCTION

Issues in Synoptic criticism play a significant role in evangelical Christian apologetics. This is because such apologetics commonly focuses on defending the central Christian claims about Jesus Christ's life, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection. Yet evangelicals have widely differing views on how to handle such matters as the Synoptic problem, redaction criticism, and harmonization of the Gospels. This paper briefly reviews aspects of the debate over Synoptic Gospel criticism as it relates to evangelical Christian apologetics. For the sake of clarity and focus I will present this review in the form of a series of ten theses.

**1. One's solution to the Synoptic Problem should not be chosen for its apologetic utility but for its fidelity to the facts, realizing that in the end the better we understand the facts the stronger our apologetic will be.**

The task of Christian apologetics is to defend the *truth* of the Christian faith, which means that one must first recognize and accept

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<sup>1</sup> A shortened version of this paper was read at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Baltimore, MD, on November 21, 2013.

the truth prior to defending it. There is no value in adopting a position on the Synoptic problem, or anything else, because it seems more useful for defending our views on something else. We must be prepared to abandon or revise certain apologetic arguments if the evidence calls those arguments into question. For example, the theory that the Synoptic Gospels give us three completely independent testimonies to the events they report in common may have to be reconsidered if we find that there is some literary relationship among them. For example, according to the “two-source” theory, Matthew and Luke both made use of Mark as well as of another source that is no longer extant (conventionally known as Q). Other theories propose different literary relationships, such as that Mark used Matthew while Luke used both Mark and Matthew (the “Mark without Q” view), that Luke used Matthew and then Mark used both Matthew and Luke (the Griesbach or “two-Gospel” theory), or that Luke used Matthew while Mark used both Matthew and Luke (the “Augustinian” hypothesis). If *any* of these views is correct, two of the Gospels are dependent on one or two of the others.<sup>2</sup>

Abandoning one line of apologetic argument does not mean forfeiting the case for the truth of the Gospels but rather exchanging a weaker apologetic for a stronger one. For example, standard views in Synoptic criticism identify not just three, but as many as *five* independent sources for Jesus’ actions and sayings. These sources include Mark’s main source (traditionally identified as Peter<sup>3</sup>), a pre-Markan “passion narrative” or passion narrative sources,<sup>4</sup> the source dubbed Q, and the sources of Matthew’s special material (M) and Luke’s special material (L). Furthermore, at least three of these five commonly identified sources would probably have *predated* all of the Synoptic Gospels. This stronger argument is not warrant for accepting the two-source theory—only an analysis of the texts can provide such

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<sup>2</sup> A good overview of these theories may be found in Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 37-47.

<sup>3</sup> For a defense of this tradition, see especially Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), esp. 155-81.

<sup>4</sup> A cautious, non-evangelical treatment of the issue of pre-Markan passion narrative(s) is found in the moderate Roman Catholic scholar Raymond E. Brown’s book *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1:36-93.

warrant—but it exemplifies the point that the apologist should not be afraid to follow the evidence where it leads.

**2. Evangelicals who advocate an evidentialist approach to apologetics are generally more likely to favor the two-source theory or other literary-dependence theory of Synoptic origins, while evangelicals who advocate a presuppositional approach to apologetics are generally more inclined to question such literary-dependence theories or at least to regard them as of little value.**

In *The Jesus Crisis*, Robert Thomas took Craig Blomberg to task for his advocacy of an “evidentialist” approach to the Gospels in contrast to a “presuppositional” approach that assumes that the Bible is inspired. Thomas commented that Blomberg’s approach “includes an embracing of the same methodology as those of radical persuasions.”<sup>5</sup> The comment, though meant as a criticism, gets at a significant divide among evangelicals with regard to apologetics. Evidentialists do in fact seek to defend the Christian faith utilizing methods that are also used by non-Christians. According to evidentialist John Warwick Montgomery, “Christianity...declares that the truth of its absolute claims rests squarely on certain historical facts, open to ordinary investigation.”<sup>6</sup> It follows that one may use “ordinary” methods of investigation to show that those historical facts are indeed facts. Such methods may conclude, however, at best that the historical claims of Christianity are factual with some high degree of probability or confidence, not that they are apodictically or absolutely certain.

By contrast with evidentialists, presuppositional apologists maintain that methods of science and history inevitably reflect the presuppositions or typically unstated assumptions of those who employ those methods. Thus Cornelius Van Til, the architect of the most influential version of presuppositionalism, regarded any apologetic argument that ends in a *probable* conclusion as a compromise of the

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<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “Introduction: The ‘Jesus Crisis’: What Is It?” in *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (ed. Robert L. Thomas & F. David Farnell; Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), 29-30, n. 13.

<sup>6</sup> John Warwick Montgomery, “The Jury Returns: A Juridical Defense of Christianity,” in *Evidence for Faith: Deciding the God Question* (ed. John Warwick Montgomery; Cornell Symposium on Evidential Apologetics 1986; Dallas, TX: Probe Books, 1991), 319.

gospel. "A really fruitful historical apologetic argues that every fact is and *must be* such as proves the truth of the Christian position."<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, an apologetic stance of this type precludes historical methods of critical inquiry into the Gospel sources, since such historical methods do not presuppose the historical truth of the Gospel narratives. As a result, scholars who explicitly advocate Van Til's apologetic methodology rarely even discuss Synoptic criticism. An interesting exception is Vern Poythress, whose recent book *Inerrancy and the Gospels* devotes a chapter to the Synoptic problem. Poythress suspects that as many as hundreds of pieces of written materials of varying length and subject matter pertaining to the life of Jesus were generated even before his crucifixion. The Gospels may have drawn on any of these sources as well as oral sources (from apostles and others). He concludes that the situation is simply too complex to permit any definite conclusions regarding the literary origins of the Gospels, pronouncing the Synoptic problem "unsolvable."<sup>8</sup> What is noteworthy about Poythress's treatment is that he neither dismisses the question by critiquing the methods scholars use to investigate such matters nor denies a priori the possibility of any of the specific theories of Synoptic origins. He leaves open the possibility that Matthew used Mark, and he agrees that Luke probably used some earlier sources. Indeed, his conclusion is that Matthew and Luke may have used many *more* sources than scholars commonly acknowledge.

It should be noted that the landscape of apologetic methodology is far more complex than just the two types known as evidentialism and presuppositionalism. There are other schools of thought in apologetic theory such as classical apologetics, Reformed epistemology, and even rational fideism, though the last of these often strikes other apologists as a contradiction in terms. There are also integrative approaches that seek in various ways to combine elements of more than one apologetic methodology. Many evangelical thinkers do not fit neatly into any typology category of apologetic methodology. Moreover, evangelical scholars, being individuals, hold varying opinions that sometimes cut

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<sup>7</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Nutley, NJ/Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967), 199. For a discussion of this statement, perhaps the most often quoted statement in Van Til's writings, see Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005), 277-80.

<sup>8</sup> Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 123.

across the lines of such distinctions between differing apologetic methodologies.<sup>9</sup> Thus some evangelicals who eschew the customary Synoptic literary critical methods are not self-avowed proponents of presuppositionalism; and evidentialists, though all of them are open to those methods, do not all reach the same conclusions as to the literary relationships among the Synoptics.

In the second edition of his book *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, Blomberg discusses both evidentialist and presuppositionalist approaches to the Gospels and suggests, "Surely there is a place for both approaches." He argues that "it is possible to defend the accuracy of much of Scripture on purely historical grounds" using "widely accepted historical criteria to demonstrate the general trustworthiness of the Scriptures." However, Blomberg suggests that presuppositionalists can and should seek to offer considered responses to skeptics beyond simply rejecting their presuppositions.<sup>10</sup>

**3. Broadly speaking, evangelicals who work from such literary-dependence theories as the two-source theory are focused on defending the substantial historicity of the Gospels against extreme skepticism, while evangelicals who advocate literary-independence theories are focused on defending the inerrancy of the Gospels against what they consider compromises by other evangelicals. The former argue based on what can be shown using historical methods of inquiry; the latter argue based on what the doctrine of inerrancy is understood to require with regard to the harmony of the Gospels.**

This point is obviously related to the preceding point about apologetic methodologies. In some respects evangelicals who take opposing positions on Synoptic origins often have different agendas.

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<sup>9</sup> See further Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, which proposes ways of integrating valuable elements of other apologetic systems into one's own preferred approach (see especially 483-93).

<sup>10</sup> Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 35, citing C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 231-301. For an analysis of the approach to apologetics advanced by Evans in this and other books, see Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 459-72.

The difference is one of emphasis or focus or orientation to the task, not an absolute disparity: both groups of evangelicals care about both biblical historicity and inerrancy.

**4. The inspiration of the Gospels as Scripture implies no particular conclusions regarding the literary origins of the Synoptic Gospels. None of the Synoptic Gospels claims to have been written or composed by an eyewitness. The only canonical Gospel that makes that claim is the Fourth Gospel. Dogmatism on such matters not actually addressed in Scripture is not warranted for evangelicals.**

The only canonical Gospel that actually claims to have been written by an eyewitness is the Gospel of John (19:34-35; 21:24-25). Tradition credits the apostle Matthew, another eyewitness, as the author of the First Gospel, and that tradition may be correct. If tradition is correct, Mark, the author of the Second Gospel, may have been an eyewitness of some of the events narrated in that writing, but probably not of most of those events. However, neither the First Gospel nor the Second Gospel actually states that it was composed utilizing eyewitness testimony. And everyone agrees that Luke was not an eyewitness at all of any of the events reported in his Gospel.

One reason why many evangelicals specifically oppose the two-source theory is that it seems to undermine the apostolic origin of Matthew since, it is commonly argued, the apostle Matthew would not have used Mark, a Gospel written by a non-apostle, as the basis for his own work. However, since the NT nowhere attributes the First Gospel to Matthew, it is not necessary theologically to defend Matthean authorship to uphold biblical inerrancy. Nor is it necessary that the tradition of Matthean authorship be correct in order for the Gospel to be the product of apostolic eyewitness testimony. The author might have drawn much of his unique material from Matthew, for example, without Matthew himself authoring the text.

In the very first issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Ned Stonehouse offered the following observation:

I personally am strongly persuaded of the apostolic authorship of Matthew. Nevertheless, in keeping with the main point that I have been making, it appears to me to be essential to distinguish qualitatively in this matter also between the

testimony of tradition and that of Scripture itself. Matthew is an anonymous work in that it does not make any claim to Matthaean authorship. One may therefore be influenced by the strength of the tradition and by the complete congruity of the contents of Matthew therewith firmly to maintain the traditional position concerning its authorship. Nevertheless we should not elevate such a conclusion to the status of an article of the Christian faith. Such articles of faith should be based securely upon the teaching of Scripture.<sup>11</sup>

**5. Evangelicals should feel free to continue exploring any and all solutions to the Synoptic Problem, including literary independence theories, oral tradition theories, and literary interdependence theories.**

Literary-dependence theories of Synoptic origins have a long history. The early fifth-century church father Augustine proposed that Matthew was written first, that Mark produced a digest of Matthew, and that Luke drew on both Matthew and Mark. In the Reformation era, Martin Chemnitz, the father of Lutheran orthodoxy, endorsed Augustine's view. This "Augustinian Hypothesis" has had few defenders in recent decades, John Wenham being by far the most notable. Augustine was also the first Christian theologian to espouse the view that the Gospels did not follow a strict chronological order in their accounts. Virtually all Gospel scholars today concur with Augustine on this point.

Despite the venerable history of discerning literary relationships among the Synoptic Gospels, in modern times many evangelicals have regarded some or even all such theories with deep suspicion if not hostility. Some evangelicals, while not eschewing all Synoptic literary criticism, sharply denounce the two-source theory. John Niemelä, for example, considers those who accept that particular theory as compromisers who have "bowed the knee to Baal."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Norman Geisler and William Roach claim that "total inerrantists, such as the framers of the ETS and ICBI statements, have difficulty" with the view

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<sup>11</sup> Ned B. Stonehouse, "1957 Presidential Address: 'The Infallibility of Scripture and Evangelical Progress,'" *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 1.1 (Winter 1958): 11.

<sup>12</sup> John H. Niemelä, "Two-Gospel Response," in *Three Views on the Origins of Gospel Origins*, ed. Thomas, 110.

that “Mark was the first Gospel written.”<sup>13</sup> Other evangelicals regard all theories of literary relationships among the Gospels as anathema. David Farnell asserts that “it is impossible to assume literary dependence without denigrating the accuracy of the Synoptic Gospels.”<sup>14</sup> According to Robert Thomas, “since its founding in 1948 the Evangelical Theological Society has been favorably inclined toward the independence position regarding the Synoptic Gospels.”<sup>15</sup>

The evidence suggests that these claims are far from the case. Michael Strickland’s 2011 dissertation reviewed every article in the first half-century of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)* that even mentioned the Synoptic problem. He found that 27 articles and book reviews expressed preference for the two-source theory, five expressed support for Markan priority without addressing other issues of Synoptic origins, one argued for the two-Gospel theory, one argued for the Farrer theory, and four (three by Thomas and one by Geisler) argued for independence. Some 93 other articles and reviews commented in some way on the Synoptic Problem without expressing clear support for any particular view of the matter.<sup>16</sup> In an editorial introduction to the March 1999 issue of *JETS* that included Norman Geisler’s presidential address at the 1998 ETS convention in which he warned against all historical criticism of the Gospels,<sup>17</sup> Andreas Köstenberger made the following remark: “For clarification purposes, it should be noted that ETS has no policy on the orthodoxy of certain positions on Gospel criticism or theories of Synoptic interrelationships and that members in good standing hold to a variety of views.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the reality is that there is no historic Christian position on the Synoptic problem and no historic evangelical position. Advocacy of the two-source theory is not a recent intrusion into evangelical Christian scholarship on the Gospels but a position that was

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<sup>13</sup> Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 195.

<sup>14</sup> F. David Farnell, “Independence Response to Chapter One,” in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (ed. Robert L. Thomas; Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002), 124.

<sup>15</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical: Another View,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000): 99.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Strickland, “Evangelicals and the Synoptic Problem” (Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham, 2011), 374.

<sup>17</sup> Norman L. Geisler, “Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars,” *JETS* 42.1 (March 1999): 3-19 (esp. 14-15).

<sup>18</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Editorial,” *JETS* 42.1 (March 1999): 1.



maintained by some evangelicals and criticized by others throughout the twentieth century, a situation that simply continues to this day.

**6. Theories proposing that the Gospels made use of oral traditions, written sources, or both are not necessarily incompatible with acceptance of eyewitness testimony as the ultimate source of the Gospels' contents.**

Geisler and Roach construe Robert Webb as presenting a schema of four successive stages leading to the composition of the canonical Gospels, (1) eyewitness testimony, (2) oral tradition, (3) early collections, and (4) composition of the Gospels. They object to this view, pointing out that eyewitnesses were alive when the Gospels were composed.<sup>19</sup> However, Webb specifically denies that these four stages were chronologically “separate and discrete.” He points out that “these stages overlapped one another” and agrees with Richard Bauckham that “eyewitnesses were still alive during the oral traditioning process.”<sup>20</sup> The criticism also overlooks the possibility that while some of the eyewitnesses were still alive, others had passed away by the time some or all of the Synoptic Gospels were written. Geisler and Roach assert that “the views of evangelical redactionists” are wrong if the NT claim to be based on eyewitness testimony is true.<sup>21</sup> This statement is patently false since evangelicals who employ literary-critical methods agree that the NT Gospels were based on eyewitness testimony. The statement also glosses over the possibility that a text might be *based* on eyewitness testimony but present that testimony in a distinctive, literary way.

**7. Any dates for the Gospels prior to the end of the first century are consistent with their being based in**

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<sup>19</sup> Geisler and Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 196. Similarly, Eta Linnemann has asserted, “There was no period of oral tradition that preceded the formation of the Gospels.” *Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels* (trans. Robert W. Yarbrough; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 181.

<sup>20</sup> Robert L. Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence* (ed. Darrell L. Bock & Robert L. Webb; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 56 n. 123.

<sup>21</sup> Geisler and Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 197.

**eyewitness testimony and with their being inerrant, inspired Scripture.**

Most evangelicals accept a date for the Gospel of John in the 90s, without regarding such a date as compromising its apostolic origin. In principle, then, there can be nothing a priori unacceptable theologically about dating some or all of the Synoptic Gospels to the 70s or 80s, as some evangelical scholars now do. For example, one may agree with Geisler and Roach that Luke was written before AD 62, as I do, but they give no evidence or reason for their claim that holding a different opinion is inconsistent with belief in the inerrancy of Scripture. Their main point here seems to be that a date before AD 70 for Luke or the other Synoptic Gospels means there was not enough time for Gospel material to have undergone any kind of change or redaction.<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to see why this would follow. If sayings of Jesus might have been redacted in some way around, say, AD 75, why would this be impossible around AD 65 or even 55? In any case, a later date for Luke would not necessarily entail its being edited in a way incompatible with its inerrancy, just as most evangelicals agree it would not if the traditional date of John in the 90s is correct.

**8. Literary independence theories are not immune from being construed as implying error on the part of the Gospel authors.**

Ironically, in his zeal to refute theories of literary dependence among the Synoptic Gospels, Robert Thomas cites what he calls “places of disagreement” among the Synoptics: “Matthew and Mark against Luke, Matthew and Luke against Mark, and Mark and Luke against Matthew.”<sup>23</sup> The irony of this argument in a work professing to defend biblical inerrancy against misguided evangelicals seems lost on Thomas. Nor was the statement an isolated instance or verbal slip: in a journal article Thomas also presses “the agreements of two Gospels against a third Gospel” as evidence against literary dependence theories of Synoptic origins.<sup>24</sup> Of course, Thomas does not intend to charge the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 196-97.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas, “Introduction,” in *Jesus Crisis*, ed. Thomas and Farnell, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “Discerning Synoptic Gospel Origins: An Inductive Approach (Part One of Two Parts),” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 15.1 (Spring 2004): 12.

Synoptic Gospels with contradicting one another. Neither do evangelicals who reject literary independence.

**9. The dogmatic stance that the Gospels must be interpreted consistently as presenting the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus Christ is hermeneutically unsound, textually indefensible, and theologically unnecessary.**

Darrell Bock has given several arguments against the theory that the Gospels record the *ipsissima verba* or exact words of Jesus.<sup>25</sup> (1) Jesus probably spoke in Aramaic most of the time, but the Gospels report his words mostly in Greek. (2) The Gospel accounts of Jesus' discourses are summaries or digests. Bock points out that even the longest speeches of Jesus can be read aloud in just a few minutes in the form in which they are reported in the Gospels. (3) The Gospels and the other NT writings quote the OT profusely but rarely give the exact words of the OT text or an exact word-for-word translation of those words. (4) It was conventional in genres of ancient Greco-Roman historical writing for the authors to compose speeches that gave the substance of what the speakers historically had said as accurately as possible. (5) A comparison of some of the parallel statements by other speakers in the Gospels, such as the statement of the Father from heaven at Jesus' baptism or the confession by Simon Peter, make it clear that the Gospels are not recording precise transcripts of speeches.

Insistence on viewing the Gospels as giving exact transcripts of everything they report was said leads to all sorts of difficulties if not outright absurdities. For example, Harold Lindsell in his 1976 book *The Battle for the Bible*, following the lead of Johnston Cheney's popular 1969 Gospel harmony *The Life of Christ in Stereo*, argued that Peter had denied Christ *six times* rather than just three times.<sup>26</sup> Robert Thomas took essentially the same approach two years after Lindsell in his 1978 *Harmony of the Gospels*, concluding that "Peter apparently denied Jesus

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<sup>25</sup> See especially Darrell L. Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (ed. Michael Wilkens & J. P. Moreland; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 73-99.

<sup>26</sup> Johnston M. Cheney, *The Life of Christ in Stereo* (Portland: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1969), 190-92, 258; Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 174-76. The theory apparently goes back at least to Bullinger.

at least four times.”<sup>27</sup> Bart Ehrman has some fun in his book *Jesus, Interrupted* with these harmonizations, asking what is really a good question: “And isn’t it a bit absurd to say that, in effect, only ‘my’ Gospel—the one I create from parts of the four in the New Testament—is the right one, and that the others are only partially right?”<sup>28</sup>

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy specifically denies “that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision...the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations” (Art. 13). In the exposition of this denial, the Chicago Statement observes that “non-chronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days.” This means that the dogmatic claim that the Gospels **must** be interpreted as reporting the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus is actually **contrary to** the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

Robert Thomas claims that John 14:26 refers to a “supernatural boost to the memories of eyewitnesses and writers.... The Spirit’s work in reminding and inspiring is a supernatural work, guaranteeing a degree of accuracy and precision that is without parallel in the annals of human historiography.”<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere Thomas makes the even stronger claim that John 14:26 means that the Synoptic Gospels “were accounts of eyewitnesses whose sharp memories, aided by the Holy Spirit, reproduced the exact wording of dialogues and sermons.”<sup>30</sup> It is far from self-evident, however, that what John 14:26 means is that the Gospels would provide an exact transcript of what Jesus said. Does it follow from the fact that the apostles were reminded by the Holy Spirit of all that Jesus said to them that the apostles always quoted Jesus’ exact words? Supposing for the sake of argument that this is what John 14:26 means, does it then follow that when the apostles or their associates penned the Gospels they introduced no variation in how Jesus’ sayings were worded? If the Holy Spirit supernaturally inspired the Gospel

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<sup>27</sup> Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels: New American Standard Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 229 nt.

<sup>28</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don’t Know about Them)* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 7-8.

<sup>29</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics,” in *Jesus Crisis*, ed. Thomas and Farnell, 372.

<sup>30</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “Conclusion: The Evidence Summarized,” in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Thomas, 378.

writers to produce the *ipsissima verba* of Christ, why do parallel passages nearly always quote Jesus using at least somewhat different wording?

To their credit, Geisler and Roach rightly point out in their critique of Bart Ehrman that biblical inerrancy does not entail “that we have the exact words (*ipsissima verba*) of Jesus in the Greek New Testament but only the same voice or sense (*ipsissima vox*).” They observe that Jesus probably spoke in Aramaic, not Greek, and agree that in the Gospels Jesus’ words may sometimes “be abbreviated or paraphrased.”<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, on the other hand, in their critique of Darrell Bock and Robert Webb they agree with Thomas in claiming that John 14:26 is incompatible with acknowledging any “redacting, editing, and processing the words of Jesus” in the canonical Gospels. To accept “evangelical reductionism” is supposedly to deny that the Holy Spirit “did his job.”<sup>32</sup> But if the Holy Spirit’s inspiration of the Gospels is compatible with the view that the Gospel writers abbreviate and paraphrase Jesus’ teaching and do not always give us the exact words of Jesus, then there can be nothing wrong in a measured use of “redaction criticism” to learn as much as one can about the exact words of Jesus. Nor is it amiss to use such critical tools to seek to understand how the Gospels’ rewording of Jesus’ sayings reflects the perspective, purpose, context, and emphasis of each individual Gospel.

An obvious objection, made as has been noted by Bock as well as Geisler and Roach, against the claim that the Gospels uniformly give Jesus’ exact words is that Jesus’ mother tongue was Aramaic but the Gospels were written in Greek. Against the near-consensus of scholarship on the question,<sup>33</sup> Thomas claims that “the case that Jesus spoke Greek is quite strong.”<sup>34</sup> While Jesus probably was able to understand Greek and to speak in Greek as the occasion arose (especially in urban settings), it is almost certain that his usual speech when addressing his disciples and the Galilean crowds was in Aramaic.

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<sup>31</sup> Geisler and Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 96.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>33</sup> On this issue, see *Moisés Silva*, “Bilingualism and the Character of Palestinian Greek,” *Biblica* 61 (1980): 198-219; G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, Volume 5: Linguistic Essays* (Sydney: Ancient History Documentation Centre, Macquarie University, 1989), 19-21; Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 158-59.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas, “Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics,” in *Jesus Crisis*, ed. Thomas and Farnell, 368; see also F. David Farnell, “The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins,” in *Three Views on the Origins of Gospel Origins*, ed. Thomas, 288-89.

Unless it can be shown that Jesus *always* spoke in Greek except in those rare places where the Gospels happen to quote him in Aramaic, Thomas cannot overcome this objection to a strict *ipsissima verba* view of the Gospel sayings of Jesus. Thomas does not even attempt to make this claim, let alone to defend it.

The claim that the Gospels always give us the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus even with regard to quoting him in the same language in which he spoke is easily shown to be false. In one notable instance Mark quotes Jesus in Aramaic while Luke quotes the same saying on the same occasion but in Greek. Whereas Mark reports Jesus raising the little girl from the dead by saying to her in Aramaic, *Talitha koum* (Mark 5:41), Luke reports the same saying on that occasion in Greek, *Hē pais egeire* (“Child, arise,” Luke 8:54). It might be tempting to hypothesize that Jesus issued the same imperative to the girl in both Aramaic and Greek—an *ad hoc* hypothesis if ever there was one—but in this case Mark all but rules out this idea. After quoting Jesus in Aramaic, Mark adds, “which is translated, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise’” (*to korasion soi legō egeire*). Clearly, Mark presents his Greek version of the saying as a translation of what Jesus said in Aramaic, not as a repetition by Jesus of the saying in Greek. If it were, it would pose another problem for the *ipsissima verba* position, since Mark’s interpretation of Jesus’ sentence in Greek is different from that in Luke. Mark consistently provides a Greek translation of the Aramaic sayings of Jesus that he quotes (Mark 5:42; 7:34; 15:34; see also *abba ho patēr*, “Abba, Father,” Mark 14:36, cf. Matt. 26:39, 42; Luke 22:42).

Another example involves a single word—the saying in Mark using the Aramaic word *corban*. “But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down” (Mark 7:11 ESV). Here Mark quotes Jesus as using the Aramaic word *corban*, and then Mark adds parenthetically, *ho estin dōron* (literally, “that is, ‘a gift’”). Matthew, in what is definitely a parallel account of the same incident, reports Jesus attributing to the Pharisees the claim that the man can free himself of his obligation to his parents by telling them, “What you would have gained from me is given to God [*dōron*]” (Matt. 15:5 ESV). There is no plausible way to add the words of these two different versions of the saying together into one saying; Jesus would not have used the familiar Aramaic term *corban* when speaking to the Pharisees and then explained it to them by saying, “that is, ‘a gift’”!

These examples prove beyond reasonable doubt that the Gospels do not intend to present in every instance the exact words of Jesus in the language in which he actually spoke. Indeed, no Gospel writer ever claims that he is intending to give Jesus' exact words at all, even in translation. Such an idea does not arise from the text, but is an assumption brought to the text deriving from expectations regarding what an inerrant report of Jesus' teaching would need to look like.

The assumption that the Gospels report the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus requires interpreters to engage in what Robert Thomas calls an "additive-harmonization approach," in which each Gospel reports only part of what Jesus said and all of the parts are to be fitted together somewhat like a jigsaw puzzle. This approach may be illustrated by the first Beatitude. Apparently on the same occasion that Luke reports Jesus beginning his sermon with the words "Blessed are the poor, because yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20), Matthew reports Jesus beginning his sermon with the words "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). If one assumes that the Gospels intend to report the exact words of Jesus, the different wordings of the saying constitute a problem. Has Matthew added words or has Luke omitted words from this saying? Did Jesus speak of the blessed in the second or third person? Did Jesus say "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven"? It is not possible to add elements of the two versions of the saying together to harmonize them into a single saying with both Gospels reporting exact words (but not all of the words) of Jesus' saying. Or were Matthew and Luke reporting sermons delivered on two different occasions? Although interpreters who assume that the Gospels present Jesus' exact words have usually drawn that conclusion, Thomas's solution is that Jesus probably made both statements in the same sermon one right after the other: "Most probably Jesus repeated this beatitude in at least two different forms when he preached His Sermon on the Mount/Plain.... Each writer selected the wording that best suited his purpose."<sup>35</sup> What Thomas does not seem to recognize is that even this theory results in the sermon expressing *the Evangelist's purpose* and not merely reporting what Jesus said.

Thomas asserts, "It is important to a sound view of biblical inspiration that readers have the precise intended sense of Jesus' teaching, not an altered sense that a writer conveyed because of a particular theological theme he wanted to emphasize."<sup>36</sup> But how is this

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<sup>35</sup> Robert L. Thomas, "Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics," in *Jesus Crisis*, ed. Thomas and Farnell, 370.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

not the result if, for example, Jesus frequently used the expression “the kingdom of heaven” and Mark, Luke, and John chose for whatever reason to omit *all* of the sayings of Jesus that used that expression? Thomas does not seem to understand that *omission is a redactional change*. Thus, when Thomas worries that “even the slightest redactional change of Jesus’ words by a gospel writer would have altered the meaning of Jesus’ utterances on a given historical occasion,” he does not seem to recognize that verbal omissions *are* redactional changes, even if “slight,” just as much as slight verbal rewordings or additions.

Poythress suggests that where the three Synoptic Gospels report Jesus’ speech with some variations, it may be that he said all three things. For example, Jesus’ words to the disciples in the boat during the storm (Matt. 8:26; Mark 4:40; Luke 8:25) might have been something like, “Why are you so afraid, O you of little faith? What is the matter with you? Where is your faith? You have been with me for some time. You have seen the things that God has done. Have you still no faith?”<sup>37</sup> He rightly argues that people do often repeat themselves in the same context, for emphasis or reinforcement or to make a point from several different angles.<sup>38</sup> While this is (of course) possible and even realistic in many situations, the question is whether this is the most plausible explanation for the variations among the Synoptics in their report of Jesus’ speech here. Poythress himself seems to acknowledge that this “additive” approach to harmonizing the texts may not be a complete answer, as he notes that the Matthean version uses the word *oligopistoi*, “ones of little faith,” which reflects a distinctive theme in his Gospel (Matt. 6:30; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20).<sup>39</sup> That word does not occur at all in Mark and occurs in Luke only once, in a saying parallel to Matthew 6:30 (Luke 12:28).

There is nothing wrong with considering whether parallel versions of Jesus’ sayings or movements can be harmonized in an “additive” fashion. We should avoid two extremes here, regarding only traditional harmonization or only redaction-critical explanations for differences among the Synoptics. Both additive harmonizations and redaction-critical explanations of differences among the Synoptic Gospels may be considered; whether one or the other is to be accepted should be determined on a case-by-case basis by evaluating the evidence for each explanation.

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<sup>37</sup> Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels*, 158-59.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.



**10. The Synoptic problem is significant not only for the light it may shed only on the Synoptic Gospels but also for the light it may shed on noncanonical gospels.**

Although the Synoptic problem is of course about the three Synoptic Gospels in the NT canon, it turns out to have some relevance in exposing the unhistorical and fraudulent nature of several noncanonical gospels composed centuries later. Such an application of Synoptic criticism thus has important if surprising apologetic value in defending the orthodox claim that the four Gospels in the NT canon are the only authoritative accounts of the life, teachings, and passion of Jesus Christ.

In order to show how such application is possible, it will be helpful to look at a specific issue in Synoptic studies. It is now widely though not universally recognized among both evangelical and non-evangelical Gospel scholars that the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 is Matthew's expansion of an earlier form of Jesus' sermon to which Matthew added supplemental discourse units and sayings of Jesus that were thematically related but originally spoken at various other occasions. Jesus' historical sermon in Galilee was probably more like the so-called Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20-49 (though not necessarily identical to it, either). Careful analysis of the Matthean and Lukan settings as well as the content and structure of the discourses shows that the Matthean and Lukan passages are in fact two versions of the same historical sermon, not two different sermons that Jesus delivered on separate occasions.<sup>40</sup>

Robert Thomas takes issue with those evangelicals who accept such a conclusion. In his view, suggesting that either Matthew's or Luke's text arranges Jesus' teaching thematically or in any other way impugns "the integrity of the gospel accounts," questions their "historicity," and "devastates the historical accuracy of the Gospels."<sup>41</sup> He argues that Matthew's narrative introduction and conclusion (Matt. 5:1-2; 7:28-29) are inexplicable if they do not mean that everything presented within that frame as sayings of Jesus was spoken on that occasion. "If Jesus did not preach such a sermon on a single occasion, why would the

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<sup>40</sup> See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 935-36; D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 154-55; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT; gen. ed. Clinton E. Arnold; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 160.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas, "Introduction," in *Jesus Crisis*, ed. Thomas and Farnell, 16.

gospel writer mislead his readers to think that Christ did? This question has no plain answer.”<sup>42</sup> This question makes the same type of mistake as the following questions

- “If Jesus did not preach his sermon in Greek, why would the Gospel writer mislead his readers to think that Christ did?”
- “If Jesus said things in his Galilean sermon other than what is found in Luke 6:20-49, why would Luke mislead his readers to think he said only what is found there?”
- “If Jesus gave the Lord’s Prayer to his disciples as part of the sermon he preached that day, why would Luke mislead his readers to think that Christ did not present the Lord’s Prayer to them until much later in his ministry?”

These questions beg the question by assuming that the Gospel authors’ presentation intends to convey something that the text does not actually assert.

The conclusion that the Sermon on the Mount includes sayings of Jesus originally spoken on other occasions is not dependent on one specific solution to the Synoptic problem. For example, John Calvin, who held to the literary independence of the Synoptics, accepted that Matthew and Luke both constructed compilations of Jesus’ sayings around Jesus’ original sermon.

For the design of both Evangelists was, to collect into one place the leading points of the doctrine of Christ, which related to a devout and holy life. Although Luke had previously mentioned a *plain*, he does not observe the immediate succession of events in the history, but passes from miracles to doctrine, without pointing out either time or place: just as Matthew takes no notice of the time, but only mentions the place. It is probable, that this discourse was not delivered until Christ had chosen the twelve: but in attending to the order of time, which I saw that the Spirit of God had disregarded, I did not wish to be too precise. Pious and modest readers ought to be satisfied with having a brief summary of the doctrine of Christ placed before their eyes, collected out of his many and various discourses, the

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 20; see also Robert L. Thomas, “Redaction Criticism,” in *Jesus Crisis*, 257.

first of which was that in which he spoke to his disciples about true happiness.<sup>43</sup>

If one accepts the conclusion that Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is a compilation of Jesus' sayings that Matthew has arranged using Jesus' historical sermon in Galilee as a starting point and frame, this conclusion has important implications for later noncanonical gospels that incorporated parts of the Matthean Sermon on the Mount.

Consider, for example, the *Gospel of Barnabas*, written no earlier than about the fourteenth century and notorious for its Islamicized theology and portrayal of Jesus.<sup>44</sup> The *Gospel of Barnabas* replaces the Sermon on the Mount (SM) with several discourses it attributes to Jesus at separate times. This material consistently evidences dependence on the Matthean Sermon on the Mount rather than the Sermon on the Plain, as when it concludes a section on returning good for evil with the statement, "be ye perfect, for I am perfect" (*G. Barn.* 18), a wording that reflects Matthew 5:48 rather than the parallel in Luke 6:36.

The *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, published in Ohio in 1908, is a favorite "gospel" in the New Age movement.<sup>45</sup> It loosely paraphrases and expands on the entire SM, but in a way that again consistently reflects dependence on Matthew, not on Luke. So, for instance, the *Aquarian Gospel* quotes Jesus as saying, "Worthy are the strong in spirit; theirs the kingdom is.... Worthy they who hunger and thirst for right; they shall be satisfied" (*Aquarian Gospel* 95.7, 9), sayings clearly

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<sup>43</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.; Eng. trans. orig. 1845), 230 (on Matt. 5:1).

<sup>44</sup> The standard English edition is still *The Gospel of Barnabas: Edited and Translated from the Italian Ms. in the Imperial Library at Vienna: With a Facsimile* (trans. Lonsdale and Laura Ragg; Oxford: Clarendon, 1907). The text of this translation is easily accessible in several places online. For an evangelical critique, see F. P. Cotterell, "The Gospel of Barnabas," *Vox Evangelica* 10 (1977): 43-47.

<sup>45</sup> The full title gives some flavor of the book: Levi H. Dowling, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ: The philosophic and practical basis of the religion of the Aquarian age of the world and of the church universal: Transcribed from the book of God's remembrances, known as the Akashic records*, with introduction by Eva S. Dowling (Los Angeles: Leo W. Dowling; London: L. N. Fowler, 1908 [©1907]). The book was famously critiqued in Edgar J. Goodspeed, *Famous Biblical Hoaxes or, Modern Apocrypha* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1956 [orig. 1931]), 15-19.

dependent on Matthew's form of these two beatitudes (Matt. 5:3, 6) rather than the form of the Lukan parallels (Luke 6:20b-21).

The most blatant and arguably the most important use of the SM in a noncanonical "gospel" is that found in 3 Nephi, one of the fifteen "books" in the Book of Mormon and one that Mormons have often dubbed a "Fifth Gospel."<sup>46</sup> The Book of Mormon, of course, is the foundational new scripture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Third Nephi 12-14 reports Jesus, sometime shortly after his ascension, appearing to the "Nephites" somewhere in the Western Hemisphere and preaching to them the SM almost exactly as it reads in Matthew. The Book of Mormon version omits about eight and a half verses of the 107 verses in the SM, and it replaces them with about an equal number of new verses. Where the sayings included in the Book of Mormon sermon have parallels in both Matthew and Luke, the Book of Mormon reflects the order and wording of the sayings as they appear in Matthew 100 percent of the time. This is simply not historically credible if one acknowledges that Matthew's version of the sermon was in any significant respect shaped and worded by the author. If Matthew sometime between AD 50 and 80 took discourse units and sayings of Jesus originally spoken on various occasions and integrated them into Jesus' historical sermon in Galilee, rewording and structuring the material as an expression of his literary art, this finding poses an insuperable problem for the Book of Mormon. It simply defies all plausibility to claim that Jesus in AD 34 had preached a sermon to the Nephites in the Americas that closely followed the contents, order, and wording of Matthew's composition.

This issue was explored briefly in a 1982 article by liberal Reorganized LDS writer William Russell and more substantively in a 1997 article by evangelical scholar Ron Huggins.<sup>47</sup> Mormon scholar John W. Welch in a book published in 1990 and revised in 1999 attempted to defend the historicity of the Book of Mormon in relation to the Synoptic Problem as well as other issues.<sup>48</sup> The evidence in this

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<sup>46</sup> Andrew C. Skinner, *Third Nephi: The Fifth Gospel* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> William D. Russell, "A Further Inquiry into the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* 7 (Sept. 1982): 20-27; Ronald V. Huggins, "Did the Author of 3 Nephi Know the Gospel of Matthew?" *Dialogue* 30 (1997): 137-48.

<sup>48</sup> John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple & Sermon on the Mount: An Approach to 3 Nephi 11-18 and Matthew 5-7* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999 [rev. ed. of a book originally publ. in 1990]). I address the issue of the historicity of the Sermon in its Book of Mormon setting in a comprehensive way in a forthcoming dissertation entitled "The Sermon on the Mount in the

regard, however, is simply overwhelming. To circumvent the problem, one would need to argue that Luke's Sermon on the Plain has no relation at all to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount; Matthew and Luke must be viewed as reporting two entirely separate sermons. Moreover, one would need to argue that Matthew gives the *exact* words of Jesus except where the Book of Mormon version of the Sermon happens to vary from Matthew. We can continue to debate whether Matthew was dependent on the hypothetical source known as Q; it is really beyond reasonable doubt that the Sermon to the Nephites in the Book of Mormon is dependent on Matthew!<sup>49</sup>

The investigation of Synoptic critical questions by evangelicals can thus pay apologetic dividends in unexpected places. Apologetics is not all about "playing defense"; it is also about vindicating the truth of Christianity against false gospels. It would be a shame to miss such opportunities because evangelicals were afraid to ask tough questions about the human origins of the divinely inspired Gospels of the New Testament.

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Book of Mormon," being done in the Ph.D. Biblical Studies program at the South African Theological Seminary.

<sup>49</sup> The problem runs even deeper, since the evidence shows that the Book of Mormon version of the Sermon is not merely dependent on the Gospel of Matthew but specifically on the Gospel of Matthew in the King James Version. For example, the Book of Mormon sermon quotes Jesus ending the Lord's Prayer with the same doxology, in the same wording, as in Matthew 6:13 KJV—a doxology that is not in the Lukan version of the prayer (Luke 11:2-3) and was almost certainly added to the text of Matthew by a later scribe.