

EVANGELICALS AND *IPSISSIMA VOX*

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The ipsissima vox position views the Gospels as containing the concepts that Jesus expressed, but not His very words. This essay focuses on the use of ancient history and parallel scriptural passages to support the ipsissima vox view. Advocates of the view regularly cite Thucydides as furnishing a pattern for how NT writers quoted their sources, but this precedent breaks down for a number of reasons. In addition, it does not take into account the difference between Greco-Roman writers and Jewish historiography. The reliance of ipsissima vox on parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels also falters. On one hand, proponents of the position use accounts of events that prove nothing regarding accounts of spoken words. On the other hand, they make no allowance for explanations in accounts of spoken words that adequately account for differences by assuming an ipsissima verba view of the quotations. A further failing of the ipsissima vox position is its failure to account for the role of the Holy Spirit in the inspiration of the Gospels. Recent evangelical proponents of this system have yielded too much ground in their discussions of the accuracy of these books.

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Introduction

To what extent do the four canonical Gospels record the very words of Jesus? That question sparked the work of the infamous Jesus Seminar, and has been the subject of increasing attention in evangelical circles in the past few years. Various writers, including Grant Osborne,¹ Daniel Wallace,² Robert Thomas,³

¹Grant Osborne, "Historical Criticism and the Evangelical," *JETS* 42 (June 1999):193-210; cf. "Historical Criticism: A Brief Response to Robert Thomas's 'Other View,'" *JETS* 43 (March 2000):113-117.

²Daniel Wallace, "An *Apologia* for a Broad View of *Ipsissima Vox*," paper presented to the 51st Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Danvers, Mass., November 1999.

³Robert L. Thomas, "Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics," in *The Jesus Crisis*, ed. Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 367-74; cf. Thomas, "Historical Criticism and the Evangelical: Another View," *JETS* 43 (March 2000):97-111. Thomas

Darrell Bock,⁴ and Robert Wilkin⁵ have all addressed this issue to some extent in their recent writings.

In technical terms, this discussion centers on whether the Gospels contain the *ipsissima vox* of Jesus (“His very voice,” i.e., His teaching summarized) or the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus (“His very words”).⁶ The proponents of *ipsissima vox* maintain that the gospel writers never intended to give a verbatim account of Jesus’ words, but rather took the liberty to edit His words to fit their own purposes in writing. Under the *ipsissima vox* view, “the concepts go back to Jesus, but the words do not—at least, not exactly as recorded.”⁷

Given the fast-growing prominence of this issue, an examination of the *ipsissima vox* position in greater detail is timely. To simplify the focus of the present discussion, this essay will evaluate primarily certain views that Darrell Bock expressed in his chapter, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?,” particularly his opinions on the role of ancient history and parallel Scripture passages in the discussion.⁸ After an evaluation of those two areas, a brief examination of the relationship between the doctrine of inspiration and current *ipsissima vox* positions will follow.

An Overview of the Ipsissima Vox Position

Bock’s article seeks to defend the historical reliability of the Gospels’ record of Jesus’ words from the destructive criticism of the Jesus Seminar. He argues that the Gospels contain an accurate summary of Jesus’ teaching, but not necessarily His precise words. He writes, “The Gospels give us the true gist of his teaching and the central thrust of his message,” but “we do not have ‘his very words’ in the strictest

supports a presumption in favor of *ipsissima verba* in the Gospels.

⁴Darrell Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex,” in *Jesus Under Fire*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995):73-99; idem, Review of *The Jesus Crisis*, by Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (April-June 2000):232-36.

⁵Robert Wilkin, Review of “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical” by Grant Osborne, *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Spring 2000):83-85; idem, “Toward a Narrow View of *Ipsissima Vox*,” paper presented to the 52nd Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Nashville, Tenn: November, 2000.

⁶Bock, “The Words of Jesus” 77.

⁷Wallace, “An *Apologia*” 1.

⁸Bock, “The Words of Jesus” 73-99. There are, of course, differences on certain issues between the *ipsissima vox* proponents. However, the present approach is justified by the recognition given to Bock by others who agree with his views. Wallace states that Bock’s essay represents “the best of evangelical scholarship when it comes to describing *ipsissima vox*” (Wallace, “An *Apologia*” 6 n. 20). For an evaluation of Wallace’s contribution to the discussion, see the present writer’s Th.M. thesis “Inspiration and Current Positions on *Ipsissima Vox*,” forthcoming at The Master’s Seminary, Sun Valley, Calif., in the spring of 2001.

sense of the term.”⁹

Bock advances three primary reasons for his acceptance of the *ipsissima vox* position: (1) Jesus probably gave most of his teaching in Aramaic, meaning that most of His teaching in the Greek New Testament is already a translation.¹⁰ (2) The Gospel writers obviously abbreviated Jesus’ teachings, because His longest speeches in the Gospels take only a few minutes to read, even though Jesus Himself kept His audiences for hours at a time. (3) The NT citations of the OT are not word for word. If the Bible can summarize a citation of itself in this way, then to see the same technique in its handling of Jesus’ words should come as no surprise.¹¹ Bock’s positions on these three issues have been addressed elsewhere,¹² and to reexamine those arguments is beyond the scope of this essay. The more modest goal of the present discussion is to consider his use of ancient history and parallel scriptural passages in support of his position. A final section will also consider the impact of the doctrine of inspiration on an analysis of *ipsissima vox*.

Ipsissima Vox and Ancient History

Ipsissima vox proponents usually support their position by asserting that it is consistent with the general standards of recording speeches in ancient secular history. Supporters argue that classic historians did not use modern quotation marks to set off precise quotations, and as a result, the accepted practice was to be “faithful to the meaning of the original utterance,” while the exact phrasing was left to the discretion of the writer. Writers who so framed their quotations would not be accused of distortion or inaccurate reporting.¹³

⁹Bock, “The Words of Jesus” 77-78. Osborne interprets Bock’s position to mean that while the Gospels may at times contain the “exact words” of Jesus, “summaries and paraphrases predominate” (Osborne, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical” 203).

¹⁰Bock’s point here is that if Jesus spoke in Aramaic, there would have been an inevitable, even if slight, linguistic entropy in translating the spoken Aramaic of Jesus into the written Greek of the Gospels. Bock assumes the long-held scholarly opinion that Jesus spoke and taught primarily in Aramaic, a view represented, for example, in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Languages of Palestine in the First Century A.D.,” *CBQ* 32 (October 1970):501-31. However, more recent writers have marshaled impressive evidence to challenge that presumption and to support the view that Jesus not only spoke but also taught in Greek at various times during His ministry. See Stanley E. Porter, “Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek?,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44/2 (November 1993):199-235. It is notable that even fellow *ipsissima vox* proponent Wallace disagrees with Bock on this issue (Wallace, “An *Apologia*” 6; cf. his *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996] 17-18). Consequently, Bock’s view on this important issue should not be accepted as a given.

¹¹Bock, “The Words of Jesus” 77-78.

¹²Thomas, “Impact of Historical Criticism” 367-68.

¹³Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987) 118.

The Key Statement of Thucydides

To support that assertion, *ipsissima vox* advocates routinely refer to a famous statement by the ancient historian Thucydides (c. 460-400 B.C.), who was a pioneer in the writing of history. One authority states, “Readers of all opinions will probably agree that [Thucydides] saw more truly, inquired more responsibly, and reported more faithfully than any other ancient historian.”¹⁴ Thucydides explained his historical method in the introduction to his work, and described the nature of the speeches found in his writing as follows:

In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.¹⁵

Ipsissima vox advocates rely heavily on Thucydides’ acknowledgment that he did not use the “precise words” in the speeches found in his history, but rather kept as closely as possible to the “general sense” of what was said. They suggest that Thucydides’ practice established the standard for recording speeches in subsequent historical writing up to the time of the Gospels. Since the Gospel writers were products of their milieu, they should be expected to write in accordance with prevailing historical standards, which only called for adherence to the general sense of the speeches, not their actual words.¹⁶ Consequently, the modern reader of the Gospels should *expect* to find primarily paraphrases and summaries of Jesus’ words, not His actual words themselves.¹⁷

Verbal Precision of Speeches in Secular History

In his discussion of the historiographic standards of ancient times, Bock quotes exclusively from Charles Fornara’s work *The Nature of History in Ancient*

¹⁴Henry Theodore Wade-Gery, John Dewar Denniston, and Simon Hornblower, “Thucydides,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1996) 1519.

¹⁵Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.22, rev. ed., trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1972) 47.

¹⁶One writer suggests that scholars who rely on this statement of Thucydides to establish “the” historiographic standard for recording speeches do so at their own peril because of the many interpretive difficulties in the text (Stanley E. Porter, “Thucydides 1.22.1 and Speeches in Acts: Is There a Thucydean View?” *NovT* 32 (April 1990):121-42). Though those issues will not be addressed here, they are an area for further study in future works.

¹⁷Bock, “The Words of Jesus” 78-79; Wallace, “*An Apologia*” 1-5.

*Greece and Rome*¹⁸ to establish his position. Fornara starts with the statement of Thucydides and argues that a genuine “core” of the speeches recorded is present in Greek history from the end of the sixth to the first century B.C. Further, while the nature of Roman history is more complicated, he “cautiously” asserts that those speeches are substantially trustworthy from the time of the Second Punic War (c. 218-201 B.C.) to the end of the fourth century A.D.¹⁹

Fornara reaches that conclusion by tracing the attitudes of ancient historians from the time of Thucydides through the following centuries. Following a description of historians from Thucydides into imperial times, Fornara concludes that while the importance of speeches in history diminished in the centuries following Thucydides, “the more important principle of reporting the main points of what had actually been said remained (theoretically) an unquestioned rule through Hellenistic times at least.”²⁰

Fornara notes a change with the establishment of the Roman Empire. Some historians were rhetorical in nature, and though some germ of the actual speeches may remain in their record, preserving what was actually said was not a matter of importance to the historical author. Other historians, like Tacitus, demonstrated fidelity to the substance of the speech while still using stylistic freedom. That freedom included the liberty to rearrange, condense, and give arguments in what seemed to him the most appropriate form and order.²¹

In reviewing the application of that theory in historical practice, Fornara states why he believes that the ancients proved faithful to that doctrine.²² He examines the practice of Thucydides, Polybius, and Tacitus in support of his position. Based on this broad examination of evidence, Fornara argues for a general reliability of ancient speeches, even if the historians were not *invariably* reliable.²³ He acknowledges up front, however, that his approach is contrary to the prevailing estimation of speeches in ancient history that finds them more questionable.²⁴

Secular History and Gospel Speeches

When he writes on the words of Jesus in the Gospels, Bock adopts Fornara’s arguments and applies them to the Gospel writers, even though Fornara himself does

¹⁸Charles William Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, 1983). Bock’s thinking may also be influenced by A. W. Mosley, “Historical Reporting in the Ancient World,” *NTS* 12 (1965-1966):10-26, although he does not cite Mosley in his popularly-oriented article in *Jesus Under Fire*.

¹⁹Fornara, *The Nature of History* 168.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 151.

²¹*Ibid.*, 152-53.

²²*Ibid.*, 143.

²³*Ibid.*, 160.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 142.

not consider the Gospels in his work. Bock believes that Fornara is describing the pattern of careful ancient historians, and finds a parallel in Luke 1:1-4. He writes, “The Evangelists were able to search out what Jesus did and said because they had access to people and communities who had been exposed to Jesus or his intimate followers.”²⁵

In one sense, it is easy to see why Bock would adopt Fornara’s historiographic standards and apply them to the Scriptures. Fornara makes a credible case for the substantial trustworthiness of the accounts of speeches in antiquity. If that standard is established and one assumes that the Gospel writers operated in conjunction with the historiographic norms of the day, then Bock has arguably presented a *prima facie* case that the Bible is substantially more reliable than the Jesus Seminar concluded.

How Accurate Was Ancient Secular History? However, Bock’s reliance on Fornara’s statements regarding ancient historiography is fraught with peril. First, it is not clear that Fornara is accurate in his assessment of the reliability of ancient records of speeches. He is at odds with numerous historians who believe the standard is substantially lower than that for which Fornara argues. The Thucydidean principle may have established an ideal, but whether it was followed in *practice* is another matter altogether.

Some historians have argued that Thucydides himself did not follow the practice of recording the main substance of the speeches found in his writings. In some places, Thucydides demonstrably did not follow the actual content of the speeches which he records. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* has these comments:

It is much debated whether [Thucydides made his statement about his speeches] early or late [in his career]; and it has been much explained away. But it is unreasonable to doubt that from the start Thucydides took notes himself, or sought for hearers’ notes, of the speeches he considered important. But since he used speeches dramatically, to reveal the workings of men’s minds and the impact of circumstance, it is clear that verbatim reports would not have served even if he could have managed to get them, and he was bound to compromise (unconsciously) between dramatic and literal truth. It is likely that, as his technique developed, dramatic truth would tend to prevail; it is tempting to put his profession of method early, a young man’s intention.²⁶

Other writers dispute the notion that subsequent historians followed the Thucydidean principle in their writings, and maintain that subsequent historians strayed far from Thucydides’ standard of accuracy and wrote scarcely believable

²⁵Bock, “The Words of Jesus” 79.

²⁶Wade-Gery, Denniston, and Hornblower, “Thucydides” 1518. The authors give several examples to support their assertion. They do not reject Thucydides’ speeches as fiction, and indeed, believe that Thucydides tried to recreate real occasions. One does not have to reject all of Thucydides’ speeches to recognize that he may not have always followed his standard in actual practice.

accounts of speeches. Ferdinand Schevill maintains that some ancient historians obviously made no effort to convey the true substance of the speeches. He writes,

The historians who came after Thucydides throughout the long succession of classical centuries were so hypnotized by what they considered the charms of rhetoric that they tended to hide and even black out the facts they had set out to present behind a blinding curtain of verbal fireworks. It has been universally agreed that the speeches of Thucydides carry so different a content from those of all other classical historians that they rate as a contribution unique of its kind.²⁷

M. I. Finley says that Thucydides had a passion for accuracy in the field of history, but he was “an exceedingly lonely figure in the history of ancient historical writing, for not one man after him, among either the Greek historians or the Roman, shared his passion.”²⁸ And Mortimer Chambers, professor emeritus of Ancient Greek History at the University of California, Los Angeles, writes:

After [the time of Thucydides] the integrity of speeches in narrative dropped off considerably. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, for example, who wrote about the time of Jesus or a bit earlier . . . gave way to fantastic, florid speeches about which no one could say, as Thucydides said of his speeches, that they tried to give a summary of what was actually said.²⁹

One need not resolve this dispute among historical experts to see that the “standards of ancient historiography” are not as well defined as Bock’s article suggests. In this respect, Bock’s article suffers from its narrow band of research. At times, Bock almost seems to follow Fornara’s analysis because it supports his conclusions, not because Fornara represents a broad historical consensus on ancient historiographic standards. At the very least, one must conclude that Fornara’s views are contested among modern historians, so that Bock’s exclusive reliance on Fornara is subject to serious question.

Historical Error in Ancient Secular Speeches. That weakness in Bock’s position is compounded further as one investigates Fornara’s position more closely. Bock omits some of Fornara’s conclusions that are critical for the evangelical committed to the inspiration of Scriptures. While Fornara adopts a *generally* high view toward secular speeches in ancient history, he acknowledges that the historical standard of the time often did not even keep to the *gist* of the speech:

Always there was the admixture of the imagination and intellect of the historian, and it obviously increased in the degree that the recollection of speeches actually delivered grew

²⁷Ferdinand Schevill, *Six Historians* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1956) 19.

²⁸M. I. Finley, *Aspects of Antiquity*, 2d. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1977) 52.

²⁹From personal correspondence with Professor Mortimer Chambers, August 10, 2000.

dimmer, or the same speech was recast by a succession of authors to suit the best rhetorical theory. The vagaries of the historical tradition accessible to the writer also facilitated *self-deception*. Knowledge that a speech actually had been delivered, the conviction that a speech must have been delivered, the inference that a speech probably was delivered because it was required, are easy gradations leading to *unintentional perjury*, and it would be rash to deny the occasional occurrence of such defalcations as these. . . . But these imperfections in the practice of the historians should not detract from the basic integrity of their approach.³⁰

The student of the Gospels should not miss that Fornara's standard allows for "self-deception," "unintentional perjury," and "defalcations" in the historical writings. Though that may be acceptable in the realm of secular history, an evangelical commitment to the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture cannot accept such errors in the Bible. The Scriptures that assert their perfection (Ps 19:7), truth (John 17:17), and inviolability (Matt 5:18) preclude such a conclusion..

To be sure, Bock does not argue for such imperfections in Scripture. However, his adoption of Fornara's standards paves a broad road for the conclusion that the Scriptures must also include deception and perjury. For if Fornara is correct about the historiographic standards, and Bock is correct that the NT authors wrote in accordance with those standards, then the student of Scripture should not only expect paraphrases and summaries of Jesus' words in the Gospels, he should also expect the kind of errors that Fornara adopts. Bock's analysis leaves him utterly defenseless against that conclusion.

Other Problems with Assuming the Ancient Secular History Standard.

The foregoing discussion has assumed the validity of the premise that the Gospel writers followed Greco-Roman historiographic standards. However, two points need to be made at this juncture. First, *ipsissima vox* proponents offer no evidence to support the assertion that the Gospel writers were familiar with Thucydides. Even if such familiarity is assumed, no proof that they consciously patterned their writings after him exists. The *ipsissima vox* position on ancient historiography has been assumed, not proven.

Second, the citation of Thucydides proves nothing about the habits of the Gospel writers. Over four centuries separate Thucydides from the Gospel writers. Although a verbal parallel exists between Thucydides and what *ipsissima vox* writers want to prove, to say (without further proof) that a nearly 500-year-old statement proves what the Gospel writers' standard was when they wrote the Gospels is a logical leap of cosmic proportions. It would be akin to "proving" modern nautical habits by establishing what Columbus did when he sailed the Atlantic in 1492.³¹

³⁰Fornara, *The Nature of History* 167-68 [emphasis added].

³¹Wallace acknowledges this point when he writes, "One of the factors that needs to be addressed is how ancient historiography evolved from Thucydides on" ("An *Apologia*" 4 n.18). If that evolution is unknown, as Wallace suggests, it is bald speculation to assert that the Gospel writers followed

Jewish Historiography

Is there any historical testimony that would shed light on the regard that the Gospel writers had for Greco-Roman history? Perhaps some clues can be found in the writings of Josephus. It is a reasonable assumption that a first-century Jewish historian would more likely reflect the mindset of the Gospel writers than a fifth-century B.C. Greek historian. If Josephus is to be believed, Jews did not hold Greek historiography in high regard. Josephus goes into this matter at length, beginning with his defense of Jewish historical accuracy:

But what is the strongest argument of our exact management in this matter is what I am now going to say, that we have the names of our high priests from father to son set down in our records for the interval of two thousand years. . . . [E]very one is not permitted of his own accord to be a writer, nor is there any disagreement in what is written; they being only prophets that have written the original and earliest accounts of things as they learned them of God himself by inspiration; and others have written what hath happened in their own times, and *that in a very distinct manner also*.³²

In the quoted section, Josephus argues for a high concern for historical accuracy among Jews, as seen in their careful preservation of the genealogical records of the high priests. Further, he argues that Jews attributed their historical accounts to the direct inspiration of God. Josephus takes great pride in the Jewish distinctives:

For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another, as the Greeks have, but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death . . . and how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add any thing to them, to take any thing from them, or to make any change in them; but it is become natural to all Jews immediately, and from their very birth, to esteem these books to contain Divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and if occasion be, willingly to die for them . . . that they may not be obliged to say one word against our laws and the records that contain them.³³

Of vital importance to the present subject is the contrast that Josephus draws between these esteemed Jewish historical writings, and the Greek writings that were in circulation:

Thucydides.

³²Josephus *Against Apion* 1.7-1.8, in *The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1957) 861 [emphasis added].

³³Ibid., 1.8, 862.

[T]here are none at all among the Greeks who would undergo the least harm on that account, no, nor in case all the writings that are among them were to be destroyed; for they take them to be such discourses as are framed agreeably to the inclinations of those that write them; and they have justly the same opinion of the ancient writers, since they see some of the present generation bold enough to write about such affairs, wherein they were not present, nor had concern enough to inform themselves about them from those that knew them; examples of which may be had in this late war of ours, where some persons have written histories, and published them, without having been in the places concerned, or having been near them when the actions were done; but these men put a few things together by hearsay, and insolently abuse the world, and call these writings by the name of Histories.³⁴

Josephus claims that Greek histories had “insolently abused the world” and indicates that they were not worthy to bear the name “histories.” Unless one posits that Josephus was totally out of touch with Jewish sentiments in the first century, his writings make it virtually impossible to assert that the Gospel writers modeled their work after their Greek counterparts. The low regard for Greek histories surely meant that they were writing after a different pattern, a pattern inherited from their fathers. Commenting on this section of Josephus, Martin Hengel writes:

Thus the model for the collection and the literary presentation of the ‘biographical’ Jesus tradition is [rooted] in the accounts of history to be found in the Old Testament and Judaism, which to a large degree are composed of ‘biographical’ sections. . . . Josephus shows us that the educated Greek-speaking Jew understood the narrative writings of the Jewish canon as historical works *sui generis*, which differed fundamentally from the works of pagan historians by virtue of their divine authorization and inspiration and were therefore especially reliable. . . . Conscious though they were of the different character of their message, the New Testament historians wanted to take up the tradition which already existed.³⁵

Birger Gerhardsson concurs as he describes the Jewish attitude toward the words of their teachers from OT times to Rabbinic Judaism:

The art of reproducing another person’s statements in one’s own words, and of abstracting points of view and ideas from someone’s words, has been carried to considerable lengths in the Hellenized West. *But the art was not practised [sic] in ancient Israel. A person’s views were conveyed in his own words.* Authentic statements contained the authority and power of the one who uttered them; this we know from the Old Testament.

This also applies to Rabbinic Judaism, though certain developments and changes have come about. We can distinguish tendencies towards a more abstract mode of thought.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 30-31.

We see above all the method—which was taken to extreme lengths—of subjecting authoritative sayings to thorough penetration and exegesis. *But reverence and care for the ipsissima verba of each authority remains unaltered.* In the colleges no attempt was made to give a synopsis of the views of the old masters; their words were quoted—together with the name of the one who had uttered them.³⁶

The historical tradition that the Gospel writers drew upon came not from the Greco-Roman tradition, but rather from the Jewish/OT tradition that was conscious of the divine inspiration of its writings. 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.³⁷

Ipsissima Vox and Parallel Accounts in the Synoptic Gospels

Since Bock believes in advance that the Gospel writers were mostly summarizing and “giving the gist” of Jesus' statements, it is not surprising that he believes his scriptural examples demonstrate that phenomenon. Bock uses two different kinds of parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels as evidence of his *ipsissima vox* position—(1) those that differ in their recording of the order of events; and (2) those that are similar but not identical in their account of sayings. These differences between the Synoptic writers, he believes, inexorably lead the interpreter to the conclusion that they were not concerned to preserve the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus—only the substance of what He said. The following analysis is not intended to analyze in detail each of Bock's examples, but simply to show in a broad fashion that the passages can reasonably be understood without resorting to an *ipsissima vox* position.

Parallel Accounts of Events

The Temptations of Jesus. Bock begins by discussing the parallel accounts of Jesus' temptations in Matthew 4 and Luke 4. As is well known, Matthew and Luke reverse the order of the second and third temptations. Since Bock offers that example in the context of his discussion of his position on *ipsissima vox*, he

³⁶Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity, with Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity*, combined ed. with new preface, trans. Eric J. Sharpe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 130-31 [emphasis added].

³⁷Bock touches on the transmission of oral tradition in Jewish culture, but he creates the impression that there was no *fundamental* difference between Greeks and Jews in their approach to historical precision (“The Words of Jesus” 79-81). The failure to draw that distinction waters down Jewish standards and unjustifiably lowers expectations for the reader of the Gospels.

apparently believes that the Gospel writers' arrangement of chronological material somehow proves their willingness to modify the words of Jesus. However, the order of the temptations of Jesus does not contribute to the *ipsissima vox* discussion. There is no logical relationship between an a-chronological arrangement of historically accurate material and the assertion that the Gospel writers did not record the precise words of Jesus. An example that does not involve the words of Jesus is, at best, of only marginal relevance in establishing how the Gospel writers handled His sayings.

Matthew most likely establishes the chronological order with his use of *τότε* (*tote*, "then") in 4:5, 10, along with the terminal indicator in 4:10-11 of "Begone, Satan! . . . Then the devil left Him." Luke does not employ temporal markers, using *καί* (*kai*, "and") and *δέ* (*de*, "but") instead, which indicates that he did not intend to give a chronological arrangement as Matthew did. Consequently, the passages do not contradict each other.³⁸ Neither do they prove the *ipsissima vox* position.

Miracle Accounts in Matthew 8–9. A similar analysis applies to Bock's citation of the miracle accounts in Matthew 8–9 and its parallels. That Matthew 8–9 is arranged topically rather than chronologically is widely acknowledged. Bock states, "[These differences] reflect differences in theme and emphasis in terms of intended presentation. They give evidence of conscious choices in ordering events within the Gospel accounts."³⁹

Again, however, this ordering of events says nothing about the Gospel writers' treatment of the *words* of Jesus. To arrange material topically rather than chronologically does not mean the author has taken liberty to change spoken words. Broadus speaks for the traditional position regarding the arrangement of material when he writes:

When we compare the Gospels of Mark and Luke, we find several of these miracles, and the attendant sayings, introduced there in such connections as to show that they did not occur in the precise order in which they are here mentioned. . . . They are grouped by Matthew without any particular regard to the chronological order, but in such a way as to promote the special design of his historical argument.⁴⁰

Thus, as with the temptations of Jesus, Bock's citation of Matthew 8–9 does not advance the *ipsissima vox* position. Chronological arrangement of genuine historical material does not necessarily correlate with Bock's assertion that the Gospel writers modified Jesus' words in their effort to summarize His teaching.

³⁸Bock acknowledges the legitimacy of this harmonization (Bock, "The Words of Jesus" 97 n. 21).

³⁹*Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁰John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886; reprint, *Commentary on Matthew*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990) 174 (page references are to reprint edition).

Arrangement does not negate historical accuracy when the author does not imply chronological sequence.⁴¹

Parallel Accounts of Sayings

Gist of the Saying or Harmonization? More to the point is Bock's comparison of the accounts of the baptism of Jesus, Peter's confession, and the trials of Jesus, which actually involve the Gospel writers' report of words spoken by Jesus and others. By way of overview, Bock asserts that the differences in the manner in which parallel sayings are recorded prove that the writers intended to summarize statements rather than give the equivalent of modern-day quotations. The Gospel writers were content to give the gist of the saying, because otherwise they would have given full and accurate quotations.⁴²

By way of contrast, and before examining Bock's specific examples, it should be noted that others have examined the differing statements in parallel accounts and reached an entirely different conclusion. Instead of finding a disregard for verbal precision, these writers find harmonization of the differences in the assumption that each writer recorded different aspects of a broader conversation or discourse.

Benjamin B. Warfield writes,

It lies in the nature of the case that two accounts of a conversation which agree as to the substance of what was said, but differ slightly in the details reported, are reporting different fragments of the conversation, selected according to the judgment of each writer as the best vehicles of its substance.⁴³

Similarly, Kelly Osborne says,

When the words spoken by Jesus are similar but not identical between Luke and Matthew, the assumption should not be that one is more authentic than the other, but that the Lord reiterated the same idea in a similar but not identical manner. . . . This does not provide facile solutions to all difficulties in the text, but it avoids the need to say that one or another evangelist inserted into the text of his gospel words or phrases never actually spoken by Jesus.⁴⁴

Indeed, Scripture itself gives many examples of repeated statements in the same discourse to support this principle. Several illustrations are found where a

⁴¹Robert L. Thomas, "Redaction Criticism," in *The Jesus Crisis*, ed. Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 257.

⁴²Bock, "The Words of Jesus" 86.

⁴³Benjamin B. Warfield, "Jesus' Alleged Confession of Sin," *The Princeton Theological Review* 12 (April 1914):191.

⁴⁴Kelly Osborne, "The Impact of Historical Criticism on Gospel Interpretation: A Test Case," in *The Jesus Crisis*, ed. Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 304.

statement is repeated *in the same immediate context* for the sake of emphasis. Mark 10:23-24 is one example:

And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, “*How hard* it will be for those who are wealthy *to enter the kingdom of God!*” And the disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, “Children, *how hard* it is *to enter the kingdom of God!*”

Another example can be adduced from John 14:10-11, where Jesus says, “Do you not believe *that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me?* The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me *that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me.*” Paul’s comments in Phil 4:4 also come to mind in this context: “*Rejoice* in the Lord always, again I will say, *rejoice!*”

In light of these examples, one must concur with the writer who said, “Those who so narrowly restrict conversations and discourses to only what is recorded in the gospels apparently have a distorted concept of what communication was like in these early times.”⁴⁵ The view of Warfield and Osborne, long held by those who practice traditional harmonization, is not an uncritical failure to deal with problems. Rather, it approaches these issues with common sense and is justified readily by examples from the Scriptures themselves. In the analysis that follows, then, application of that principle will show that the scriptural evidence upon which Bock relies does not prove the *ipsissima vox* position. The data are susceptible to better explanations—explanations that Bock usually does not even consider in his article.

The Baptism of Jesus. Bock first refers to the parallel passages on the baptism of Jesus. He notes that separate writers record the voice from heaven differently. Mark and Luke portray the remark as a second person reference made directly to Jesus (“You are my beloved Son”), while Matthew records it as a third person remark (“This is my beloved Son”). From this data, Bock concludes that Mark and Luke have probably given the actual remark, while Matthew relays “the general report of its significance.”⁴⁶ In other words, the Father did not actually say, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased,” as Matthew reports. Instead, Matthew only relayed the general gist of what the Father meant to help his readers understand the significance of the event.

Bock’s assessment, however, lacks precision and underestimates the effect that such a change has on the historical accuracy of Matthew’s account. Bock’s proposal means that Matthew modified the Father’s words and changed what was

⁴⁵Robert L. Thomas, “The Rich Young Man in Matthew,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (Fall 1982):256.

⁴⁶Bock, “The Words of Jesus” 86.

really a private dialogue with the Son into a public affirmation of Jesus. In other words, Bock has Matthew putting words on the lips of the Father that He never actually spoke. The reader of Matthew's gospel, standing alone, would receive a significantly inaccurate perception of Jesus' baptism. Contrary to Bock's claims, this is not an issue of getting the "gist" of the meaning. It alters the dynamic of the entire event. One never knows exactly what was said, because he never knows whether the writer is reporting the actual words that were spoken or his *interpretation* as though that interpretation were the actual words of the speaker.

In the instance of Jesus' baptism, persuasive reasons lead one to believe the Father uttered both the second- and third-person statements, and the statements thus harmonize with each other without doing violence to the context or wording of any of the passages. The Father could very well have spoken first to Jesus directly, then for emphasis repeated Matthew's third person version for the benefit of witnesses at the baptism. This approach of traditional harmonization is preferable to an approach that obscures historical clarity and puts non-existent words on the Father's lips.

Peter's Confession. Bock next centers on Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21). He sets forth Jesus' initial question as follows:

Matthew 16:13: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

Mark 8:27: "Who do people say I am?"

Luke 9:18: "Who do the crowds say I am?"

Bock maintains that the gist of the statement is present, but with variation. He notes the variation between "Son of Man" and the first-person personal pronoun "I," along with the difference between "people" and "crowds." He then asks:

Did the translation of remarks in distinct reports of the event merely use two similar Greek words to render one Aramaic one? Or did one writer put the question in language that was more like his own style? Or did one writer simply intend to summarize the event rather than transcribe it? Any of these options is possible. What is crucial to note is that the texts themselves show no necessity to render each other word for word, even in dialogue.⁴⁷

Bock's analysis does not exhaust the possible alternatives, however. Perhaps each writer gave a *precise*, but not *exhaustive*, account of the conversation. Nothing

⁴⁷Ibid., 86-87.

about these differences *demand*s that Jesus was speaking in Aramaic at the time,⁴⁸ or that one of the writers made a stylistic variation, or that Jesus' words were paraphrased. The data can be explained equally well by positing an ongoing conversation about Jesus' identity.

Indeed, variations of the same question would heighten the disciples' attention and allow them to focus on Jesus' identity, more so than a single question would. By using repeated questions, Jesus may have been heightening the importance of the moment. He wanted to establish clearly who the people—the crowd—said that He was. Repeated statements of the questions in slightly differing forms would bring that emphasis to the disciples' mind. By establishing the confusion of the multitudes, He set the stage for Peter's great confession that followed.

It would also set the stage for the emphatic question that Jesus addressed to the disciples next: "But who do *you* (ὁμεις, *hymeis*) say that I am?" Jesus used repeated questions about the crowds to establish emphasis, and then turned to emphatic vocabulary and grammar in a single question that crystallized the main issue for the disciples and men of all ages: Who *is* this Jesus? The disciples, conscious of the significance of the moment, were about to articulate what the rest of the world was missing. Bock notices the following differences in the account of Peter's reply:

Matthew 16:16: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Mark 8:29: "You are the Christ."

Luke 9:20: "The Christ of God."

Bock says, "There are two possibilities here. Either Mark and Luke have simplified a much deeper confession as recorded here by Matthew, or Matthew has presented in ambiguous terms the fundamental messianic confession of Mark and Luke."⁴⁹

But again, Bock's proposal does not exhaust the possibilities. An even more plausible alternative exists. Peter, who only recently had been an unsung fisherman, was suddenly in a position to affirm what the multitudes had missed. Jesus was the Messiah! Matthew and Mark both record Peter's use of the emphatic pronoun *σύ* (*sy*) as he says, "*You* are the Christ." One can almost picture Peter with his index finger pointing at Jesus, and with conviction saying, "I know who You are—you are

⁴⁸Though Bock does not allude to it in his article, part of the reason that some believe this dialogue originally took place in Aramaic relates to a possible Aramaic word-play involving Peter's name. For a full discussion and bibliography related to this passage, along with a defense of the position that the dialogue took place in Greek, see Porter, "Did Jesus Ever Teach in Greek?" 229-35.

⁴⁹Bock, "The Words of Jesus" 87.

the Christ, the Christ of God! You are the Son of the living God!”

One further aspect supports this scenario. Peter's confession came at a turning point in Jesus' ministry. As all three Synoptists record, it was immediately after Peter's confession that Jesus began teaching them that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer, be killed, and be raised on the third day (Matt 16:21; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22). Jesus fixed His identity in the disciples' minds before He unfolded for them the fulcrum of the redemption of mankind. Frederic Godet writes,

The question addressed to the disciples is designed, first of all, to make them distinctly conscious of the wide difference between the popular opinion and the conviction at which they have themselves arrived; next, to serve as a starting-point for the fresh communication which Jesus is about to make respecting the manner in which the work of the Christ is to be accomplished.⁵⁰

The grammar and surrounding context in this event all call for an emphasis that repeated questions and multiple emphatic responses would supply. Traditional harmonization can well explain the data, preserve the exact words as they are recorded, and at the same time call attention to the high drama of the moment in the life of Jesus. Contrary to Bock's assertion, the choices are not limited to “Either Mark and Luke have simplified a much deeper confession as recorded by Matthew, or Matthew has presented in ambiguous terms the fundamental messianic confession of Mark and Luke.”⁵¹ The data are consistent with an entirely different explanation that Bock does not consider, but that Warfield articulated nearly a century ago—the Gospel writers simply recorded different parts of a larger whole. Nothing about the data compels the conclusion that Bock suggests.

The Trial of Jesus. Bock's final example relates to different statements made at the trial of Jesus (Matt 26:57-68; Mark 14:53-65; Luke 22:54-71). Bock sets forth the different questions from the high priest:

Matthew 26:63: I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.

Mark 14:61: Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?

Luke 22:67: If you are the Christ, . . . tell us.

Bock says, “Jesus is asked about his messianic claim, though again the wording differs. So some of the Evangelists must be summarizing.”⁵² Again,

⁵⁰Frederic Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke* (New York: I. K. Funk, 1881) 265.

⁵¹Bock, “The Words of Jesus” 87.

⁵²Ibid., 88.

however, the data simply do not compel his dogmatic conclusion. First, Bock acknowledges that Luke may be describing an event separate from Matthew and Mark. If that is the case (and others would agree),⁵³ the comparison of Matthew and Mark with Luke on this point is irrelevant to establishing how the Gospel writers reported *the same saying made at the same time*.

Secondly, even for the differences between Matthew and Mark, Bock takes his conclusions far beyond what the evidence warrants. No reason prohibits the making of both statements: “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God. Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” Both Matthew and Mark would have exercised verbal precision in quoting only a part of the larger portion of the inquest.⁵⁴ It is not at all necessary that one of the writers has put words on the lips of the high priest that he never in fact uttered. Jesus’ reply can be handled similarly. “Yes, it is as you say. I am He.” A verbally precise account could report a portion of the response without giving the response in its entirety.⁵⁵

After considering all of Bock’s examples, one sees that when he is confronted with similar but differing passages, he assumes that, at best, only one statement records the precise words that were actually spoken at the time. He explains differences as some editorial activity by one of the writers—usually Matthew or Luke. It seems that he is drawn to that explanation by his historical presupposition that the Gospels are comparable to ancient secular history in their method of recording speeches. But the Scriptures that he quotes do not prove his position, especially when he utterly omits the possibility that the individual Gospel writers may have preserved only a portion of a larger conversation or statement.

Inspiration and Ipsissima Vox

The Holy Spirit’s Role in Recalling Jesus’ Words

Not only do *ipsissima vox* proponents fail in their comparison to ancient history, their failure to account for the doctrine of inspiration in their analysis results in another significant omission. Thucydides clearly states that he resorted to summaries *because he had difficulty in remembering the exact substance of the*

⁵³Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978) 227-30, 329-30.

⁵⁴The present writer has experienced first-hand the often-repetitive nature of legal questioning, having participated in hundreds of hours of courtroom and deposition testimony during his former legal practice. Seldom, if ever, are case-determinative questions asked only one time and in one way. A skilled litigator will ask several questions with only the slightest difference in nuance to highlight an issue when he has the opportunity to nail down a point in his favor.

⁵⁵R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1946) 665. Lenski acknowledges this option without committing himself to it.

speeches he heard.⁵⁶ However, such memory lapses were decidedly *not* a hindrance to the inspired Gospel writers. Neither Bock nor Wallace quotes Jesus' words in John 14:26, which leave no room for doubt on this issue:

But the 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* (NASB, cf. John 16:13-14) [emphasis added].

In this verse, Jesus uses the term ὑπομνήσκω (*hypomnēskō*) to describe the Spirit's work in the lives of the disciples after the resurrection. The term means "to cause one to remember," "put one in mind," or "remind one of."⁵⁷ It is used six other times in the NT: Luke 22:61; 2 Tim 2:14; Tit 3:1; 2 Pet 1:12; 3 John 10; Jude 5. In each verse, the content of the remembrance appears to be something that was previously known or heard. Here in John 14:26, the remembrance means, "The Holy Spirit ratifies, confirms and explains the work of Jesus and thereby brings definitive and conclusive remembrance."⁵⁸

Godet puts it this way:

This internal activity of the Spirit will unceasingly recall to their memory some former word of Jesus, so that in proportion as He shall illuminate them, they will cry out: Now, I understand this word of the Master! And this vivid clearness will cause other words long forgotten to come forth from forgetfulness.⁵⁹

Consequently, the appeal to Thucydides—whatever it may say about secular history—does not clarify the precision of the Gospels in recording the words of Jesus. Thucydides resorted to *ipsissima vox* because he "found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches."⁶⁰ Jesus' promise of the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit placed the Gospel writers in a different realm in which different standards of memory would be operative. They would be supernaturally enabled to recall Jesus' words in a manner that freed them from the human limitations of secular historians. As a result, they would not have the same need to resort to *ipsissima vox*. To compare them with Thucydides at this point is to compare apples and oranges.

Absence of Biblical Disclaimers About Historical Accuracy

⁵⁶See p. 52.

⁵⁷G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991) 462.

⁵⁸O. Michel, "μνήσκω κ.τ.λ.," *TDNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 4:677.

⁵⁹Frederic Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (reprint of 1886 ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1985) 847.

⁶⁰See p. 52.

Yet another consideration makes the comparison between ancient historians and the Gospel writers untenable. Thucydides gives his reader an honest disclaimer about the extent of his historical accuracy. He tells the reader in no uncertain terms that he is not giving exact quotations, but summaries to the best of his abilities. By contrast, the Gospel writers—who were allegedly following Thucydides' example—made no such disclaimers. To the contrary, Luke gives the opposite impression when he tells Theophilus that he investigated everything carefully “so that you might know the *exact truth* about the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4, NASB [emphasis added]).

That self-conscious claim to precision, combined with the supernatural ministry of the Holy Spirit, is a telling blow against the historical argument framed to date by evangelical *ipsissima vox* proponents. To argue that the interpreter's expectations of the historical precision of the Gospels in recording Jesus' words should be determined by analogy to the pattern of ancient secular history controverts the biblical data that are directly on point. In this regard, *ipsissima vox* proponents have presupposed the validity of their analogy to ancient history without evaluating their assumptions biblically.

Conclusion

The ramifications of recent *ipsissima vox* writings could have far-reaching effects on evangelical confidence in the historical accuracy of the Gospels. The more the position explains away the words attributed on face value to Jesus in the Gospels as additions, accretions, and editorial modifications, the more the historical authority of the Gospels is threatened. Evangelicals professing a commitment to the inspiration of Scripture should thus tread with utmost care in this area.

Unfortunately, evangelical *ipsissima vox* proponents have conceded too much ground in their recent writings, and the evidence at hand does not even remotely require the concessions given. The historical and scriptural arguments presently advanced are surprisingly weak and usually fail to consider more viable solutions to the issues at hand.

Not only are those arguments faulty, *ipsissima vox* writers have thus far neglected a discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling the Gospel writers to recall the words of Jesus as they wrote. The Gospel writers decidedly did not face the same human limitations as ancient historians. Consequently, one cannot restrict the scope of their ability to reproduce Jesus' words to the abilities of uninspired secular historians. Evangelical *ipsissima vox* proponents either need to account for Jesus' words in John 14:26 in the formulation of their views or explain why His words there are not pertinent to the discussion.

The final word on these matters has surely not yet been written. The interpreter who seeks to uphold the truth that has been delivered once for all to the saints should scrutinize closely the future of this discussion.