

## BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS—GOSPEL HISTORY

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### Genre Override and Historicity

#### Craig L. Blomberg

The preunderstanding of most of today's evangelical scholars who specialize in Gospel study is that the Gospels require special rules of interpretation because they belong to a special literary category. "Genre" is the term they use to speak of such a category. These scholars will usually advocate that theological rather than historical purposes dominated in the writing of the Gospels, and consequently, that a high degree of historical precision in the Gospels is not to be expected. They evaluate the Gospels according to historiographical canons of the day in which they were written and not according to modern standards of historical reliability.<sup>1</sup> Blomberg writes,

Ancient biographers and historians did not feel constrained to write from detached and so-called objective viewpoints. . . . In an era which knew neither quotation marks nor plagiarism, speakers' words were abbreviated, explained, paraphrased and contemporized in whatever ways individual authors deemed beneficial for their audiences. All of these features occur in the Gospels, and none of them detracts from the Evangelists' integrity. At the same time, little if any material was recorded solely out of historical interest; interpreters must recognize theological motives as central to each text.<sup>2</sup>

#### Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Vanhoozer also emphasizes the importance of genre in interpretation. Following C. S. Lewis, he points out the richness of various genres in formulating various biblical discourses:

He [i.e., C. S. Lewis] suggests that two biblical passages may not be inerrant in exactly the same way; that is, not every biblical statement must state historical truth. Inerrancy must be construed broadly enough to encompass the truth expressed in Scripture's poetry, romances, proverbs, parables— as well as histories.<sup>3</sup>

Vanhoozer's preference for the term "infallibility" over "inerrancy" is clear when he

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<sup>1</sup>C. L. Blomberg, "Gospels (Historical Reliability)," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992) 292. Blomberg sees the Gospels as belonging to the category of Jewish and Greco-Roman biographies and histories of the day.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 294. Whether the preunderstanding about Gospel genre brought about an embracing of historical-critical methodology or a preunderstanding that embraced historical-critical methodology produced the necessity to postulate a special Gospel genre to override normal grammatical-historical principles is difficult to determine. Without doubt the use of historical-critical presuppositions reduce the accuracy of what one finds in the Gospel accounts. That possibly was a motivation for evangelical scholars to turn to the analogy with secular historians to justify their theories about imprecision in the Gospels. Whatever the sequence of development was, the impact of preunderstanding on hermeneutics is evident.

<sup>3</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Forms," in *Hermeneutics Authority and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 79.

makes “inerrancy” a “*subset* of infallibility.”<sup>4</sup> He supports this preference by noting, “When exegetes examine the total speech act situation, it will be seen that biblical texts are often more concerned with effective communication rather than scientific precision or exactness.”<sup>5</sup>

Vanhoozer’s preference for the term “infallibility” over “inerrancy” is clear when he makes “inerrancy” a “*subset* of infallibility.”<sup>6</sup> He supports this preference by noting, “When exegetes examine the total speech act situation, it will be seen that biblical texts are often more concerned with effective communication rather than scientific precision or exactness.”<sup>7</sup>

Later, Vanhoozer pursues the subject of inerrancy more:

[I]s mine an approach that assumes that the truth of the Bible is a matter of its correspondence to historical fact? Not necessarily. On the contrary, I have argued that literary genres engage with reality in different ways, with other illocutionary forces besides the assertive. This, to my mind, represents a decisive parting of the ways, for it means that not all parts of Scripture need be factually true.<sup>8</sup>

On this point, he tries to distance himself from fundamentalists:

In their zeal to uphold the truth of the Bible, fundamentalists tend to interpret all narratives as accurate historical or scientific records. In the previous chapter, however I distinguished between a literalistic interpretation, which operates with a theory of meaning as reference, and a genuinely (*sic*) literal interpretation which reads for the literary sense and operates with a theory of meaning as communicative act.<sup>9</sup>

Elsewhere, he writes,

Fundamentalists believe that the biblical narratives accurately (i.e., empirically, physically, historically describe what actually happened), even when this includes understanding creation in terms of six twenty-four hour days.<sup>10</sup>

### **Darrell L. Bock**

Another factor in the thinking of some of today’s evangelical scholars is their view that history is changing. In Bock’s words,

History is not a static entity. Neither are the sayings that belong to it and describe its events. Historical events and sayings do not just happen and then sit fossilized with a

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 95 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 95 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 424-25.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 425. Cf. *ibid.*, 305-15.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 307.

static meaning. As events in history proceed, they develop their meaning through the interconnected events that give history its sense of flow.<sup>11</sup>

Bock fails to account for the two senses in which “history” is used, one to refer to a historical incident as it actually occurred and the other to speak of the historical interpretation that a historian applies to that incident.<sup>12</sup> In essence, he concludes that the Gospel writers did not record history in the sense of objective and absolute events as known by God alone, but rather recorded their own subjective impressions of what the events meant, impressions that at times varied substantially from the events themselves. Current evangelical scholars are joining the incident and the interpretation into a unit in a way that changes the meaning of the original event.<sup>13</sup> Viewing history and the Gospels in this light can lead only to the conclusion that the Gospels contain only the gist of what happened, not precise accounts of the events.<sup>14</sup>

Such assumptions as the above about the nature of Gospel literature have led evangelical scholars to conclude that the four books are *generally* reliable, but cannot be pressed for accuracy in matters of historical detail. Yet a question exists about whether ancient historiographic standards that the Gospel writers allegedly followed were as high as these evangelicals have assumed them to be. The scholars usually cite Thucydides as a typical representative of the Greco-Roman culture.<sup>15</sup> Yet their case for the general reliability of ancient historiographic standards is fraught with difficulties. For one thing, there is strong question about whether Thucydides lived up to the theory of recording events and speeches very closely as they actually occurred.<sup>16</sup> He professed to record the gist of what was said and done, but it is questionable as to whether he did even that well. In addition, many authorities maintain that later historians strayed far from Thucydidean standards of accuracy.<sup>17</sup> They simply did not share his passion for accuracy. Even Fornara who saluted Thucydides for his attempts at accuracy and the integrity of his works allowed that Thucydides and historians under his influence at times incorporated self-deception and unintentional perjury in his historical accounts.<sup>18</sup>

If such were the standards upheld by the Gospel writers, no room remains to view them as even *generally* reliable and therefore inerrant in any sense of the word. Evangelicals who want to be known as inerrantists are wrong in pursuing a comparison of the Gospels with that kind of secular literature. What is most troubling, however, is the unwillingness of evangelical scholars because of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to attribute a greater degree of precision to

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<sup>11</sup>Darrell L. Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?,” in *Jesus under Fire*, Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 81.

<sup>12</sup>Earle E. Cairns, *God and Man in Time* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 12-14.

<sup>13</sup>Donald E. Green, “Inspiration and Evangelical Views on *Ipsissima Vox*” (unpublished Th.M. thesis, The Master’s Seminary, Sun Valley, Calif., 2001) 60-64.

<sup>14</sup>Bock, “Words of Jesus” 94.

<sup>15</sup>E.g., Darrell L. Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex,” in *Jesus under Fire*, Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 78-79.

<sup>16</sup>Donald E. Green, “Evangelicals and *Ipsissima Vox*,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 12/1 (Spring 2001):54.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 54-55.

<sup>18</sup>Charles William Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, 1983) 167-68; cf. Green, “Inspiration and Evangelical Views” 52-60.

the biblical works than to secular writings.<sup>19</sup> A grammatical-historical approach accepts the Gospels as historically factual—i.e., events as they actually happened and objectively reported history—and not events as embellished by the Gospel writers—events as subjectively interpreted. That is the definition of history embraced by traditional hermeneutics, which does not allow genre to override regular exegetical guidelines. History with this degree of accuracy is unknown outside the realm of biblical revelation.

According to John 14:26, Jesus promised His disciples that the Spirit would bring to their memories the words that He had spoken to them. That enablement put their memories into a category entirely different from the category of secular writers in the Greco-Roman culture, making it entirely inappropriate to classify the Gospels in line with the genre of those times. It also assures enough historical as well as theological interest on their parts to make them quite accurate in recording even the historical details of events they wrote about. In such situations, theological objectives do not exclude interest in historical accuracy. If anything, they enhance it. Inspiration of the Spirit results in accounts that are absolutely accurate in every respect and not just the “gist” of what happened. Current assumptions about a special genre for the Gospels do not override the application of normal rules of interpretation for those books, as some have theorized that they do.

### **Historical Criticism and Historicity**

Such a preunderstanding about the historicity of the Synoptic Gospels frees a NT scholar to treat the text through utilization of historical-critical principles, which presuppose that a species of literary dependence or collaboration explains their origin. Advocates of historical-criticism have unsound logic and unsound premises that are appropriately described as “proceeding from an unwarranted assumption to a foregone conclusion.” Their unwarranted assumption that furnishes the sole basis for the way they treat the Synoptics is easily demolished when appealing to the Gospels themselves.

Comparisons of Matthew, Mark, and Luke with each other lead inevitably to the conclusion that they did not consult the writings of each other in composing their Gospel accounts. Neither do writings of the early church fathers support such a theory of literary dependence.<sup>20</sup> Recently, I have added to sets of comparisons of the three Gospels done several years ago. The former comparisons showed only a 17% agreement of identical words in different sets of comparisons of triple-tradition sections of the three Gospels and only 30% agreement of identical words in various pairs of double-tradition sections of the three.<sup>21</sup> My most recent analysis of the Gospel texts has followed a slightly different approach and has yielded results very similar to those obtained before—about 80% in both triple- and double-tradition sections.

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<sup>19</sup>Green, “Evangelicals and *Ipsissima Vox*” 66-67.

<sup>20</sup>See Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, “The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church,” in *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 57-75.

<sup>21</sup>See Robert L. Thomas, “Discerning Synoptic Gospel Origins (Part 1 of 2 Parts),” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 15/1 (Spring 2004):3-38; idem., “Discerning Synoptic Gospel Origins (Part 2 of 2 parts),” *MSJ* 16/1 (Spring 2005):7-47.

### **Literary Interdependence: Probable or Improbable?**

**A Standard for Establishing Literary Interdependence.** A suitable criterion for determining how high a percentage of identical words is necessary to demonstrate literary interdependence is needed. Such a bench mark is available in one area where the Synoptic writers depended in a literary way on other written works of the biblical canon. That area is, of course, their use of the OT, because the use of the OT by NT writers is a very visible use of literary interdependence.

One method of measuring their policies in citing OT Scriptures is to compare each individual citation a parallel account in another Gospel. Results of such a study should be revealing. Twenty-four pairs of parallel accounts defined in the Burton and Goodspeed *Harmony* have parallel accounts of OT citations. A comparison of those accounts in two Gospels at a time—Matthew and Mark, Mark and Luke, and Matthew and Luke—to determine the extent of verbal agreements when two writers at a time are literally dependent on Scripture furnishes a gauge for determining whether the three writers were literally interdependent on each other. Chart #1 shows the results of such a comparison. The Burton and Goodspeed section number is in the left column. For Matthew and Mark, the next three columns give the number of words in the OT quotation, the number of identical words in the two Gospels, and the percentage of identicals compared to the total. The next three columns do the same for Mark and Luke, with the final three columns giving figures for Matthew and Luke. The aggregate of total words, total identicals, and percentage appears below Chart #1.

From the above figures, one can conclude that in their literary interdependency on the OT the Synoptic Gospel writers averaged 79% in using words identical with one another when copying from the LXX (or perhaps the Masoretic Text of the OT in some cases). Carrying that figure over to their alleged literary interdependency among themselves would lead to the assumption that their use of identical words with each other, two by two, should approximate about 79%. Such a frequency would show clearly the limited liberty the Gospel writers felt in altering another inspired document, if literary interdependence occurred.

Someone may object to comparing the writers' use of one another with their use of the OT because of the high respect for the OT that prevailed in the first century. Yet no difference exists between books of the OT and the three Synoptic Gospels in that all are parts of the biblical canon. Some advocates of literary interdependence theorize that Synoptic writers used another Synoptic writer because they viewed the source document as inspired.<sup>22</sup> In the interdependentist mind, this distinguished the writers' source as true in comparison with the many false Gospels in circulation in that day. They do not feel that the Lukan Prologue (Luke 1:1-4) implies that earlier accounts of Jesus' life and words were inadequate and therefore uninspired and that Luke knew he was consulting an inspired work in his research.<sup>23</sup> If interdependence advocates recognize that writers dependent on another Gospel or other Gospels were aware they were using an inspired book or books as literary sources, their usage of those inspired sources lies squarely in the same category as their usage of the OT.

Some scholar may shy away from equating a source Gospel with the OT, but that would

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<sup>22</sup>E.g., Grant R. Osborne and Matthew C. Williams, "Markan Priority Response to Chapter Three," *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) 318.

<sup>23</sup>E.g., John H. Niemelä, "Two-Gospel Response to Chapter Three," in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* 325-27.

raise questions about that scholar's view of biblical inspiration. From the beginning of each NT book's existence, the church recognized a canonical book's inspiration because it came from an apostle or a prophet under the influence of an apostle.<sup>24</sup> Surely the writers themselves would have been aware of that unique characteristic of their own works and the works of other canonical Gospel writers *if* they had used them in the writing of their own Gospels.<sup>25</sup> If anyone of them used the work of another, surely he would have treated his source with the same respect he showed the OT. If he knew one or two of his sources to be head and shoulders above the rest, he would doubtless have handled it or them as inspired. In other words, his literary dependency on another Synoptic Gospel should demonstrate itself in an average of about a 79%-frequency of identical words.<sup>26</sup>

### Applying the Benchmark to Literary Interdependence Theories

**Double-tradition pericopes.** Burton and Goodspeed have twenty-nine sections of double tradition in the Synoptic Gospels. See Chart #2 for a listing of these sections. As evident from Chart #3, seventeen double-tradition sections involve Matthew and Mark, seven involve Matthew and Luke, and five involve Mark and Luke. The seventeen sections of Matthew and Mark contain 4,910 words and 1,614 identical words, identical words comprising 32.87% of the words in the section. The highest frequency of identicals is 63.13% in §135 and the lowest is 9.09% in §147. The seven sections of Matthew and Luke have 2,887 words, 706 of the words being identical or 24.46%. The highest figure of this group was 43.80% in §40 and the lowest was 0% in §165. In the five Mark-Luke pericopes there are 256 identicals and 726 total words or 32.26% frequency. The highest frequency within this group is 50.45% in §93 and the lowest is 22.22% in §25. See Chart #3 for a section by section analysis.

A combination of all the double-tradition pericopes yields 2,576 identicals and 8,523 total words, or 30% frequency.

**Triple-tradition pericopes.** Burton and Goodspeed divide the triple-tradition portions of the Synoptic Gospels into fifty-eight sections. The fifty-eight sections of Matthew-Mark parallels contain 16,449 words of which 6,352 are identical with words in another Gospel. In other words, 39% of the words in Matthew-Mark sections of triple tradition are identical. The fifty-eight sections of Mark-Luke parallels include 15,421 total words with 4,550 of them being identical with words in another Gospel. The resulting percentage in this case is 30. The fifty-eight sections of Matthew-Luke parallels have 15,547 total words, including 3,541 that have identical counterparts in the other Gospel, or 23% of the total. The highest single-section

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<sup>24</sup>For discussion of this point, see Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999) 162-69.

<sup>25</sup>Would anyone suggest that Matthew and Mark were ignorant of Mark's dependence on the apostle Peter when writing his Gospel, or that Luke and Mark were ignorant of the apostle Matthew's direct knowledge of what Jesus said and did? Or, on the other hand, would anyone suggest that a Gospel writer knew the authority of his source-Gospel and did not care to respect that authority? Either possibility belies what is known of the high respect for apostolic authority in the ancient church.

<sup>26</sup>As a part of his 2002 response, Prof. Stein used the Feeding of the Five Thousand to illustrate the higher percentage obtained when comparing two Gospels at a time instead of three. Excluding the disputed, subjectively defined close agreements, he found 50% agreement between Matthew and Mark, 31% between Mark and Luke, and 25% between Matthew and Luke (the figures for the feeding of the 5,000 are substantially less than calculated by Prof. Stein: 44% for Matt-Mk, 25% for Mk-Lk, and 23% for Matt-Lk). All three of Stein's figures fall far short of the 79% average identical agreements that the Synoptic writers have shown when literarily dependent on inspired OT sources. Such is testimonial to their literary independence among themselves, because interdependence which involves an inspired source would show a much higher respect for the source text.

percentage is in §156, where Mark and Luke record Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees. In this relatively brief section containing almost exclusively Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisee, the percentage of identical words is 76%. Typically, the identical-word agreements are higher for Jesus' words than for narrative sections of the Gospels.

The aggregate totals for triple tradition sections are as follows:

Matthew-Mark	16,499 total words	6,352 identical words
Mark-Luke	15,421 total words	4,550 identical words
Matthew-Luke	15,547 total words	3,541 identical words

The total words come to 47,467 with 14,442 identical words or 30% of the total words. A combination of the double- and triple-traditions sections brings the total words to 55,990 with 17,018 of them being involved in identical-word combination. That too yields a percentage of 30% identical words.

**Observation #1.** The aggregate figure of 30% falls far short of the 79% accumulated by the Gospel writers in their literary dependence on the OT. Only one section of the 145 possible combinations of double tradition even approaches that percentage, and even that section falls short of the average of all the instances in which two Gospel writers cite the same OT passage.<sup>27</sup> In their use of the OT, they agree with one another far more often in using identical words than they do if, for instance, Matthew and Luke were using Mark as a source, as proposed in the Markan priority view of Gospel origins. The Matthew-Luke combination yields a percentage of only 23%. If literarily dependent on Mark, those two writers must have had a very low view of their source because of failure to represent it accurately. If that had been the case, Luke would have taken a dim view of Mark's accuracy and would have used this dim view as a reason for writing another Gospel (cf. Luke 1:1-4). But Luke did not take such a dim view of another inspired document, as a proper understanding of Luke 1:1-4 dictates.<sup>28</sup> He used no sources whose inspiration he respected, as evidenced by the low percentage of identical words in Mark-Luke, 32% in the double-tradition sections and 29% in the triple-tradition sections.

A similar phenomenon exists in relation to the Two-Gospel view of Gospel origins. If Mark and Luke used Matthew as a source, they certainly fell far below the percentage of identical words that they agree upon in their use of the OT, a figure is 85%.<sup>29</sup> In triple-tradition sections, Mark and Luke agree on only 29% of the words as identical, when they were allegedly using Matthew as a source.<sup>30</sup> That would indicate their lack of respect for Matthew's inspiration, if they had used it as a source. The only rationale to explain such a low percentage of identical words is to accept that the two writers worked independently of each other and independently of Matthew as well. Here, then, is another indication that a proper understanding of Luke's

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<sup>27</sup>The absence of even one instance in which a Gospel writer directly cites another Gospel the way the writers cite the OT is further evidence that no literary interdependence existed in the composition of the Synoptic Gospels.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Paul W. Felix, "Literary Dependence of the Lukan Prologue," in *The Jesus Crisis*, eds. Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 271-88, especially 274-76.

<sup>29</sup>See column 7 of Chart #1.

<sup>30</sup>See Chart #6.

Prologue dictates that he used no inspired sources.

**Observation #2.** Aside from the 79% benchmark established in the Synoptic Gospel writers' use of the OT, an average 30% agreement of identical forms is an extremely low figure on which to base a theory of literary interdependence. All it takes is a survey of typical sections in which only about 30% of the words are identical with each other.

The outcome of all the word-counting brings the inevitable conclusion that the theory of literary interdependence among the Synoptic writers is a myth that cannot be substantiated on an inductive basis. That the writers worked independently of each other offers far more coherence to explain the phenomena arising from the text itself. Only by selecting limited portions of the Synoptic Gospels to support a presupposed theory of interdependence can one come to any other conclusion. Only a strong interdependence presupposition cancels the results of a full inductive investigation such as this. Objectivity—i.e., freedom from presuppositions—is possible only by looking at the Synoptic Gospels as a whole rather than at a few selected passages. An objective approach—i.e., based on an inductive investigation—leads inevitably to the conclusion of literary independence.

### Scholarly Recognition of Another Benchmark

I wondered how long it would take the world of NT scholars to come to their sense in recognizing the paucity of evidence for literary interdependence—i.e., that an arbitrary assumption of such interdependence was completely unfounded. Such a dawning came as a ray of hope with a recent commentary on the Gospel of Matthew by Jeffrey A. Gibbs.<sup>31</sup>

After reviewing a number of the arguments for Mark as a literary basis for Matthew and Luke, Gibbs writes, “Through it all, however, one should note emphatically that many of the arguments are valid *only if one assents to the prior conclusion that a theory of direct literary usage or dependence is required by the data.*”<sup>32</sup> To this he adds, “I am not satisfied with the affirmative majority answer to the primary and original question in this whole debate, namely, Do the data require a solution that posits direct literary interdependence?”<sup>33</sup>

Based on *The Roots of the Synoptic Gospels* by Bo Reicke, Gibbs writes further, “A number of Reicke’s observations, however, coupled with other data culled from the texts, lead me to believe that *a combination of oral tradition, some smaller written materials, and the influence of the common teaching of the Jerusalem apostles suffices to explain the data as we have them in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.*”<sup>34</sup> Following a method similar to that outlined above, he did not count single identical words but identical pairs of words to come up with the number of words in “precise verbal agreement.”<sup>35</sup> He arrived at three observations. (1) “[T]he precise verbal agreements tend to occur in very small groups of only several words.”<sup>36</sup> (2) “[T]here is an

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<sup>31</sup> *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1* 19 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–25.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.



astounding variety of small disagreements between Matthew's text and the Markan parallels. . . . The copying habits of any ancient author would surely be impossible to predict, but when one looks carefully and repeatedly at the wording of Matthew and his Markan parallels, one is impressed with the steady stream of differences and disagreements, which are too numerous to count and too complex to categorize."<sup>37</sup> (3) "The rate at which precise verbal agreements occur between Matthew and Mark, his supposed source, varies widely, and at times, wildly. Perhaps it is most puzzling when several pericopes occur in the same contextual sequence in a row and yet, for example, one pericope exhibits around 25 percent agreement while the very next pericope jumps to a rate of about 50 percent or higher."<sup>38</sup>

In concluding his discussion of the origin of the Synoptic Gospels, Gibbs isolates three factors: "the twelve apostles and the ministry of the Word that they performed together in Jerusalem during the first years of the post-Pentecost Christian church"; "written sources that were available to the evangelists as they composed the Gospels that bore their names"; and "accurate oral transmission of authentic material."<sup>39</sup>

### Questions Raised by Assuming Literary Interdependence

#### The Biblical Jesus?

Interdependence offers the following portrait of Jesus: The lineage of the evangelical interdependent Jesus is in doubt, with embellishments to His genealogies leaving both His physical and legal lineage open to question. The narrative about the birth of John the Baptist is in question.<sup>40</sup> Jesus' mother never asked the angel about how she would conceive a Son as Luke says she did in Luke 1:34.<sup>41</sup> The Magi never asked Herod about "the king of the Jews" as Matthew 2:2 says they did. Circumstances of Jesus' baptism are questionable, whether He ever heard the voice from heaven and saw the dove descending on Him.<sup>42</sup> The duration of His temptation in the wilderness is unknown. Jesus' movements between Galilee and Jerusalem are uncertain because of the symbolism conveyed in those place names. His activities in the wilderness are vague because of the symbolism involved in the writers' use of "the wilderness." Jesus never promised forgiveness of sins to the paralytic of Mark 2 (cf. 2:10).<sup>43</sup> Regarding the "patch" of Mark 2:21 = Luke 5:36, did the interdependence Jesus teach the impossibility of mending the deficiency of Judaism with a Christian patch, the impossibility of trying to graft something Christian on to Judaism, or neither? No one can tell.<sup>44</sup> Did Jesus actually preach to Jewish crowds or were those crowds merely a symbol for Gentile Christians? Interdependence

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>40</sup>Thomas, *Jesus Crisis* 322.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 326.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 320.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 319.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 323-24.

says you cannot tell.<sup>45</sup> The interdependence Jesus was incapable of delivering the Sermon on the Mount, the commissioning of the Twelve, the parables of Matthew 13 and Mark 4, and the Olivet Discourse as the Synoptists said He did. Jesus never gave the “exception” clauses of Matthew 5 and 19. Matthew’s account of Jesus conversation with the rich young man in Matthew 19 is distorted. The Pharisees were a good bit more righteous than the Synoptists’ negative picture of their opposition to Jesus indicates. Jesus did not utter the nine beatitudes as recorded in Matthew 5. The details surrounding Jesus resurrection are very muddy because of the redactional elaborations of the Gospel writers. The interdependentist Jesus did not give the Great Commission of Matt 28:18-20. His words were later interpolations and additions of the Christian community and the Gospel writer. Remember, this is the portrait painted by evangelical interdependence, not by The Jesus Seminar.<sup>46</sup>

With such a fuzzy picture as that, one wonders about the nature of God who inspired His servants to write the three Synoptic Gospels. It does not take a very high view of Scripture to subscribe to the “findings” of interdependence. The human element is constantly in the ascendancy over the divine element in inspiration. But what do we learn from Scripture about the nature of God who inspired the Bible?

How precise is the history recorded in the NT? How much can we depend on it? Is it absolutely reliable, or do the writers “round off” certain aspects of that history to present a *generally* accurate picture? The answer comes in examining Scripture itself.

- In Matt 5:18 Jesus said, “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter (i.e., *yodh*) or stroke (i.e., *serif*) shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.” In other words, neither the smallest letter nor the smallest part of any letter will pass away from the OT until all is accomplished, i.e., until heaven and earth pass away.
- In Matt 22:31-32 Jesus said, “But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” The Lord’s proof of a future resurrection resides in the present tense versus the past tense of the verb: “I am” rather than “I was.”
- In Matt 24:35 Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away.” Jesus assigned a permanence to the words that He spoke just as He did to the words of the OT.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 325.

<sup>46</sup>In the recent past, a group of evangelical scholars under the auspices of the Institute of Biblical Research “Jesus Group,” is meeting regularly “to engage in a fresh assessment of the historicity and significance of ten key events in the life of Jesus” (<http://www.bible.org/docs/theology/christ/thejesusgroup/ibr-jesusgroup.htm>, 9/24/03). With the leadership of co-convenors Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb, they are sometimes assigning ratings “assessing the possibility or probability of an event or a detail within it . . . as a way of expression what can be demonstrated historically” (ibid.). Though disclaiming any similarity to the Jesus Seminar, these evangelicals are engaging in the same type of critical study of the Gospels as that nonevangelical group, as I have written earlier: “Outspoken evangelical critics have engaged in the same type of dehistoricizing activity as the Jesus-Seminar people with whom they differ. If they were to organize among themselves their own evangelical ‘Jesus Seminar,’ the following is a sampling of the issues they would vote on . . .” (Thomas, *Jesus Crisis* 14-15). Now, in fact, they have so organized, a possibility also alluded to by Carson (D. A. Carson, “Five Gospels, No Christ,” *Christianity Today* 38/5 [April 25, 1994]:30).

<sup>47</sup>It is rarely if ever noted that if Jesus spoke primarily in Aramaic during His incarnate ministry, Jesus words *have* indeed passed away. All that remains are approximations of His words reported in the Greek language if Aramaic was His main language.

- In Gal 3:16 Paul recalls, “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ.” That Paul advocates a precise handling of the OT is unquestionable. By inspiration of the Spirit the author cites the explicit significance between a singular and a plural.
- In Jas 2:10 the author wrote, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.” Our God is a God of precision. He is interested in details. Showing respect of persons is in the eyes of the inspired writer the one point that condemns a person as a breaker of the whole law.

Without question, the Bible itself insists on the ultimate in precision for its contents.

Without referring to further biblical examples,<sup>48</sup> one would think that this electronic age would teach greater expectations of precision in handling the Bible, as did the Scriptures themselves in their use of other Scriptures. One and only one wrong pushbutton on a telephone or one and only one wrong letter in an e-mail address will condemn an effort to reach the desired party. Certainly the God whose providence provided for the discovery of all the electronic advantages of modern times is familiar with that kind of precision and has provided for such precision in His Word.

### **The Response to Precision That Scripture Expects**

The Epistle of 2 Timothy is quite appropriate in a study of the Scriptures, particularly in considering the precision of the Scriptures. The epistle divides into four parts:

1:1–2:13 — Paul tells Timothy to *Replenish the Earth* with people like himself. To do this Timothy must implement particularly the instruction 2 Tim 2:2: “The things that you have heard from me through many witnesses, these commit to faithful men, the kind who will be competent to teach others also.”

2:14-26 — Paul tells Timothy to *Rescue the Drifters*. This he is to do through personal diligence in interpreting the Word correctly, as directed in 2 Tim 2:15: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, [as] an unashamed workman, cutting straight the Word of truth.”

3:1-17 — Paul tells Timothy to *Resist the Times*. He can accomplish this by letting the Word guide his own life as prescribed in 2 Tim 3:14-15: “But you, abide in the things that you have learned and have been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from a child you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

4:1-22 — Paul tells Timothy to *Report the Scriptures* as Paul’s replacement on the front lines of gospel warfare. He can do so by being ready for every opportunity to preach the Word, as 2 Tim 4:2 indicates: “Preach the Word; stand by [for duty] in season and out of season.”

Notice how in one way or another each section of the epistle builds upon the Scriptures. For present concerns, however, the section of “Rescuing the Drifters” (2:14-26) is most appropriate in learning the right response to the precision of the Scriptures. First of all, 2:14-18

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<sup>48</sup> Among other Scriptures that could be cited to demonstrate the precision and reliability of Scripture are the following: “Then the woman said to Elijah, ‘Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth’” (1 Kgs 17:24); “The sum of Your word is truth” (Ps 119:160a); “Your word is truth” (John 17:17b); “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching” (Titus 1:9a); “And He said, ‘Write, for these words are faithful and true’” (Rev 21:5b); “And he said to me, ‘These words are faithful and true’” (Rev 22:6b).

speaks about the drifters:

Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the Word of truth. But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and thus they upset the faith of some.

**The Cause of Drifting.** This part of the study might be entitled “How to Become a Heretic.” Those in Ephesus who were causing trouble for the church and for Timothy as Paul’s apostolic representative to the church did not become heretics all at once. In fact, some were not yet heretics, but they had launched on a voyage that would eventually lead them to shipwreck and heresy if someone did not head them off. That was what Timothy was supposed to do, head them off.

From what is known about this church, one can detect several steps these people must have taken on their way to heretical status. The steps are not necessarily sequential.

(1) **A hunger for something new.** First Tim 1:3 refers to their activity as “teaching other [things].” They became teachers of *other* doctrines before they became teachers of *false* doctrine.<sup>49</sup> They taught strange doctrines that did not exactly coincide with the true doctrine. They had a craving to be different. They did not begin by teaching radical error, but they put a wrong emphasis on a correct doctrine. A craving for something new is all it takes to launch oneself on the road to heresy. Many times it will be a quest for a shortcut or an easier way to explain Scripture. In this the novelty teachers differed from the Judaizers in the churches of Galatia, who taught a false gospel (Gal 1:6-7). Teaching novelty is the first step toward the teaching of error.

(2) **A wrong understanding of knowledge.** First Tim 6:20 tells Timothy to turn away from “profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge.” Without going into all the details in 1 and 2 Timothy, one can simply summarize the problem at Ephesus as a combination of incipient Gnosticism and a wrong view of the law.<sup>50</sup> There were some inroads of Platonic dualism that these people had latched onto. Historically, an attempt at integrating that dualism with biblical teaching resulted in the second-century heresy of Gnosticism. But the dominant part of their system was a misguided emphasis on the OT. In current terminology, they had not properly worked out the issues of continuity and discontinuity between the two testaments.

(3) **A failure to guard against heretical influences.** In Acts 20:29-30 Paul warned the elders at Ephesus where Timothy was now serving, “I know that after my departure savage

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<sup>49</sup>Cf. 1 Tim 1:3; and W. A. Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924) 8; J. H. Bernard, *The Pastoral Epistles*, CGT (Cambridge: University Press, 1899) 23; Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903) 3:301-2.

<sup>50</sup>Lock, *Pastoral Epistles* 76; H. A. Moellering, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, Concordia (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970) 121; Newport J. D. White, “The First and Second Epistles to Timothy and The Epistle to Titus,” vol. 4 of *Expositor’s Greek Testament* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 150-51.

wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.” Paul’s warning to the church’s elders came only about ten years before he wrote 2 Timothy. Such a rapid decline in the church’s orthodox standards must have been a great disappointment to the apostle. The elders had failed to heed his warning.

(4) **Carelessness, shoddiness, and laziness in handling the Word of truth.** Second Tim 2:14 tells Timothy to remember the words about courage he has just read in 2:1-13. From there he turns to urge him to diligence. By their lack of diligence Hymenaeus and Philetus had come up short. They did not pass the test because of careless work. Paul wants Timothy to avoid “word fights” and to devote all his energy to mastering the Word of truth. In 2:16-17 he tells him to shun profane and empty words that will lead to further ungodliness and will spread like gangrene. Replace diligence in handling the Word of truth with disrespectful and empty words, and you are on the same path as Hymenaeus and Philetus, who provided case studies in the drifting about which Paul spoke.

The word sometimes translated “lead to” in 2:16 is προσκόπτω (*proskoptō*). It also has the meaning of “to progress.” The men to whom Paul was referring apparently viewed themselves as “progressives” and claimed to lead their followers to a more advanced type of Christian thinking.<sup>51</sup> All the while, though, they were going in a backward direction. Instead of moving forward, they were in reverse.

Preterism today is another example of doctrinal slippage to the point of heresy. Like Hymenaeus and Philetus, full preterism says the resurrection is purely spiritual and therefore has already passed.<sup>52</sup> Can’t you hear their reasoning? “Never mind a gospel to die by. The only thing that matters is a gospel to live by. My present relationship with Christ is all that matters. I died and was raised with Him when I became a Christian. That’s all that’s relevant. The historical basis of the teaching —i.e., Christ’s own resurrection—doesn’t matter as long as the idea helps me in my present spiritual life.” That kind of reasoning evidences the inroads of pagan dualism that taught that everything spiritual is good and everything material is evil, so evil human bodies will not be raised from the dead. That kind of teaching became one of the bedrocks of second-century Gnosticism. Already in that day men were integrating the Bible with then-contemporary philosophy. They would say, “After all, ‘all truth is God’s truth,’ isn’t it?” Full preterism has already reached the point of heresy; moderate or partial preterism has begun drifting along the path of full preterism and is not far behind.

All it takes to start down the road to heresy is a craving for something new and different, a flashy new idea or something to gain attention, the urge to latch on to a new fad. Forget what true knowledge is all about and the warnings to guard against heresy. Combine such forgetfulness with a little carelessness, slothfulness, or laziness in handling the Word of truth, and before you know it, you have a full-blown heresy. Imprecision in handling the Scripture is the root of most heresy.

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<sup>51</sup>A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 87; W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965) 264; Lock, *Pastoral Epistles* 99; E. F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Moffatt New Testament (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936) 110; Kenneth S. Wuest, *The Pastoral Epistles in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 137.

<sup>52</sup>Dennis M. Swanson, “International Preterist Association: Reformation or Retrogression?” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 15/1 (Spring 2004):39-58.

The challenge for Timothy's leadership in Ephesus was halting the slide that had already ended in heresy for Hymenaeus and Philetus. Others were beginning to drift in the direction of these two men as 2:18 indicates. The two were upsetting "the faith of some." According to 2:14 their war-words were turning people upside down (the Greek word *καταστροφῆ* [*katastrophē*] transliterated is our English word "catastrophe").<sup>53</sup> Just shave the edge off the truth slightly, just put a wrong emphasis on a correct teaching, and you will find yourself on the road to doctrinal waywardness. Imprecision if nurtured will, increment by increment, ultimately lead to heresy.

**The remedy for drifting.** Second Tim 2:15 provides the remedy that would halt the doctrinal slippage in Ephesus. That verse and its context bring out several key elements of such a remedy.

(1) **The goal.** Notice Paul does not tell Timothy to attack the problem directly. He tells him to use indirect means. Don't limit yourself to confronting these men directly, though that sometimes may be necessary as 2 Tim 4:2b indicates ("reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering"). Rather the goal is to gain the approval of God by making oneself an unashamed workman. Concentrate on the positive side of teaching the Word of truth. The man of God is to be a God-pleaser, not a man-pleaser. He is not to be distracted by merely human considerations. He is to have an eye that is single toward God's will and glory. He is looking for His seal of approval. He strives to maintain His standards so that he has nothing to be ashamed of before Him.

*Dokimon*, the word translated "approved," includes two ideas, that of being tested and that of being approved.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes the most challenging tests come while one is diligently training for vocational Christian service. It is a great privilege to be tested, but it is even more important to achieve the goal of passing the test.

An approved workman should also have as his goal not to be ashamed because of doing a shoddy job. Nor should he be ashamed of his work before men. Note Paul's elaboration on this theme at 1:8, 12, 16. Hold your head up, Timothy. Do the right kind of job and you will not have to apologize to anyone.

(2) **The means to reach the goal.** The instrumental participle *ὀρθοτομοῦντα* (*orthotomounta*) in 2:15 tells how Timothy can satisfy the standard set earlier in the same verse: "by cutting straight the Word of truth" or "by handling the Word of truth accurately." What figure Paul had in mind with this participle is uncertain. Sometimes in secular Greek writings it referred to a mason squaring and cutting a stone to fit exactly into a predetermined opening. Other times it referred to a farmer's ploughing a straight furrow in his field or to a tentmaker cutting a piece of canvass to exactly the right size. Still other times it referred to a road-maker

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<sup>53</sup>Bernard, *Pastoral Epistles* 122; Charles J. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Boston: Draper and Halliday, 1861; reprint; Minneapolis: James Family, 1978) 141; D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 147; A. Plummer, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1891) 367; Scott, *Pastoral Epistles* 108; M. R. Vincent, *New Testament Word Studies* (reprint of 1887 ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 1059; Wuest, *Pastoral Epistles* 134.

<sup>54</sup>J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, Harper's New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper, 1963) 182; Hendriksen, *Pastoral Epistles* 262; H. Haarbeck, "dokimos," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. By Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 3:809.

constructing a straight road.<sup>55</sup> Whatever figure Paul had in mind entailed precision.

Because of the word's use in Prov 3:6 and 11:5 ("In all your ways acknowledge Him and he will make your paths straight"; "The righteousness of the blameless keeps their ways straight") and the use of similar terminology in Heb 12:13 ("make straight paths for your feet"), Paul probably had in mind the figure of road construction. The specifications for the construction have to be exactly right. The same must be true in constructing the road of truth.

Some have objected to trying to figure out just what figure Paul had in mind. They say that all we need is the general idea Paul expressed. They claim that knowing the broad sense of the word is sufficient, and pressing to figure out the specific meaning is an example of *λογομαχία* (*logomachia*, "striving with words," "hair splitting") that Paul forbids in the 2:14 just before his use of the word.<sup>56</sup> That is not what Paul meant by *λογομαχεῖν* (*logomachein*), however. In 1 Tim 6:4 the noun form of the word refers to quibbling over what is empty and profitless while playing philosophical word games. So here he probably refers to verbal disputes over peripheral issues that distract from the close attention that should be given the Word of truth (cf. 2 Tim 2:16).<sup>57</sup> "Truth" highlights the contrast between God's unshakable special revelation and the worthless chatter of the novelty seekers. There is a direct correlation between the high quality of a *detailed* analysis of Scripture and maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy.

In 2:15 the command impresses Timothy's mind with the importance of precision. Learning the general idea of what Scripture teaches is not sufficient, because it gives the novelty teachers too much room to roam in search of their innovations. It allows them to shade the truth a little bit this way or that way in order to integrate the Bible with psychology, science, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, mathematics, modern linguistics, or some other secular discipline that allegedly has discovered additional truth from God's general revelation, truth not found in the Bible. Proper handling of Scripture has to be specific and right. It has to be accurate. It has to be right on target.

If Scripture is not interpreted very carefully, who will hold the fort for truth? Being able to develop the tools to understand the details of Scripture is a privilege, but it is also a great responsibility in a time when so much subtle error emanates from reputedly trustworthy leaders.

**(3) The work ethic in reaching the goal.** Paul commands Timothy, "Be diligent," and uses a verb form that emphasizes urgency. The word carries the notion of self-exertion. Paul is recommending strenuous moral effort, a ceaseless, serious, earnest zeal to obtain God's approval through a right handling of the Word of truth. Perhaps "do your utmost" captures the degree of effort to be expended. The absence of a conjunction to introduce v. 15 adds further emphasis to Paul's command. After you have reached your limit and gone beyond, Paul tells Timothy, push a little more so as to gain a better mastery of the text.

That kind of expenditure of one's energy and resources is a lifelong quest. Only by thus taking himself in hand can Timothy fulfil his responsibility toward others, that of solemnly charging others not to wrangle about words (2:14).

Exegesis of the Word of truth is hard work. The expression "Word of truth" refers to the

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<sup>55</sup>Lock, *Pastoral Epistles* 99; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1933) 4:619.

<sup>56</sup>E.g., Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles* 183.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 182; Ellicott, *Pastoral Epistles* 228.

gospel in general, the Christian message as a whole,<sup>58</sup> but in practical reality it is the same as “the things which you have heard” in 2 Tim 2:2, the same as the God-breathed Scripture that the writer refers to in 2 Tim 3:16, and the same word Timothy is commanded to preach in 2 Tim 4:2. “Truth” contrasts God’s unshakable, inerrant revelation with the worthless chatter of the novelty teachers. The only way one can salvage the drifters is to gain a thorough hold on God’s truth. Timothy dare not cut his efforts short.

That means learning the biblical languages, correct rules of interpretation, historical backgrounds, correct doctrines and how to state them, and all other data pertinent to reaching precise conclusions regarding God’s truth. It means making only those applications that align with the correct interpretation. This is a mountainous task, but it is worth every bit of effort expended to accomplish it. It is part of the discipline in becoming an unashamed workman.

(4) **The pressure in attaining the goal.** Second Tim 2:22-26 recalls the manner for retrieving the drifters and at the same time points out that the process will not be easy. Verse 25 speaks of those who “are in opposition” to Timothy.

Pressure will come any time a person aims for accuracy in understanding and applying God’s Word. He will encounter opposition. He will get a lot of heat. Not everyone will agree that such strenuous effort is necessary. They will not think precision is that important. Some in today’s world are satisfied with rough estimates, particularly when it comes to theological matters. It will take a lot of “thick skin” to put up with the criticism and outright opposition that will come to God’s servant who insists on detailed accuracy.

In 2 Tim 2:9 Paul pointed to himself as an example of suffering hardship, hardship that will come from outside and even from some within the professing church. He urged Timothy not to bend under the pressure that was inevitable (see also 2 Tim 1:8; 2:3; 4:5).

Timothy faced it in his then-current ministry in Ephesus, and Paul told him to respond with kindness and gentleness. There is a wrong way and a right way to respond to the pressure. To approach the task as belligerent warriors, looking for a fight, is wrong. The “take no prisoners” approach in this spiritual battle is self-defeating. “Flee youthful lusts” in 2:22 probably refers to a tendency to fly off the handle, lose one’s temper, blow one’s stack, have a short fuse. Any such reaction would typify a lack of maturity. It’s okay to reprove, rebuke, and exhort, but it has to be done with patience (see 2:24-25a).

Gentleness and patience should prevail. If one’s manner is belligerent, his efforts to recover the drifters will fail. He must patiently instruct them, demonstrating righteousness, faith, love, and peace (2:22). Apparently the Ephesian church as a whole failed to fulfil this responsibility in its rescue efforts. About thirty years later, through the apostle John in Revelation, Jesus had nothing to say against the church doctrinally, but He criticized them severely for leaving their first love, love for God and for one another (Rev 2:1-7). Love must temper every rebuke of the drifters.

### **The Contrasting Contemporary Response**

If Scripture expects the same response to its precision as it expected from Timothy, how has contemporary evangelicalism measured up. Unfortunately, not too well. Exegetical and consequent theological slippage—i.e., drifting—is the rule of the day as the twenty-first century

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<sup>58</sup>Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles* 183.



begins. If anyone takes a stand against it, he must be ready to accept the flack that will come his way. Often twenty-first-century drifters have spoken against precisionists with such remarks as, “You have cast your net too wide,” or “You have painted with too broad a brush.” “You are expecting too much precision from the text.” In other words, “Your view of truth is too narrow. You are too detailed.” Three examples of twenty-first-century drifting will suffice to illustrate the seriousness of the problem.

**Vacillation between precision and imprecision.** Quite interesting is the way that some evangelical writers treat the precision of Scripture. Poythress and Grudem furnish an example. A chapter entitled “Generic ‘He’” appears in a work on Bible translations co-authored by the two.<sup>59</sup> At one point they express their viewpoint about gender-neutral translations:

Because generic singular is a convenient and frequent usage in the Bible, gender-neutral translations end up using ‘they’ and ‘you’ in a large number of passages where earlier translations had generic singular ‘he/his/him.’ In still other instances the new translations adopt passive rather than active constructions or substitute descriptive nouns for pronouns in order to avoid using “he.” The total number of verses affected numbers in the thousands.

Now let us be clear: The gender-neutral translations still achieve a rough approximation of the meaning of the original when they change the pronouns. But it is an approximation. When we look at finer nuances, shifts from singular to plural and from third person to first or second person result in subtle alterations.<sup>60</sup>

Their insistence on precision in handling the “generic ‘he’” properly is gratifying, because it aligns with the precision that Jesus and Paul exemplified and that Paul sought to instill in Timothy and those under his influence. They rightly note the damage done when a translation settles for an approximation rather than a precise rendering of the text.

Yet elsewhere in the same volume, in a chapter called “The Bible: The Word of God,” a section entitled “The inerrancy of Scripture,” the co-authors write,

## **2. The Bible can be inerrant and still include loose or free quotations**

The method by which one person quotes the words of another person is a procedure that in large part varies from culture to culture. While in contemporary American and British culture, we are used to quoting a person’s exact words when we enclose the statement in quotation marks, written Greek at the time of the New Testament had no quotation marks or equivalent kinds of punctuation, and an accurate citation of another person needed to include only a correct representation of the *content* of what the person said (rather like our use of indirect quotations): it was not expected to cite each word exactly. Thus, inerrancy is consistent with loose or free quotations of the Old Testament or of the words of Jesus, for example, so long as the *content* is not false to

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<sup>59</sup>Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000) 111-33.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

what was originally stated. The original writer did not ordinarily imply that he was using the exact words of the speaker and only those, nor did the original hearers expect verbatim quotation in such reporting.<sup>61</sup>

Poythress and Grudem reverse their position on precision when it comes to the Gospels' reporting the words of Jesus, perhaps failing to realize that if the Gospels have only the *general content* of what Jesus said, who can say whether Jesus used a generic "he," a plural "they," or a passive voice in instances they cite. For example, they cite the difference in renderings of Matt 16:24:

NIV: Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

NIVI (New International Version Inclusive Language Edition): "Then Jesus said to his disciples, "*Those* who would come after me must deny *themselves* and take up *their* cross and follow me."<sup>62</sup>

In the NIVI rendering, they point out the possible meaning of a cross belonging to a whole group of people jointly rather than a single individual. However, if one has only the gist of what Jesus said, who is to say whether He used the singular or the plural.

Another instance cited is John 14:23:

NIV: If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

NRSV (New Revised Standard Version): *Those* who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love *them*, and we will come to *them*, and make our home with *them*.<sup>63</sup>

Here Poythress and Grudem note the probability that the NRSV means that the Father and the Son make a home with a plurality of people *together*—i.e., with the church corporately—whereas the singular in the original text shows clearly the meaning of making a home with each person. Again, however, if the text has only the general idea of what Jesus said rather than His exact words, who is to say that He did not express the corporate idea.

By relaxing their standard of precision in regard to the words of Jesus, these two have fallen into the pattern of the drifters whom Timothy was instructed to rescue. Their inconsistency is lamentable in that it does serious injustice to the precision that is inevitably a major part of biblical inerrancy.

**All-out support for imprecision.** Approximation rather than precision best describes the way a goodly number of evangelical scholars handle the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life.

Guelich, for example, represents several who refer to the Gospels as "portraits" rather

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 49 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 117 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>63</sup>Ibid [emphasis in the original].

than “snapshots” of Jesus’ life.<sup>64</sup> He contrasts a critical approach to the Gospels, which is equated to abstract paintings, with an uncritical approach, which to him is the same as snapshots. For this author, the Gospels were close approximations but not precise representations of the historical Jesus. Hagner and Blomberg follow closely the pattern set by Guelich, where that author sees the Gospels as portraits contrasted with snapshots—i.e., an uncritical approach—and abstract paintings—i.e., a critical approach. They take the Gospels as close approximations but not precise representations of the historical Jesus.<sup>65</sup>

Bock fits the same pattern of consistently labeling the Gospel descriptions of Jesus’ words and actions as approximations. He repeatedly refers to their reporting of the “gist” of Jesus words and actions.<sup>66</sup> “Gist” is the substance or essence of a speech, but not the very words spoken. In his category of “gist,” Bock includes not only the substance or essence of a speech, but also what the Gospel writers’ later reflections on the significance Jesus’ teaching came to mean.<sup>67</sup> This means that the writers consciously changed His words and actions later to accomplish the purposes of their reports. As Stein explains,

[T]hey [namely, the Evangelists] felt free to paraphrase, modify certain terms, and add comments, in order to help their readers understanding the “significance” of what Jesus taught. The Evangelists had no obsession with the *ipsissima verba* [i.e., the very words], for they believed that they had authority to interpret these words for their audience.<sup>68</sup>

Bock even argues for imprecision in the recording of the gist of the events in Jesus life,<sup>69</sup> by which he apparently means that differing details of parallel accounts activities need not be historically harmonized. That is a far cry from the precision that Jesus demonstrated in His use of the OT.

Following in the train of others, Keener advocates the same imprecision when writing,

Because ancient biography normally included some level of historical intention, historical questions are relevant in evaluating the degree to which Matthew was able to achieve the intention his genre implies. This does not require us to demand a narrow precision regarding details, a precision foreign to ancient literature, but to evaluate the *general* fidelity of substance. . . . My most striking discovery while writing this commentary was how often Matthew ‘re-Judaizes’ his sources, probably mostly on the basis of concrete Palestinian, Jewish-Christian oral traditions.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>R. A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount, A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982) 24-25.

<sup>65</sup>D. A. Hagner, “Interpreting the Gospels: The Landscape and the Quest,” *JETS* 24/2 (1981):24; Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987) 8-12.

<sup>66</sup>Darrell L. Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?” in *Jesus under Fire*, ed. By Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 78, 86, 88, 94.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>68</sup>Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 156.

<sup>69</sup>Bock, “Words of Jesus” 85-86.

<sup>70</sup>Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 2 [emphasis added].

He later adds, “The Gospel writers’ contemporaries, such as Josephus, noticeably exercised a degree of both freedom and fidelity in their handling of *biblical* history . . . and one would expect the Gospels to represent the same mixture, albeit not necessarily in the same degree of each.”<sup>71</sup> To justify further his case for imprecision in Matthew’s Gospel, he notes, “[G]iven Matthew’s proximity to Jesus’ situation, his guesses are more apt to be correct than ours.”<sup>72</sup> If the best Matthew could do was guess about Jesus’ situation, one can hardly entertain any thought of historical precision in that Gospel. Keener puts Matthew into a category with other ancient writers: “Of course, students regularly paraphrased sayings of teachers; paraphrase was in fact a standard school exercise in Greco-Roman education . . . , and it was the ‘gist’ rather than the verbatim precision that ancients valued. . . . Scholars from across the theological spectrum thus acknowledge that Jewish and Christian sources alike both preserved and adapted earlier tradition. . . .”<sup>73</sup> Regarding the genealogy in Matthew 1, Keener attributes further imprecision to Matthew: “The best alternative to harmonizing the lists is to suggest that Matthew emphasizes the nature of Jesus’ lineage as royalty rather than trying to formulate a biologically precise list (contrast possibly Luke), to which he did not have access.”<sup>74</sup>

In commenting on the inherent difficulties of genre identification, Green observes,

As interesting and consequential as greater precision in genre identification might be, though in terms of our task of ‘reading the Gospel of Luke,’ this area has become problematized in recent years by the growing recognition that, *from the standpoint of our reading of narrative*, the line separating historical narrative and nonhistorical cannot be sustained. This is not because historical narrative makes no historical claims (or has no historical referent outside of the text), but because the narrative representation of history is always inherently ‘partial’—both in the sense of its selectivity and in the sense of its orientation to a hermeneutical vantage point. Historiography—in terms of temporal and causal relations—inevitably provides more, and less, than ‘what actually happened.’<sup>75</sup>

In his words, “the line separating historical narrative and nonhistorical cannot be sustained,” a blurring that he blames on a lack of precision in genre identification. Genre has only come to be a factor to be reckoned with in evangelical interpretation since the late twentieth century. Among scholars it has as yet to find a consensus definition, particularly in the Gospels. Green acknowledges this fact and admits that sorting out the mixture of historical and nonhistorical in the Gospels and Acts remains an unsolved problem. Narrative claims to precise historicity are unjustified in his eyes. In other words, imprecision is the rule of the day in dealing with the NT historical books.

He speaks of “varying levels of precision the sort of history-writing Luke-Acts most

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 12-13 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 75-76.

<sup>75</sup>Joel B Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 2 [emphasis in the original].

approximates,”<sup>76</sup> which, of course, makes wide allowance for various levels of imprecision in those books.

With his words, “Against the backdrop of the last two centuries of biblical studies, the approach to the Lukan narrative we have sketched may seem ahistorical to some, or at least impoverished with reference to historical concerns,”<sup>77</sup> Green evidences his realization that his case for imprecision in Luke-Acts differs from past historical interests in these works. Yet he continues to press his case that historical accuracy is not that important: “Nevertheless, the veracity of Jesus’ healing ministry is neither for Luke, nor apparently for his contemporaries, the point at issue. . . . Luke’s compulsion is to provide meaning for the events he recounts, not to argue for or demonstrate their veracity.”<sup>78</sup>

A recent work by France also imbibes of this spirit of imprecisionism in the Gospels, this time the Gospel of Mark. Regarding the forty days of Jesus’ temptation, France writes, “[Τ]εσσαράκοντα ἡμέρας ([T]essarakonta hēmeras, ‘Forty days’) need be no more than a [*sic*] idiomatic expression for a long but limited period, and is so used elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., Gn. 7:4 etc; Nu. 13:25; 1 Sa. 17:16; Jon. 3:4; Acts 1:3).”<sup>79</sup> Elsewhere he questions historicity: “So when Mark emphasises [*sic*] the wilderness location in 1:2-13, it is not only to signal that this part of the gospel operates on a different level from the story of real-life involvement which will follow, but also that the wilderness is itself a symbol of hope and fulfilment.”<sup>80</sup>

The above examples of recent scholarship that insist on at least a few, and in some cases many, aspects of historical imprecision in the NT historical books demonstrate an utter disregard for the precision of Scripture.

**Imprecision and uncertainty.** Advocates of a modern linguistics approach to Scripture typify an unavoidable by-product of imprecision. That byproduct is uncertainty about the meaning of a text being interpreted. Cotterell and Turner express this uncertainty:

In fact, the criticism goes, the Cartesian or Baconian ideal of ‘objective’ exegesis, an exegesis that is unaffected by the world of the analyst, is unattainable. . . . The original meaning is hidden from us, and we have no way of resurrecting it. . . . All that we can do is to infer the meaning, and that will in some measure be affected by our present understanding of our world. . . . We need fully to recognize that *our* reading of the letter to Philemon (or whatever), however certain we may feel it is what Paul meant, *is actually only a hypothesis*—our *hypothesis*— about the discourse meaning.<sup>81</sup>

They correctly blame such widespread uncertainty about biblical meaning on what they call an

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>79</sup>R. T. France. *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. by I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 85 [transliteration added].

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>81</sup>P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989) 59, 68, 70 [emphasis in the original].

unjustified expectation of “a precision in the use of words”:

It is, perhaps, a danger of exegesis that we tend to demand a precision in the use of words which our everyday experience should tell us is not to be expected, and to find differences in meaning where none is demonstrably intended. A case in point is John 21 and the alternation between two Greek words for ‘love’ in Jesus’ questioning of Peter. It is probable that we are right in seeing significance in the three-fold question in vv. 15-17, less probable, however, that the change in *word* is significant.<sup>82</sup>

Their rationale is that since no human communication is completely unambiguous, the same must be true of God’s attempts at communication with humanity through the Bible. Such a rationale vastly underestimates God’s ability in conveying His direct revelation to man.

The above three illustrative categories, far from following the pattern of Scripture itself and Scripture’s expected response from believers, demonstrate an utter disregard for the precision and hence the reliability of Scripture.

### **Precision and Jesus’ Words**

Much attention has centered on the rival perspectives of *ipsissima vox* (“Jesus’ exact voice”) and *ipsissima verba* (“Jesus’ very words”). In discussions of the precision of Scripture, a consideration of the scriptural accounts of the words of Jesus and others is inevitable. Based on merely human estimates, a dogmatic choice between the two possible views is impossible, but by looking at the evidence on each side of the issue, one can with a high degree of probability establish whether Scripture has “the very words of Jesus” or only “the exact voice of Jesus.”

**Ipsissima Vox.** One position is that the Gospels have only the “voice” of Jesus—i.e., the essence of what He said, but not His very words. Several reasons support the *ipsissima vox* position.

(1) The strongest support contends that Jesus probably gave most of His teaching in Aramaic, because that was the dominant public language of first-century Israel.<sup>83</sup> The Gospel writers wrote in Greek, meaning that most, if not all, of Jesus’ teaching recorded there is a translation, not His very words.

In response to such reasoning, the flat assertion must be that no one in modern times knows with certainty what language Jesus spoke most of the time. That information is not available in modern times, but archeological and other types of studies make a strong case to support His extensive use of Greek.<sup>84</sup> The area where Jesus taught was actually trilingual, with Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages sharing equally in usage. In NT times the influence of Hellenism on Israel was profound. The Jewish institution of the Sanhedrin had a Greek name (derived from the Greek noun συνέδριον, *synedrion*). Some scholars now hold that Greek was

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 159 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>83</sup>Bock, “Words of Jesus” 77.

<sup>84</sup>Robert H. Gundry, “The Language Mileu of First-Century Palestine,” *JBL* 83 (1964):404-8; Phillip Edgcumbe, “The Languages Spoken by Jesus,” in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. by Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 125-43.

the primary language spoken in Israel by Jesus. They point to such things as “the role of Greek as the *lingua franca* of the Roman Empire, the linguistic and cultural character of lower Galilee during the first century, the linguistic fact that the NT has been transmitted in Greek from its earliest documents, a diversity of epigraphic evidence, significant literary evidence, and several significant contexts in the Gospels.”<sup>85</sup>

The exclusive use of the Greek OT in Scripture citations found in the Epistle to the Hebrews, a document either originating from or addressed to Hebrew Christians in Israel, is another indication of Greek’s widespread use in first-century Palestine. The use by Jesus Himself of mostly LXX sources in His quoting of the OT furnishes further evidence to this effect. Andrew and Philip, two of Jesus’ twelve apostles, had Greek names.<sup>86</sup> Their encounter with a certain Greek person in John 12:20-22 is clear indication of their use of Greek. Peter, leader of the Twelve, had Hebrew and Aramaic names (“Simon” and “Cephas”), but he also had a Greek name, Peter. Most probably he spoke Greek in preaching the sermon in Acts 2 and ministering to the household of Cornelius (Acts 10). He also wrote two epistles in Greek. In the Greek text of Matt 16:18, Jesus plays on the difference between two Greek words, πέτρος (*petros*) and πέτρα (*petra*), a distinction that Hebrew or Aramaic is unable to make. Jesus must have used Greek in speaking with the Syrophenician woman who was a Greek (Mark 7:26), the Roman centurion (Matt 8:13), and Pilate (Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 18). Also, Stephen (Acts 7) and James (Acts 15) quote from the Greek OT. Furthermore, Jesus’ extensive use of synonyms in John 21 is additional validation for His use of Greek. He has two words for “love,” two words for “know,” three words for “sheep,” and two words for “feed.”<sup>87</sup> Distinctions between such synonyms is impossible to make in either Hebrew or Aramaic.

Thus, the argument that the Greek Gospels’ quotations are a translation from the Aramaic that Jesus spoke is without merit.

(2) Another reason given to support the *ipsissima vox* position is the supposition that many of Jesus’ statements and sermons are abbreviated accounts of all that He actually said on a given occasion.<sup>88</sup> The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) has elements that the parallel Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6) does not have, and vice versa. The two probably represent Jesus’ ministry on the same occasion. If so, certain parts are omitted in each account. This means that the Gospels do not contain every word that Jesus spoke.

Such reasoning is not a valid support for the “voice” position, however. The omitted portions could very well have been and probably were parenthetical-type portions of His speech, portions that did not add to, subtract from, or change what He said in the recorded portions of His messages. The Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew, for example, makes very good sense and has an even flow of continuity whose literary worthiness has been recognized through the centuries. The same is true of Luke’s Sermon on the Plain. Both the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain could very well be portions of a much longer discourse that

<sup>85</sup>Stanley E. Porter, “Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993):204; cf. F. David Farnell, “The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins,” in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. by Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) 288-89.

<sup>86</sup>Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., “The Languages Jesus Spoke,” in *The NIV Harmony of the Gospels with Explanations and Essays* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 301-2.

<sup>87</sup>Cf. M. S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 200-201.

<sup>88</sup>Bock, “Words of Jesus” 77-78.

Matthew and Luke under the Spirit's inspiration extracted and preserved word-for-word in writing for the profit of subsequent generations.

(3) A third consideration offered to support the *ipsissima vox* position is the way the NT writers cite the OT. If they felt freedom to vary the wording of the OT in their citations, they must have felt the same freedom in citing the teachings of Jesus.<sup>89</sup> The thrust of the argument is that if they loosely quoted the OT, they must have loosely quoted the words of Jesus also.

Those who follow that line of reasoning, however, seldom if ever take into account that the readers of the NT had access to various versions of the OT. They had opportunity to compare those Gospels with the OT to learn how the NT writers had used the OT. By comparing the NT with the OT, they could tell whether the Gospels had cited a passage word-for-word and given it a literal interpretation, or whether they had cited a passage word-for-word or with word changes in order to apply a non-literal sense of the passage to a new situation. In the latter case, they made an "inspired *sensus plenior* application" of the passage, which they were authorized to do because the NT writers themselves were inspired to write what they wrote and could assign such a fuller meaning.<sup>90</sup>

Those readers could not do the same with Jesus' sayings. In knowing what Jesus actually said, they were strictly limited to what was written in the inspired Gospels. They had no second source to compare. Therefore, to compare how the Gospel writers quoted the sayings of Jesus with how they used the OT is illegitimate. In comparing with the OT, one is comparing familiar words with familiar words. But one cannot compare the use of familiar words with a use of unknown words.

Thus, a reader learns nothing about how the Gospel writers quoted the words of Jesus through considering how they quoted the words of the OT.

(4) Bock says that, by examining the Gospels themselves, one can learn that the Gospel writers gave only the gist of the words and activities of Jesus.<sup>91</sup> Consistently, his reasoning says, they took a summarizing approach to reporting on the teachings and events of Jesus' life, furnishing another evidence that the biblical text itself clearly evidences a distinction between the Lord's words and His voice.

Bock's assertion regarding this aspect of the biblical text is simply not true. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to refute his handling of various passages, but Green has shown clearly that Bock has failed to prove this point.<sup>92</sup> Bock's biased preunderstanding of what he wants to find by way of proof forces him into a distorted handling of the various parallel passages that he cites.

Here, then, is another alleged evidence of *ipsissima vox* that falters for the lack of cohesive reasoning.

(5) Bock draws a fifth support for the *vox* position as he compares the Gospels with the Greco-Roman tradition and the Jewish culture.<sup>93</sup> From such comparisons he concludes, "[O]ne

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>90</sup>For more details on how the NT writers used the OT, see Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) 141-64, 241-69.

<sup>91</sup>Bock, "Words of Jesus" 78, 84-88.

<sup>92</sup>Donald E. Green, "Evangelicals and *Ipsissima Vox*," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 12/1 (Spring 2001):59-66.

<sup>93</sup>Bock, "Words of Jesus" 78-81.



can see that oral culture of that society did not mean the kind of loose approach to the teaching of divine wisdom that the ‘jive’ approach suggests, even though one cannot guarantee from the cultural practice that such writers would have always quoted material as if on a ‘memorex’ tape.”<sup>94</sup> By “jive” approach, he refers to the conclusions of The Jesus Seminar; by “memorex” approach, he refers to the *ipsissima verba* position. His view is that the degree of accuracy of the Gospels is somewhere between the two extremes.

Green has also shown Bock’s use of Greco-Roman sources to be faulty.<sup>95</sup> Bock favors the Greco-Roman sources rather than Jewish historiography as a pattern for Gospel literature, but after a careful scrutinizing of Greco-Roman and Jewish sources, Green concludes,

The comparison to secular historians for which the *ipsissima vox* proponents so valiantly argue is invalid, poorly conceived, and lacking evidence—and cannot stand against the clear testimony of Josephus on this point. The Gospel writers’ pattern for transmission of the words of Jesus does not lie in ancient Greek historiography, but in the Jewish pattern that paid close attention to the actual words used.<sup>96</sup>

So here again, a supposed support for *ipsissima vox* falls to the ground empty because the best parallels to the Gospels are literature “that paid close attention to the actual words used.”

***Ipsissima Verba.*** Of course, the precision that has been so evident thus far in this present study of Scripture itself strongly favors the *ipsissima verba* position, i.e., that the Gospels contain the actual words spoken by Jesus. If Jesus could insist on the retention of even the smallest letter of the Hebrew OT and even the smallest part of a letter of the Hebrew OT, one should expect that the Holy Spirit would preside over the inspiration of the NT with the same degree of accuracy. If Paul could insist on Timothy’s close attention to details of Scripture, one of those details would be the very words spoken by Jesus.

Bock insists that the “memorex” approach is unrealistic, however:

In the beginning there were no tape recorders. In our twentieth-century high-tech world it is difficult to appreciate how communication took place in the first century. There were no printing presses, no cassette players, no newspapers, no printed page, no faxes, no dozen other devices by which we send and record information today. Two thousand years ago there were only individually produced, handwritten copies either on pieces of parchment or on reed paper known as papyri.<sup>97</sup>

What Bock fails to take into account, however, is the fact that the same God whose providence allowed humans to invent all the electronic marvels of modern times presided over the inspiration of the Scriptures, including the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ words and activities. If He has provided for contemporary times a means of preserving factual material precisely, He

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>95</sup>Green, “Evangelicals and *Ipsissima Vox*” 51-59.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>97</sup>Bock, “Words of Jesus” 74.

certainly was capable of guiding human writers of Scripture with the same precise information in communicating His revelation to the human race.

The strongest argument against the *verba* position is that Jesus used Aramaic most of the time, but Jesus' extensive use of the Greek language in His teaching and preaching is a well-founded probability.<sup>98</sup> He did occasionally incorporate transliterated Aramaic and Hebrew into His speech as evidenced in a few instances. The fact that the Gospels at times supply an interpretation for such Aramaic or Hebrew expressions shows such uses to be only occasional, however. Jesus' use of "*Talitha kum!*" in Mark 5:41, along with its translation, "Little girl, I say to you, arise!" evidences His occasional use of Aramaic as does Mark 15:34 and His words Ἐλωι ἐλωι λεμα σαβαχθάνι; [*Elōi, elōi, lema sabachthani?*] with the translation "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Another non-Greek language appears in the parallel Matt 27:46: Ἡλι ἡλι λεμα σαβαχθάνι; [*Ēli, ēli, lama sabachthani?*] which Matthew translates "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Mark 5:41 and Mark 15:34 evidence Jesus' use of Aramaic, and Matt 27:46 shows that He knew Hebrew as well.<sup>99</sup> In Matt 23:7, 8, Jesus used the Aramaic ῥαββί (*Rabbi*)<sup>100</sup> instead of its Greek equivalent Διδάσκαλος (*Didaskalos*, "Teacher"). These occasional transliterations in languages other than Greek further support Jesus' customary use of the Greek language in His ministry.

The Gospel writers were also careful to pick up instances when Jesus' disciples and others used Aramaic instead of Greek. They used *Rabbi* and *Rabboni*<sup>101</sup> fifteen times in the Gospels<sup>102</sup> as compared with the corresponding Greek title *Didaskalos*, which the disciples and others used more than thirty-five times. In John 20:16, John is careful to note that Mary "said to Him in Hebrew" in her use of *Rabboni*. This was one of those exceptional cases when someone addressing Christ or speaking about Him did so in Hebrew (or Aramaic) rather than Greek. Note several other instances when the writer John specifically designates a name in Hebrew: John 5:2; 19:13, 17. Here is further evidence from the Gospels themselves that Jesus and His contemporaries ordinarily communicated among themselves in the Greek language. The writers made a point of identifying the exceptional cases that were not in Greek.

The major obstacle erected to combat an *ipsissima verba* position has been an assumption that Jesus and His contemporaries communicated with each other exclusively or almost exclusively in Aramaic. If Aramaic had been the principal or exclusive language in Israel at that time, each Gospel writer would in some cases have needed to translate independently from Aramaic to Greek in quoting speakers. Since in such cases the writers often agree with each other, word-for-word, their translations from one language to another would have to have been identical or nearly identical. That could hardly have been the case. A short example illustrates this phenomenon. In a section of the Synoptic Gospels dealing with the ministry of John the

<sup>98</sup>See the recent article by Aaron Tresham, "The Languages Spoken by Jesus," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 20/1 (Spring 2009):71-94, for a recent study to show that Jesus was most probably trilingual.

<sup>99</sup>Textual variants in all three passages confuse the issue of which language Jesus used, but the evidence is sufficient to show His familiarity with all three languages. The inscription on the cross was in three languages, Hebrew (or Aramaic), Latin, and Greek. The addition of Latin, the language of Rome, does not necessarily mean that Jesus knew Latin in addition to Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

<sup>100</sup>Greek transliteration: *Hrabbi*.

<sup>101</sup>Greek transliteration: *Hrabbi*.

<sup>102</sup>Matt 26:25, 49; Mark 9:5; 10:51; 11:21; 14:45; John 1:48, 49; 3:2, 26; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8; 20:16.

Baptist (Matt 3:1-12 = Mark 1:1-8 = Luke 3:1-20), there occur three word groups of John's teaching in which Matthew and Luke agree verbatim on 169 out of the 178 words in the groups. If the two authors had translated from Aramaic independently of each other, their translations could not have matched each other with such precision. Advocates of Markan priority cannot say that they copied from Mark, because Mark does not have those words. If, however, they were independent verbatim reports of John's teaching in Greek, the near-identity of the two series is easily explainable through eyewitness memories enabled by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In His Upper Room Discourse, Jesus promised His disciples an enabling for such verbatim reporting: "[T]he Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). He provided in advance for the writing of the Gospels as a divine-human undertaking: "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, *that is* the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me, and you *will* bear witness also, because you have been with Me from the beginning" (John 15:26-27). Of course, the divine side prevailed to overcome any human weaknesses, thereby providing readers of the Gospels with the very words spoken by Jesus while on earth. As He said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away" (Matt 24:35).

In concert with Hodge and Warfield,<sup>103</sup> a few years ago I wrote,

No one has an airtight case for concluding whether they are Jesus' very words or they are only the gist of what Jesus said. For one whose predisposition is toward evangelical HC [i.e., Historical Criticism] and its primary focus on the human element in the inspiration of Scripture, he will incline toward the *ipsissima vox* position. For one whose inclination leads him to place highest premium on the Spirit's part in inspiring Scripture, he will certainly lean toward the *ipsissima verba* view. In some mysterious way known only to God, the natural merged with the supernatural when the Spirit inspired the Gospels. Whatever way that happened, however, the supernatural must have prevailed. Otherwise, the Gospels could not be inerrant. The Bible is more than just a humanly generated book.<sup>104</sup>

All that has transpired since I wrote those words has served to confirm the position expressed there even more.

### Example of Heroes from the Past

**A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield.** At the end of the nineteenth century, two well-known theologians ably defended the verbal inspiration of Scripture. They were A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield:

It is evident, therefore, that it is not clearness of thought which inclines any of the

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<sup>103</sup>A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, "Inspiration," *Presbyterian Review* 2/6 (April 1881):230-32.

<sup>104</sup>Robert L. Thomas, "Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics," in *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship*, ed. by Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 373.

advocates of a real inspiration of the Holy Scriptures to deny that it extends to the words. Whatever discrepancies or other human limitations may attach to the sacred record, *the line* (of inspired or not inspired, of infallible or fallible) *can never rationally be drawn between the thoughts and the words of Scripture.*<sup>105</sup>

Hodge and Warfield insisted on the inspiration of the very words of Scripture in spite of human limitations that may have played a part in producing the Bible. Suggestions that Scripture contains only the *thoughts*, i.e., the *gist*, of what actually happened was to them preposterous. As they so pointedly note, one cannot draw a line between “the thoughts and the words of Scripture,” because once someone changes a word, he has also changed the thought. Hence, a belief in the *verbal* inspiration of Scripture is an endorsement of the *ipsissima verba* position. Only since the inroads of historical criticism of the Synoptic Gospels into evangelicalism have evangelicals begun to differ from Hodge and Warfield.<sup>106</sup>

**C. H. Spurgeon.** Spurgeon’s final annual address to his Pastors’ College in 1891 has been published under the title *The Greatest Fight in the World*. He was at that point engulfed in a theological battle with those of his own association who were attempting to befriend the findings of secular philosophy and science by shaving away certain teachings of Scripture. Here is part of his instructions to his students on that occasion:

But we are told that we ought to give up a part of our old-fashioned theology to save the rest. We are in a carriage travelling [*sic*] over the steppes of Russia. The horses are being driven furiously, but the wolves are close upon us! There they are! Can you not see their eyes of fire? The danger is pressing. What must we do? It is proposed that we throw out a child or two. By the time they have eaten the baby, we shall have a little headway; but should they again overtake us, what then? Why, brave man, *throw out your wife!* “All that a man hath will he give for his life”; give up nearly every truth in the hope of saving one. Throw out inspiration, and let the critics devour it. Throw out election, and all the old Calvinism; here will be a dainty feast for the wolves, and the gentlemen who give us the sage advice will be glad to see the doctrines of grace torn limb from limb. Throw out natural depravity, eternal punishment, and the efficacy of prayer. We have lightened the carriage wonderfully. Now for another drop. *Sacrifice the great sacrifice!* Have done with the atonement! Brethren, this advice is villainous, and murderous: we will escape these wolves with everything, or we will be lost with everything. It shall be “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”, or none at all. We will never attempt to save half the truth by casting any part of it away. The sage advice which has been given us involved treason to God, and disappointment to ourselves. We will stand by all or none. We will have the whole Bible or no Bible. We are told that if we give up something the adversaries will also give up something; but we

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<sup>105</sup>Hodge and Warfield, “Inspiration” 235 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>106</sup>For an excellent discussion of inerrancy in the nineteenth century, see Ronald F. Satta. *The Sacred Text: Biblical Authority in Nineteenth-Century America*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2007). Through extensive documentation Satta proves that throughout the nineteenth century the primary scholars of all the mainline Protestant denominations—Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and Congregationalists—were inerrantist who fought for the verbal accuracy and precision of the Bible

care not what they will do, for we are not the least afraid of them. . . . We shall with the sword of the Spirit maintain the whole truth as ours, and shall not accept a part of it as a grant from the enemies of God. . . . God being with us we shall not cease from this glorying, but will hold the whole of revealed truth, even to the end.<sup>107</sup>

Spurgeon was unwilling to surrender even the smallest detail of the Bible to the criticisms of science and philosophy, because he appreciated the precision of Scripture and knew that such precision would triumph in the end.

**J. Gresham Machen.** Other defenders of biblical inspiration in past years have set an example worth following by people of the present generation. J. Gresham Machen was one of those heroes. In the following 1930 excerpt, his example of firmness yet gentleness in defending Scripture against the drifters of his day closely adheres to instructions that Paul gave Timothy in 2 Tim 2:14-26:

The book [i.e., Machen's book on *The Virgin Birth of Christ*] has been criticized by a number of writers (for example, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, London, for April 10, 1930) on the ground that it weakens its case by attempting to prove too much—by attempting to establish a thoroughgoing trustworthiness for the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, instead of admitting the presence of a “midrashic” element as does G. H. Box.

In reply to this criticism, the author [i.e., Machen] desires to say how very highly he values the work of Canon Box (whose important book on the virgin birth has recently been supplemented, in a very interesting way, by two articles entitled “The Virgin Birth, A Survey of Some Recent Literature,” in *Laudate*, ix, 1931, pp. 77-88, 147-155); and he [i.e., Machen] also desires to say how sharply he distinguishes the view of this scholar, who accepts as historical the central miracle in the birth narratives and rejects details, from the views of those who accept only details and reject the central miracle. The author [i.e., Machen] has taken occasion, moreover, to say (in *British Weekly*, for August 21, 1930), in reply to a very sympathetic review by H. R. Mackintosh (in the same journal, for July 17, 1930), that he does not adopt the apologetic principle of “all or nothing,” and that he rejoices in the large measure of agreement regarding the birth narratives that unites him with scholars like Canon Box and the late Bishop Gore, who reject many things in the Bible that he [i.e., Machen] regards as true. Nevertheless, the author [i.e., Machen] still believes that a thoroughgoing apologetic is the strongest apologetic in the end; and, in particular, he thinks that when the objections to the supernatural have once been overcome, there are removed with them, in a much more far-reaching way than is sometimes supposed, the objections to the birth narratives as a whole.<sup>108</sup>

Machen wrote these words at a time when scholars of nonevangelical persuasion were

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<sup>107</sup>C. H. Spurgeon, *The Greatest Fight in the World* (reprint; Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1990) 33-34.

<sup>108</sup>J. Gresham Machen, “Preface to the Second Edition,” *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930) ix-x.

questioning the historicity of the birth narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Machen stood his ground against extreme liberalism and also, in a much gentler tone, against a middle-of-the-road position between fundamentalism and liberalism, such as represented by Canon Box in the quotation above. In distinction from both groups, Machen accepted “as historical the central miracle in the birth narratives” and the “details” contained therein. He was accused of “attempting to prove too much” by the “middle-of-the-roaders” who accepted the “gist” of the virgin birth accounts and rejected the details, but he stood his ground.

This hero of the faith set the pattern for conservative evangelicals of the present who have likewise been accused of “attempting to prove too much” from the Gospels. Osborne has criticized *The Jesus Crisis*<sup>109</sup> with the following: “[T]o say that virtually all the sayings in the Gospels are *ipsissima verba* is a dangerous overstatement, for inerrancy itself is at stake. Thomas demands more precision from the Gospel accounts than they can give. Such precision is virtually impossible to demonstrate.”<sup>110</sup> The observation in response to Osborne is that *imprecision* is “virtually impossible to demonstrate,” and the strongest probability is on the side of precision because of the divine role in inspiration.

Regarding the same book, Bock has written, “[S]ome warnings in this book have merit. But it casts its net far too widely.”<sup>111</sup> He adds, “Such a book should carefully describe and distinguish differences in how views are held. It should be careful about how the details of Scripture are treated, details which the Spirit of God did give us with accuracy. These details do not support the book’s claim for a specific kind of historical precision in Scripture.”<sup>112</sup> Earlier he writes, “So a historically based distinction between Jesus’ exact words (*ipsissima verba*, historically accurate direct citations) and His voice (*ipsissima vox*, a historically accurate summary or paraphrase of His utterances) remains necessary in some cases, despite the book’s claim that this distinction is bibliologically dangerous.”<sup>113</sup>

Some middle-of-the-road contemporary reviewers of *The Jesus Crisis* look at the book as “attempting to prove too much,” the same charges as Machen’s adversaries leveled against him. Machen’s adversaries have long since passed from the memories of orthodox Christians, but Machen’s name has etched itself in the annals of orthodoxy for generations to come, because he chose to interpret the text with precision.

**J. I. Packer.** Though not a voice from the distant past, J. I. Packer in 1958 published a work that won wide positive acclamation among evangelicals. In that book he wrote,

Our point here is simply that the Church must receive all teaching that proves to be biblical, whether on matters of historical or theological fact, as truly part of God’s Word.

This shows the importance of insisting, that the inspiration of Scripture is *verbal*. Words signify and safeguard meaning; the wrong word distorts the intended sense. Since

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<sup>109</sup>Thomas and Farnell, eds., *The Jesus Crisis*.

<sup>110</sup>Grant R. Osborne, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical,” *JETS* 42/2 (June 1999):203.

<sup>111</sup>Darrell L. Bock, Review of *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship*, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (April-June 2000):236.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.*, 233.

God inspired the biblical text in order to communicate His Word, it was necessary for him to ensure that the words written were such as did in fact convey it. We do not stress the verbal character of inspiration from a superstitious regard for the original Hebrew and Greek words . . . ; we do so from a reverent concern for the sense of Scripture. If the words were not wholly God's, then their teaching would not be wholly God's.<sup>114</sup>

As late as the sixth decade of the twentieth century, evangelicals overwhelmingly endorsed the verbal inspiration about which Packer wrote. The only position compatible with that verbal inspiration is that of *ipsissima verba*, but that is a far cry from the evangelicals who today speak only in terms of the Scripture's retaining the *gist* of what Jesus said.

Evangelicals need to retrace their steps of the last fifty years if they are to regain their appreciation for the reliability and precision of the Bible.

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<sup>114</sup>J. I. Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 89-90.