

EVANGELICAL RESPONSES TO THE JESUS SEMINAR¹

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Evangelicals have reacted strongly against the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar. Yet their methodologies in studying the gospels fit the pattern of methods employed by that Seminar, particularly the assumption that the composition of the gospels involved some form of literary dependence. Ten Scriptures illustrate how this assumption leads inevitably to assigning historical inaccuracies to various portions of the Synoptic Gospels. Only one alternative avoids a dehistoricizing of the gospels, that of concluding that the synoptic problem does not exist—and is therefore unsolved—because the writers did not depend on one another's works. They wrote independently of each other but in dependence on the Holy Spirit who inspired them to compose books that were historically accurate in every detail.

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The Jesus Seminar, composed of liberal scholars under the leadership of Robert Funk, began its twice-a-year meetings in 1985. Its highly publicized findings have denied the authenticity of eighty-two percent what the four gospels indicate that Jesus said. Their

¹A forthcoming work entitled *The Jesus Crisis: How Much Will Evangelicals Surrender?* (Kregel), scheduled for release in the summer of 1997, will incorporate material from this essay along with other analyses and implications of Historical Criticism.

conclusions about Jesus' sayings appeared in *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* in 1993.² The Seminar continues its meetings currently to vote on the deeds of Jesus in anticipation of publishing a similar work treating that subject. The already published work prints Jesus' sayings in four colors—red, pink, gray, and black—to match the colors of the symbolic beads members used to cast votes in their meetings—red, Jesus definitely said it; pink, Jesus probably said it; gray, Jesus probably did not say it; black, Jesus definitely did not say it. Only one red statement appears in the Gospel of Mark and none in the Gospel of John. In comparison, the appearance in red of three sayings in the Gospel of Thomas illustrates the skepticism of this group toward the canonical gospels.

The evangelical³ community has reacted strongly against the pronouncements of the Jesus Seminar because of that group's rejection of many historical aspects of the gospels.⁴ The number of specific evangelical responses to this Seminar is growing.⁵ Yet most of these responses come from those who utilize the same methodology in gospel study as do the Jesus Seminar personnel. Further, a closer look at studies done by some of these evangelical critics yields results that show their goal of refuting Seminar findings to be quite challenging if not impossible to achieve. To a degree, they must attack the same presuppositional framework that they themselves utilize. In their

²Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

³The ensuing discussion will not attempt a close definition of the term "evangelical." The loose sense envisioned allows the word to apply to individuals who probably think of themselves as being in the evangelical camp.

⁴E.g., D. A. Carson, "Five Gospels, No Christ," *Christianity Today* 38/5 (April 25, 1994):30-33; Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995) 42-43; James R. Edwards, "Who Do Scholars Say That I Am?" *Christianity Today* 40/3 (March 4, 1996):14-20.

⁵E.g., Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (gen. eds.), *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Gregory A. Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God?* (Wheaton: Victor, 1995); Witherington, *Jesus Quest* 42-57. *Jesus Under Fire* includes chapters by Craig L. Blomberg, Scot McKnight, and Darrell L. Bock, among others.

acceptance of the same historical-critical assumptions, they have rejected the wisdom of B. B. Warfield who many years ago wrote, "And in general, no form of criticism is more uncertain than that, now so diligently prosecuted, which seeks to explain the several forms of narratives in the Synoptics as modifications of one another."⁶ The following discussion will reflect this.

EVANGELICAL SIMILARITIES TO THE JESUS SEMINAR

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,"⁷ the following is a sampling of the issues they would vote on, most of which they would probably pass:⁸

- (1) The author of Matthew, not Jesus, created the Sermon of the Mount.
- (2) The commissioning of the twelve in Matthew 10 is a group of instructions compiled and organized by the author of the first gospel, not spoken by Jesus on a single occasion.
- (3) The parable accounts of Matthew 13 and Mark 4 are anthologies of parables that Jesus uttered on separate occasions.
- (4) Jesus did not preach the Olivet Discourse in its entirety as we have it in three of the gospel accounts.
- (5) Jesus gave His teaching on divorce and remarriage without the exception clauses found in Matt 5:32 and 19:9.
- (6) In Matt 19:16-17, the writer changed the words of Jesus

⁶Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Christology and Criticism* (New York: Oxford, 1929) 115 n.

⁷Carson alludes to such a possibility ("Five Gospels" 30).

⁸See below for a detailed discussion of and the documentation for the same ten issues enumerated here.

- and the rich man to avoid a theological problem involved in the wording of Mark's and Luke's accounts of the same event.
- (7) The scribes and Pharisees were in reality decent people whom Matthew painted in an entirely negative light because of his personal bias against them.
 - (8) The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 are figures of speech and not accurate records of Jesus' physical and/or legal lineage.
 - (9) The magi who according to Matthew 2 visited the child Jesus after His birth are fictional, not real, characters.
 - (10) Jesus uttered only 3 or 4 of the 8 or nine beatitudes in Matt 5:3-12.

Recognizably, the listed conclusions impinge upon the historical accuracy of the gospel records. Various evangelicals have opted for the stated unhistorical choice in each of the suggested instances. Granted, their reduction of historical precision in the gospels is not the wholesale repudiation of historical data as is that of the original Jesus Seminar, but that it is a repudiation is undeniable. An acceptance of imprecision is even more noticeable in light of the fact that the above questions are only the tip of the iceberg. An exhaustive list would reach staggering proportions.⁹

In the spring of 1991, the Los Angeles Times religion staff planned to run two articles, one a pro-Jesus Seminar piece and the other an anti-Jesus Seminar one. The co-chairman of the Jesus Seminar—Robert Funk—wrote the former and a professor at a prominent evangelical seminary—Robert Guelich—wrote the other.¹⁰ The plan to

⁹Marshall comments regarding Ernst Käsemann, "Many people who read his works may well be highly shocked by the amount of material in the Gospels which even he regards as unhistorical" (I. Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977] 12). The same observation would hold true regarding many evangelical scholars if Christians in evangelical churches were to have access to an exhaustive compilation of their conclusions about unhistorical facets in the gospels.

¹⁰See "How Should the Jesus Seminar's Conclusions Be Viewed?" *Los Angeles Times* (April 6, 1991):F18-F19.

represent the two sides failed, however. Some staff person for this newspaper recognized that the anti-Seminar article was not "anti" at all, but took the same essential viewpoint as the Jesus Seminar. This came to light when a Times editor called me and asked if I would do an "anti" article the following week because the evangelical contributor approached the gospels in the same way as those he was supposed to oppose.¹¹ This observation by someone on the editorial staff—to this day I do not know who—was shrewd because it recognized that the evangelical in what was to have been the "con" article supported the same general methodological and presuppositional mold as those whom he purposed to refute.

A STANDARD METHODOLOGY

Methodological Framework

What do evangelical scholars who surrender this or that historical aspect of the first three gospels have in common? They all build on the same presuppositional construct, which also happens to be the one followed by the more radical Jesus Seminar.¹² They thereby render themselves all but powerless to respond to the radical conclusions of that Seminar.

A title appropriate to the methodology common to Jesus-Seminar personnel and many evangelicals is Historical Criticism. Various subdisciplines that have come into vogue under this broad heading include Source Criticism, Tradition Criticism, Form Criticism, and Redaction Criticism. Source Criticism was the earliest of these to arise, having its origin in the nineteenth century. The others sprang up at various points in the twentieth century. The stated purpose of all

¹¹See "Did the Jesus Seminar Draw from Faulty Assumptions?" *Los Angeles Times* (April 13, 1991):F18-F19.

¹²Craig L. Blomberg argues for an "evidentialist" approach in responding to radical excesses in dehistoricizing the gospels (*The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987] 9-10). He contrasts this with a "presuppositionalist" approach which assumes the inspiration of the Scriptures. What he means by "evidentialist"—i.e., defending the accuracy of Scripture on purely historical grounds—includes an embracing of the same methodology as those of radical persuasions (cf. *ibid.*, 12-18). That is the methodology outlined below in this section.

the subdisciplines is to *test* the historical accuracy of NT historical narrative,¹³ but in one way or another, they *reduce* the historical accuracy of the Synoptic Gospels.

The claim of these evangelical scholars is that the widely practiced Historical Criticism is not necessarily antithetic to finding the gospels historically reliable. Yet the results of their research belie their claim. They profess that their methodology is neutral and does not necessitate negative presuppositions regarding the integrity of the gospel accounts,¹⁴ but the same people question Matthew's and Mark's representation that Jesus taught the parables of Matthew 13 and Mark 4 on a single occasion¹⁵ and Matthew's and Luke's indications that Jesus preached the whole Sermon on the Mount and Sermon on the Plain to one audience.¹⁶ The evangelical stance of those who thus question historicity dictates that in all probability the theories do not arise from conscious antisupernaturalistic predispositions. Their questionings must issue from a flawed methodology, one that inevitably leads to diminishing historical accuracy in the gospels.

A basic tenet of Historical Criticism is the assumption that the authors of the three Synoptic Gospels depended on one another's writings. Various schemes regarding who depended on whose writings have surfaced, the most widely held current theory being that Mark wrote first and Matthew and Luke depended on Mark.¹⁷ The other element of the theory maintains the existence of another

¹³I. Howard Marshall, "Historical Criticism," in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. by I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 126-27.

¹⁴E.g., William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 95; Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem, An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 217-18; Blomberg, *Historical Reliability* 20; Edwards, "Who Do Scholars" 20.

¹⁵E.g., Klein, *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 164.

¹⁶E.g., Stein, *Synoptic Problem* 96, 149-50, 219-20.

¹⁷The proposal of Markan priority originated relatively recently. France recalls that Matthean priority was the unanimous opinion of the church for seventeen hundred years, until the theory of Markan priority emerged (R. T. France, *Matthew, Evangelist and Teacher* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989] 25-27).

document called "Q" on which Matthew and Luke depended also. No one in recent centuries has ever seen Q, if indeed it ever existed.¹⁸

Attempted Proof of Literary Dependence

Rarely does one find a defense of the general theory of literary dependence. It is most often just an assumption with no serious attempt at proof.¹⁹ One exception to the unsupported assumption is the argumentation by Stein favoring a common literary source for the Synoptic Gospels. He cites agreements (1) in wording, (2) in order, and (3) in parenthetical material and (4) the Lukan prologue (Luke 1:1-4) as proof of literary dependence.²⁰

(1) He lists a number of places to illustrate agreements in wording, but makes no allowance in his argument for places of disagreement. He fails to note that these disagreements include three categories: Matthew and Mark against Luke, Matthew and Luke against Mark, and Mark and Luke against Matthew.²¹ This factor argues strongly against any type of literary dependence and favors a random type of composition through which no writer ever saw another's work before writing his own gospel.²²

(2) Stein also notices agreements in sequence in the gospels,²³

¹⁸See Eta Linnemann, "Is There a Gospel of Q?" *Bible Review* (August 1995):19-23, 42, for strong evidence that Q never existed.

¹⁹E.g., Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, in Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. by Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 7; D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *EBC*, Frank E. Gaebelien, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8:13; John Nolland, *Luke, Volume 1: 1:1—9:50*, vol. 35A of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. by David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, et al. (Dallas: Word, 1989) xxix.

²⁰Robert H. Stein, *Synoptic Problem* 29-44. Scot McKnight builds a case for literary dependence similar to Stein's (*Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988] 37-40).

²¹See Robert L. Thomas, "The Agreements Between Matthew and Luke Against Mark," *JETS* 19 (1976):110-11; idem, "The Rich Young Man in Matthew," *Grace Theological Journal* 3/2 (Fall 1982):244-48.

²²Thomas, "Agreements" 112; see also idem, "Rich Young Man" 249-51, 259.

²³Stein, *Synoptic Problem* 34-37.

but fails to give more than passing notice to disagreements in order which are adverse to the case he builds for literary dependence. He does not endorse or even mention the possibility that agreements in order could result from the sequence of historical occurrences they describe. Yet such a possibility offers a natural explanation for the agreements in essentially all cases.

(3) His first illustration of agreements in parenthetical material lies in the words "let the reader understand," found in Matt 24:15 and Mark 13:14. Yet he cites this without acknowledging the widely held opinion that these words were not parentheses added by Matthew and Mark, but were the words of Jesus Himself, referring to the reader of Daniel, not the reader of Matthew and Mark.²⁴ His other three instances of agreement in parenthetical material are not verbatim agreements with each other and could easily be coincidental words of explanation from writers working independently, without seeing each other's work.

(4) His final reason in proof of literary dependence is the prologue of Luke's gospel. In defending his use of the prologue for this purpose, he reflects no awareness of the possibility that Luke's sources mentioned therein do not include another canonical book.²⁵ This is the traditional understanding of the prologue, an understanding quite defensible exegetically, modern Source Criticism notwithstanding. The best understanding of Luke's prologue excludes Mark from, not includes Mark among, the sources used by the author of the third gospel.

So a tabulation of tangible evidence shows the case for literary dependence is essentially nonexistent. It is merely an assumption, incidentally an assumption known to be shared by only one early church figure. Besides Augustine, the church for her first eighteen hundred years held the first three gospels to be independent of each other in regards to literary matters.²⁶ Substantial opinion in support of

²⁴E.g., Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew, A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 481.

²⁵Cf. Stein, *Synoptic Problem* 42, 194; idem, *Luke*, vol. 24 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 28-29, 63.

²⁶E.g., see Wayne A. Meeks, "Hypomn_mata from an Untamed Skeptic: A

independence has emerged recently,²⁷ but most in the historical-critical school apparently do not take the possibility seriously.

CONSEQUENCES OF LITERARY DEPENDENCE

Where has the theory of literary dependence among the Synop- tists led? Does it impact one's view of the inerrancy of Scripture? To many, this foundational plank of Historical Criticism appears inconse- quential. Yet when pursued to its logical end, the theory has quite significant repercussions.

The type of dependence advocated by most is the one described above, i.e., Mark and Q are the earliest documents and Matthew and Luke are copies of and elaborations on these two. The usual name assigned to this theory is the Two-Source (or Two Document) Theory.²⁸ To many, this assumption does no harm. After all, literary collaboration between the writers of Kings and Chronicles in the OT is obvious,²⁹ and did not Jude depend on 2 Peter in writing his epistle (or vice versa, as some would have it)?

Yet the consequences are more serious when dealing with Matthew, Mark, and Luke and their similar records of the life of Christ. McKnight elaborates on the nature of the consequences in his

Response to George Kennedy," *The Relationships Among the Gospels*, William O. Walker, Jr., ed. (San Antonio: Trinity University, 1978) 171.

²⁷William O. Walker, Jr., "Introduction: The Colloquy on the Relationships Among the Gospels," in *The Relationships Among the Gospels*, William O. Walker, Jr., ed. (San Antonio: Trinity University, 1978) 2; Albert B. Lord, "The Gospels as Oral Tradition Literature," in *The Relationships Among the Gospels* 82; Leander F. Keck, "Oral Tradition Literature and the Gospels," in *The Relationships Among the Gospels* 116; Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 155-91; cf. R. T. French, *Matthew, Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 25.

²⁸A closely related theory goes by the name Four-Source, the two additional documents being "M" on which Matthew relied and "L" on which Luke relied. Like "Q," these two documents are also phantoms. No one in modern times—if indeed at any time during the Christian era—has ever seen them.

²⁹Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 145.

observations about comparing the gospels and identifying authorial reasons for editorial changes:

For example, a redaction critic, usually assuming Markan priority, inquires into the nature of and rationale for Matthew's addition of Peter's unsuccessful attempt to walk on the water (cf. Mark 6:45-52 with Matt. 14:22-33). The critic seeks to discover whether the confession at the end of the story (Matt. 14:33) is materially different from Mark's rather negative comment (Mark 6:52). . . .

Alteration . . . involves direct alterations of the tradition to avoid misunderstandings, as when Matthew alters Mark's comment which could suggest inability on the part of Jesus (Mark 6:5; Matt. 13:53) or when he changes Mark's form of address by the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-18; Matt. 19:16-17).³⁰

To illustrate how authorial changes impact historical accuracy, a closer look at the ten sample issues listed above in this essay is in order. For clarity's sake, presentation of the illustrations will be in three categories that redaction critics find useful to describe the types of editorial changes allegedly made by the Synoptic Gospel writers: arrangement, modification, and creativity.³¹ The first category is that of arrangement of material, by which they mean the writer rearranged material from a chronological to a nonchronological sequence. Four samples are of this type.³²

Arrangement of Material

(1) The Sermon on the Mount. According to many evangelical

³⁰Scot McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 84, 87.

³¹Cf. Donald A. Hagner, "Interpreting the Gospels: The Landscape and the Quest," *JETS* 24/1 (March 1981):30-31.

³²In which category each example belongs is a subjective judgment. Recategorizing from one category to another does not affect the thrust of this discussion. As they stand, perhaps the order of the categories reflects an increasing degree of departure from historical accuracy, with arrangement having the smallest impact on historicity. Nevertheless, even with arrangement a degree of dehistoricization is present.

practitioners of Historical Criticism, the traditional credit given to Jesus for preaching the Sermon on the Mount is a mistake. Guelich has written,

When one hears the phrase "the Sermon on the Mount," one generally identifies it with Matthew's Gospel and correctly so, not only because of the presence of the Sermon in the first Gospel but because the Sermon on the Mount, as we know it, is ultimately the literary product of the first evangelist.³³

Mounce's opinion clarifies Guelich's position somewhat: "We are not to think of the Sermon on the Mount as a single discourse given by Jesus at one particular time. Undoubtedly there was a primitive and historic sermon, but it has been enlarged significantly by Matthew. . . ." ³⁴ Stein goes even further regarding the creativity of the gospel writers:

The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1—7:29) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49) are literary creations of Matthew and Luke in the sense that they are collections of Jesus' sayings that were uttered at various times and places and have been brought together primarily due to topical considerations, i.e., in order to have an orderly account (1:3). There is no need, however, to deny that a historical event lies behind the scene. Jesus' teaching on a mountain/plain has been used as an opportunity by the Evangelists (or the tradition) to bring other related teachings of Jesus in at this point.³⁵

Hagner concurs: "The `sermon' is clearly a compilation of the sayings of Jesus by the evangelist, rather than something spoken by Jesus on a single occasion."³⁶ Others share the view that teachings in the Sermon

³³Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount, A Foundation for Understanding* (Dallas: Word, 1982) 33.

³⁴Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew, A Good News Commentary*, W. Ward Gasque, ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 34

³⁵Stein, *Luke* 198; cf. also idem, *Synoptic Problem* 96, 219-20.

³⁶Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1—13*, vol. 33A of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. by David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, *et al.* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 83. Regarding the

on the Mount did not all come at the same time in Jesus' ministry, but were the result of the "clustering" of similar themes by the gospel writers.³⁷

Going the route of these evangelical scholars entails explaining away Matthew's introduction to the Sermon (5:1-2)—which indicates Jesus began at a certain point to give the Sermon's contents—and his conclusion to the Sermon (7:28)—which indicates Jesus' conclusion of that same portion. Dispensing with the factuality of the introduction is what Wilkins does in his remarks:

Instead Matthew's editorial activity in the introduction to the Sermon serves to make an explicit distinction between them [i.e., the μαθηταὶ and the ὄχλοι]. . . . Since the underlying Sermon tradition clearly had the disciples as the audience (cf. Lk 6:20), this writer suggests that Matthew has maintained that tradition and has added that the crowds were also there, but as a secondary object of teaching because of their interest in his mission (4:23-25).³⁸

conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:28-29), Hagner writes, "Matthew will not miss the opportunity here at the end of a *masterful distillation* of the teaching of Jesus to call his readers' attention to the supreme authority of this Teacher" (194, emphasis added). He means the Sermon is "masterful" because of Matthew's knack for distillation, not because of Jesus' preaching.

³⁷E.g., William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 164 n. 10; C. R. Blomberg, "Gospels (Historical Reliability)," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992) 295; G. R. Osborne, "Round Four: The Redaction Debate Continues," *JETS* 28/4 (December 1985):406; France, *Matthew* 162-64. McKnight writes, "I would suggest that Matthew (or a previous Christian teacher) has thematically combined two teachings on prayer for reasons other than strict chronology, augmenting 6:5-6 with 6:7-13 (14-15)" (*Synoptic Gospels* 53 n. 2). In other words, Jesus did not utter 6:7-13 on the same occasion as He gave the words of 6:5-6.

³⁸Michael J. Wilkins, *The Concept of Disciple in Matthew's Gospel, As Reflected in the Use of the Term Μαθητῶν* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988) 149-50. Gundry is similar in treating the introduction and conclusion to the Sermon, observing that "and seeing the crowds" (Matt 5:1) is a Matthean addition that makes Jesus' teaching applicable to the universal church, that Matthew derives "He went up a mountain" (Matt 5:1) from Mark 3:13a, that "and it came about when He completed these words" (7:28) is a rewording of Luke 7:1a, and that "the crowds were amazed at His teaching" is the

In other words, the introductory and concluding formulas are no more than literary devices adopted by Matthew to give the impression (for whatever reason) that Jesus preached just such a Sermon to the crowds and the disciples on one given occasion. The historical reality of the situation was that Jesus did not preach it all at that time. Rather, Matthew grouped various teachings of Jesus given at different times to create the Sermon.

It is difficult to locate an explanation for why Matthew bracketed the Sermon with "And seeing the crowds, He ascended into the mountain; and having sat down, His disciples came to Him; and having opened His mouth, He began teaching them, saying" (5:1-2) and "and it came about that when Jesus finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching" (7:28). If Jesus did not preach such a sermon on a single occasion, why would the gospel writer mislead his readers to think that He did? This question has no plain answer.³⁹

Yet the proponent of Historical Criticism, because of his proclivity to compare parts of the Sermon with words of Christ uttered at other times and to assume Matthew's dependence on other writings (such as Mark and Q), finds himself compelled to visualize the Sermon as made up of many small pieces that the writer of Matthew assembled in a masterful manner. This theory devastates the historical accuracy of the gospels.

(2) *Commissioning of the Twelve.* A number of evangelical leaders have proposed that Jesus did not on a single occasion commission the twelve disciples as described in Matt 10:5-42, but that Matthew has drawn together sayings of Jesus from a number of

writer's reworking of Mark 1:22 (*Matthew* 65-66, 136).

³⁹D. A. Carson comments on those who see the introductory and concluding notes that frame each of Matthew's five discourses as "artistic, compositional devices" ("Matthew," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984] 124). He objects to this premise because such introductory and concluding brackets do not appear in any other first-century literature. This means they were not merely artistic devices to show the reader that they meant anything other than to furnish the historical setting they profess to describe (124-25).

different occasions and combined them into a single flowing discourse. Carson, for example, is of the opinion that if the sermon came from Q, conceived as a variety of sources, oral and written and not necessarily recorded in the historical setting in which the teaching was first uttered, the effect on historical conclusions would be "not much."⁴⁰ He finds it plausible that Matthew, without violating the introductory and concluding formulas in 10:5a and 11:1, collapsed the discourse to the seventy-two in Luke 10:1-16 with the commissioning of the twelve in Matthew 10 to form a single discourse.⁴¹ Carson thus concludes that the Matthew 10 instructions are a mingling of what Jesus gave the seventy-two with what He told the twelve when He sent them out.⁴²

Carson's explanation of how such liberties are possible without violating the sermon's introduction and conclusion is unconvincing, however. Certainly Matthew left no clues for his first readers to alert them to the fact that this sermon was a compilation of Jesus' teachings from more than one occasion.⁴³

Wilkins agrees that Matt 10:5-42 is a composite of Jesus' utterances on several occasions. He evidences his agreement in allowing that Matthew used a statement from a separate occasion when he borrowed from Mark 9:41-42 in recording Jesus' words in the last verse of Matthew 10.⁴⁴ The episode in Mark came later in Jesus'

⁴⁰Carson, "Matthew" 243. When Carson sees the effect of this theory on historical accuracy as "not much," he in essence concedes that it does make *some* difference. Yet he endorses the theory anyway. The effect on the meaning of the words is significant rather than "not much," when he casts them in a different historical context.

⁴¹Ibid., 241-42; cf. Blomberg, *Historical Reliability* 145-46.

⁴²Carson, "Matthew" 241.

⁴³See R. Morosco, "Redaction Criticism and the Evangelical: Matthew 10 a Test Case," *JETS* 22 [1979]:323-31, for an attempt to prove that "seams" in the discourse are a sign of such a compilation. Except for the last two centuries, Morosco's proposed clues have escaped readers since the time of Christ, however. The reason is they are nonexistent in the discourse. See also idem, "Matthew's Formation of a Commissioning Type-Scene out of the Story of Jesus' Commissioning of the Twelve," *JBL* 103 (1984):539-56.

⁴⁴Wilkins, *Matthew* 131.

life when Jesus warned His disciples against causing believers to stumble and is parallel to Matt 18:6. Wilkins shows his view further in stating that the interpretation and context of Matt 10:24-25 differs from that of the similar statement in Q (Luke 6:40).⁴⁵ The context of the latter is that of Luke's Sermon on the Plain, which came chronologically earlier than the commissioning of the twelve in Matthew 10. His conclusion is that Matthew used the statement from Q in two different places, once in its correct historical context and once in the context of Matthew 10. Thus Wilkins groups himself with those who view Matt 10:5-42 as a combination of Jesus' words from different periods of His ministry, in disregard for the historical markers found in the discourse's introduction and conclusion.

Blomberg also notes how the latter part of the discourse in Matthew 10 (Matt 10:17-42) parallels Jesus' eschatological discourse (esp. Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12-17) and scattered excerpts in Luke elsewhere (e.g., 12:2-9, 51-53; 14:26-27). On this basis and because of what he calls the vague wording of Matt 11:1, he concludes that a theory of composite origins is more plausible here than it is in Matthew's other four discourses.⁴⁶

Gundry joins in the opinion that in Matt 10:16-42 "Matthew brings together various materials scattered in Mark and Luke and relates them to the persecution of the twelve disciples, who stand for all disciples of Jesus."⁴⁷

The theory of literary dependence has done it again. It has caused its advocates to sacrifice historical particularity in the gospel accounts. It has caused a disregard for the discourse's introduction (Matt 10:5a)—"Jesus sent these twelve, charging them, saying"—and conclusion (Matt 11:1a)—"and it came about when Jesus finished giving orders to His twelve disciples"—which to Matthew's earliest readers and to readers for almost twenty centuries have meant that Matt 10:5-42 constituted a commissioning of Jesus delivered on one

⁴⁵Ibid., 145.

⁴⁶Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22 of *The New American Commentary*, David S. Dockery, gen. ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman, 1992) 166.

⁴⁷Gundry, *Matthew* 190-91.

occasion, not several.

(3) *The Parables of Mark 4 and Matthew 13.* Bock proposes that the parable accounts of Mark 4 and Matthew 13 are probably anthologies.⁴⁸ He notes the difficulty in placing the parable of the soils chronologically in light of the possibility that either Matthew or Mark, or both, may have done some rearranging of material. He sees the parables as having been uttered by Jesus on separate occasions and grouped in these chapters for topical reasons. He gives little or no historical weight to Matt 13:1-3 and 13:53, another introduction and conclusion that bracket the parabolic teachings in 13:4-52.⁴⁹

In dealing with the Mark sequence of parables, Brooks isolates 4:10-12 and 4:21-25 as words not spoken by Jesus on this particular occasion.⁵⁰ Regarding the former, he favors those as words applying to Jesus' whole ministry and not just to Jesus' teachings in parables as Mark indicates. Regarding the latter, he sees those as five or six sayings of Jesus spoken at various times, with Mark bringing them together and attributing them to Jesus at this point in His ministry. It is clear that Mark's introduction and conclusion to the parabolic discourse (Mark 4:1-2, 33) are of no historical consequence to Brooks.

Stein suggests the possibility that the three synoptic writers, Luke in particular (Luke 8:11-15), interpreted the parable of the soils in light of their own theological interests.⁵¹ Without concluding that the

⁴⁸Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50* 718, 742-43. R. T. France also views the parables of Matthew 13 as a compilation, not uttered by Jesus on the same occasion: "This is hardly a 'single sermon', and it seems that the larger part of it is not addressed to the audience stated in verse 2 at all" (*Matthew* 157).

⁴⁹Blomberg concludes that the parables of Matt 13:1-52 came on a single occasion, but that Mark and Luke redistributed them elsewhere in their gospels. He gives Mark and Q as Matthew's source for the parables, but then says that Mark along with Luke have scattered these parables elsewhere. He evidences a lack of concern for Mark's introduction and conclusion that bracket his section of parables, two of which parallel those in Matthew 13 (cf. Mark 4:1-2, 33) (*Matthew* 211).

⁵⁰James A. Brooks, *Mark*, vol. 23 of *The New American Commentary*, David S. Dockery, gen. ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1991) 82-83.

⁵¹Stein, *Luke* 243-44.

interpretation was a pure creation of the early church, he still sees that interpretation as being strongly influenced by early church circumstances in which existed a real danger of falling away from allegiance to Christ. Again, this questions the historical integrity of such indicators as Luke's clear statement that Jesus Himself gave the interpretation of Luke 8:9-10.

Stein's statement about the parabolic series in Mark 4:3-32 confirms his reluctance to attribute historical worth to introductory and concluding formulas: "It is clear that Mark sees the parables of Mark 4:3-32 as a summary collection and not a chronology of consecutive parables that Jesus taught in a single day."⁵² With this perspective he can allow Matthew to add parables to Mark's collection and Luke to put some of the parables in other locations.⁵³ This is all without regard to how it erodes historicity.

(4) *The Olivet Discourse.* Brooks expresses the following opinion regarding Jesus' Olivet Discourse:

This claim that the substance of the discourse goes back to Jesus himself should not be extended to claim that it is a verbatim report or free from any adaptation and application on Mark's part or spoken on one occasion. That portions of it are found in other contexts in Matthew and Luke suggests Mark included some comments Jesus spoke on other occasions.⁵⁴

Blomberg concurs with this position:

Sayings of Jesus may appear in different contexts. The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5—7) and the Olivet Discourse (Mt 24—25) gather together teachings which are scattered all around the Gospel of Luke. Some of these may simply reflect Jesus' repeated utterances; others no doubt reflect the common practice of creating composite speeches. Again, no

⁵²Stein, *Synoptic Problem* 36.

⁵³Ibid. Cf. also Gundry, *Matthew* 250; Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Biblical Interpretation* 164.

⁵⁴Brooks, *Mark* 205.

one questioned the integrity of ancient historians when they utilized a device that modern readers often find artificial.⁵⁵

Yet one must ask Brooks and Blomberg what to make of the introductory and concluding formulas of this discourse, which in Matthew read, "Jesus answered and said to them" (Matt 24:4) and "and it came about when Jesus finished all these words" (Matt 26:1). Despite what the practice of ancient historians may have been, Matthew's intention to cite a continuous discourse from a single occasion is conspicuous. Was he mistaken? Hopefully, an evangelical would not propose that he was.

Regarding the discourse, Stein writes,

Although Luke added additional material to the discourse (cf. 21:12, 15, 18, 20-22, 23b-26a, 28), his main source appears to have been Mark. Whether his additional material came from another source or sources (L, proto-Luke, some apocalyptic source) is debated.⁵⁶

Like others of the historical-critical school, he sees in this discourse as recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels sayings that Jesus uttered on other occasions.⁵⁷ He even attributes to Luke a widening of the audience of the discourse from that to whom it was addressed in Mark, his source.⁵⁸ Later in his comments, he suggests, "Luke changed Mark 13:19; Matt 24:21 . . . in order to avoid confusing Jerusalem's destruction, which he was describing, with the final tribulation that precedes the return of the Son of Man, which Mark and Matthew were describing."⁵⁹ All this raises the question as to what were the circumstances and words of Jesus on the occasion of the sermon. Were

⁵⁵Blomberg, "Gospels (Historical Reliability)" 295. Blomberg attributes a higher degree of accuracy to modern historians than to Spirit-inspired writers of the gospels in ancient times.

⁵⁶Stein, *Luke* 510 n. 57.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 510.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 522.

they as Mark and Matthew described them, as Luke described them, or neither?

Modifying of material

The second type of alteration is that of modifying material. This editorial activity accounts for places where a writer changed material when incorporating it into his gospel. Illustrations (5), (6), and (7) are of this type.

(5) *The Exception Clause.* Hagner is one of those who cannot endorse the exception clauses in Matt 5:32 and 19:9 as having come from Jesus. One of the reasons he gives for this is the absolute prohibition of divorce in Mark 10:11 which Matthew used as his source.⁶⁰ With this to work from, either Matthew or someone else in the traditional handling of Jesus' teaching must have added it.⁶¹

Gundry's reasoning is similar as he draws the conclusion, "It [the exception clause in Matt 5:32] comes from Matthew, not from Jesus, as an editorial insertion to conform Jesus' words to God's Word in the OT."⁶² Stein likewise reasons that "the 'exception clause' is an interpretative comment added by Matthew" because of its nonappearance in Mark, Q, and Paul.⁶³ Bruner says the exception clause came from the creative thought of Jesus' spokesman, not from Jesus Himself.⁶⁴ In other words, Jesus never uttered the clause.

Here is another instance where the assumption of literary dependence forces scholars to diminish the historical precision of a gospel account. This is no different in kind from decisions of the Jesus Seminar. Granted, these evangelicals do not carry their dehistoricizing to the same degree as those who radically reduce the biographical data

⁶⁰Ibid., 123, cf. xlvii-xlviii.

⁶¹Ibid., 123.

⁶²Gundry, *Matthew* 90.

⁶³Stein, *Synoptic Problem* 152.

⁶⁴Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook, A Historical/Theological Commentary: Matthew 1—12*, (Dallas: Word, 1987) 191.

in the gospels, but it is nevertheless the same type of dehistoricizing.

(6) *Dialogue with the Rich Man.* The writer of Matthew supposedly found the words of Jesus and the rich man in Mark 10:17-18 theologically unacceptable and changed them in his account to solve a Christological problem:

Mark 10:17-18

. . . Having run up and knelt before Him, one was asking Him, "Good Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

Matt 19:16-17

. . . Having come up to Him, one said, "Teacher, what good thing should I do to have eternal life?" And He said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good."

The impression given by Stein and others is that Mark's wording implies that Jesus was less than Deity, so Matthew felt compelled to change the young man's question and Jesus' answer to convey a high view of Christology.⁶⁵ Even Stonehouse sacrificed the historical accuracy of Matthew's account in theorizing Matthew's change of Mark's wording.⁶⁶

All these recent writers part company with Warfield on this issue. It was in connection with this passage that Warfield reached the sensible conclusion already noted: "And in general, no form of criticism is more uncertain than that, now so diligently prosecuted, which seeks to explain the several forms of narratives in the Synoptics as modifications of one another."⁶⁷ It is not difficult to harmonize Matthew's account of the rich man with the one in Mark and Luke if one drops the assumption that Matthew embellished Mark's account

⁶⁵Stein, *Synoptic Problem* 67, 75-76; cf. also Gundry, *Matthew* 385; Blomberg, *Matthew* 297; Carson, "Matthew" 421-23.

⁶⁶Ned B. Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 108-9.

⁶⁷Warfield, *Christology and Criticism* 115 n.

and assumes that all three writers worked independently of each other.⁶⁸

(7) *The Pharisees.* It is a recent tendency among evangelicals to dwell on the positive qualities of the Pharisees of Jesus' time, even though Jesus emphatically denounced the group on many occasions, such as when He pronounced woes against them and the scribes in Matt 23:13-36. Hagner laments,

It is a tragedy that from this ch. in Matthew [chapter 23] that the word "Pharisee" has come to mean popularly a self-righteous, hypocritical prig. Unfortunately not even Christian scholarship was able over the centuries to rid itself of an unfair bias against the Pharisees.⁶⁹

Wyatt proposes that an accurate description of the Pharisees is possible only by a comparison of three major sources: Josephus, the NT, and the rabbinic literature.⁷⁰ The resultant picture differs from how the NT pictures them, i.e., almost always in a negative light.

Hagner notes, "Pharisaism was at heart, though tragically miscarried, a movement for righteousness. . . . This basic drive for righteousness accounts for what may be regarded as attractive and Biblical both about Pharisaic and rabbinic Judaism."⁷¹ One can only marvel at how radically this appraisal differs from that of Jesus: "For I say to you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no way enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20).

How has Historical Criticism managed to formulate a picture of this group so different from the one painted by Jesus? Largely through assuming that the gospel writers, particularly Matthew, took

⁶⁸Cf. Thomas, "Rich Young Man" 251-56; cf. also Carson, "Matthew" 423.

⁶⁹D. A. Hagner, "Pharisees," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Merrill C. Tenney, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 5:750.

⁷⁰R. J. Wyatt, "Pharisees," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 3:823.

⁷¹Hagner, "Pharisees" 752.

great editorial liberties in describing the life of Christ. Matthew was writing about the church of his day late in the first century more than about the actual experiences and words of Jesus. By comparing Matthew with his source, Mark, one can see how his embellishments were intended to make the Pharisees look so bad. The cause of these embellishments is traceable to the tension that existed between Matthew's community and "a noticeable Jewish presence" in which Matthew wrote his gospel.⁷² It was this hostility between the late first-century church and the synagogue that left its impact on the material found in Matthew 23.⁷³

This type of reasoning once again highlights the implications of theorizing a form of literary dependence among the Synoptic-Gospel writers. In trying to explain why Matthew changed his source material to convey new emphases, the historical critic must postulate that the writers took editorial liberties that exceeded the limits of historical precision. In the case of the Pharisees, that liberty included reading into the life of Jesus circumstances that prevailed in the surroundings of Matthew when he wrote his gospel.⁷⁴

Creation of Material

The third kind of editorial change is that of creativity. In this case, according to historical critics the writer inserted new material that was not a part of the source(s) from which he worked. Examples (8), (9), and (10) come under this classification.

(8) *The Genealogies.* In regard to the two genealogies in Luke and Matthew, Marshall and Gundry assume that the two writers worked from a common source, presumably "Q." Marshall detects

⁷²S. Westerholm, "Pharisees," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. by Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992) 613.

⁷³Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14—28*, vol. 33B of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1995) 654-55.

⁷⁴Westerholm expresses the position of Historical Criticism thus: "The Gospels' depictions of Pharisees reflect both memories from the career of Jesus *and subsequent developments in the Christian communities*" (Westerholm, "Pharisees" 613, emphasis added).

that Luke's genealogy is not historically accurate through comparing it with the one in Matthew.⁷⁵ Gundry, on the other hand, finds that Matthew has made more revisions in the traditional material than Luke when he compares Matthew's genealogy with the one in Luke.⁷⁶ This leads Gundry to the conclusion that Matthew's "genealogy has become a large figure of speech for Jesus' messianic kingship,"⁷⁷ thereby removing it from the realm of historical data. Marshall concludes that it is impossible "to be sure that the genealogy in Lk. is accurate in detail," and may have resulted from Luke's use of midrashic techniques.⁷⁸

Here are two evangelical treatments that dehistoricize the genealogies. The starting point for both is apparently the assumption that the two gospel writers used a common source. In other words, the two commentators feel compelled to explain discrepancies in the genealogies as traceable to editorial liberties taken by the gospel writers, liberties that injected nonhistorical elements into the apparent ancestral lists. They choose the assumption that the writers worked from a common source rather than the possibility that they worked from different sources and that the genealogies lend themselves to rational harmonization.⁷⁹

(9) *Visit of the Magi.* Because of his assumption that Matthew

⁷⁵I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke, Commentary on the Greek Text*, in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 157-60.

⁷⁶Gundry, *Matthew* 13-14.

⁷⁷Gundry, *Matthew* 15.

⁷⁸Marshall, *Luke* 160. Nolland sees difficulty in reading biblical genealogies with a strict historical and biographical interest. He concludes that this difficulty precludes ancestry as the exclusive factor in interpreting the Lukan genealogy (*Luke 1—9:20* 169).

⁷⁹For possible ways to harmonize the genealogies, see Robert L. Thomas (ed.) and Stanley N. Gundry (assoc. ed.), *A Harmony of the Gospels with Explanations and Essays, Using the Text of the New American Standard Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 313-19; idem, *The NIV Harmony of the Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 304-10.

follows the same tradition as represented in Luke 2:8-20 (presumably the tradition found in Q), Gundry concludes that Matt 2:1-12 transforms the visit of local Jewish shepherds into adoration by Gentile magi from foreign parts.⁸⁰ He sees the necessity of a transformation because of his foregone conclusion that literary collaboration must explain the origin of the Synoptic Gospels.

Such compulsion forces the conclusion that the author of Matthew takes editorial liberty with his sources, a liberty justified by allowing that Matthew incorporated lessons for the church of his day into his gospel. Gundry alleges that for Matthew the coming of the magi previews the bringing of Gentiles into the church at a later time.⁸¹ To further his emphasis on Jesus as the star of David, Matthew also replaces the tradition about the angel and the heavenly host (Luke 2:8-15a) with that of a star.⁸² Here is another example of the extremes to which an assumption of literary dependence among the synoptists will drive a scholar.

(10) *The Beatitudes.* Opinion is also widespread among evangelical advocates of Historical Criticism that Jesus is not the source of all the beatitudes in Matt 5:3-12. Hagner allows that eight of them (5:3-10) may have originated with Jesus Himself—though Jesus spoke them in the second person rather than the third as Matthew has them—but that the ninth (5:11-12) is probably an addition by Matthew himself.⁸³ Guelich is of the opinion that the core beatitudes (5:3, 4, 6; also 5:11-12) go back to Jesus Himself, but that four more (5:5, 7, 8, 9) developed in church tradition after Jesus and before Matthew wrote. The gospel writer himself created one beatitude (5:10).⁸⁴ Gundry's

⁸⁰Gundry, *Matthew* 26-27, 651 n. 25.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 27.

⁸²*Ibid.*

⁸³Hagner, *Matthew* 1—13 90.

⁸⁴Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount* 117-18. Bock calls Guelich's analysis "helpful," but is less confident than Guelich as to whether Matthew and his sources are responsible for additional beatitudes beyond what Jesus actually spoke (Bock, *Luke . . . 1:1—9:50* 552).

approach has four beatitudes coming from the lips of Jesus (5:3, 4, 9, 10) and four resulting from Matthew's redaction (5:5, 6, 7, 8).⁸⁵

Gundry assumes Matthew's source (Q?⁸⁶) had only four beatitudes because Luke's Sermon on the Plain has only four. So, he concludes, Matthew must have added the other four.⁸⁷ Guelich understands several stages in the growth of three to eight beatitudes. Jesus originated the first three for the sake of the "desperate ones of his day."⁸⁸ Tension between what Jesus was accomplishing and the future consummation was the cause for adding the fourth (5:11-12) to the list. The Christian community later added four more (5:5, 7-9) through use of the Psalms and Jesus' sayings. Finally, Matthew added the last (5:10) as he adapted the rest to Isaiah 61.⁸⁹ Hagner sees the first eight beatitudes as a unity in themselves, with the ninth probably being added by Matthew himself.⁹⁰

In one way or another the positions of all three men arise through the assumption that Matthew worked from the same source (presumably Q) as Luke did in creating the Sermon on the Plain. So they must explain Matthew's differences from Luke under the assumption that they arose through Matthew's editorial activity. This assumption forces them to grant Matthew unusual liberties in attributing to Jesus either one, four, or five of the beatitudes that He never spoke, which amounts to a dehistoricizing of the gospel accounts. Even the Jesus Seminar has allowed that Jesus probably

⁸⁵Gundry, *Matthew* 67-70. Hagner, Guelich, and Gundry differ conspicuously among themselves regarding which beatitudes came from Jesus, which from church tradition, and which from Matthew.

⁸⁶See Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 17, for an indication that Gundry understands Q to have been a written source.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount* 17.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Hagner, *Matthew 1—13* 90.

spoke three of the beatitudes, the same number granted by Guelich.⁹¹

The above ten "tip-of-the-iceburg" illustrations are revealing. The hazards of Historical Criticism have entered the evangelical camp, raising questions about how much of the gospels is accurate history and how much is editorial embellishment. McKnight's rejoinder that redaction is not a matter that impinges on history, but that it is a matter of style⁹² makes an "either—or" issue out of one that is rightly a matter of "both—and." If authorial style introduces historical inaccuracy, it is not "contorted historiography and logic"—as McKnight contends—to conclude that it is *both* authorial style *and* historical distortion.⁹³ A factual misrepresentation is an inaccuracy, regardless of its cause.

THE REMAINING ALTERNATIVE

⁹¹Funk, Hoover, *et al.*, *Five Gospels* 138.

⁹²McKnight, *Synoptic Gospels* 89-90.

⁹³Marshall crystalizes the issue in the following: "It is certainly impossible to practise the historical method without concluding that on occasion the correct solution to a difficulty lies in the unhistorical character of a particular narrative. Several cases of this kind have been cited above, but in many of them we have claimed that to establish that a particular statement is unhistorical is not to establish the presence of an error which would call into question the reliability of the NT writer. Very often the reader may be demanding a kind of historical truth from the narrative which it was never intended to provide" ("Historical Criticism" 136). He proceeds to admit that the ordinary reader would view matters differently from the way scholars would. When Marshall and Blomberg speak of "reliable," they obviously distinguish the word from "accurate" or "errorless." When a writer says something happened that did not happen, he can still be reliable even though he has reported the event inaccurately or erroneously (Blomberg, *Historical Reliability* 151-52; cf. also Marshall, "I Believe" 19). These writers distinguish sharply between what is *generally reliable* and what is *historically factual* as does Graham Stanton who writes, "Gospel truth cannot be confirmed by historical evidence, but it does depend on *general reliability* of the evangelists' portraits of Jesus. . . . I have chosen the term 'general reliability' deliberately. We do not have precise historical *records* in the Gospels . . ." (*Gospel Truth? New Light on Jesus and the Gospels* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995] 193, emphasis original).

In view of the consequences of assuming literary dependence among the Synoptists, a balancing of evidence for most nonspecialists in gospel studies would rule against such an assumption. Yet it is not so with most who specialize in this field. Despite their acknowledgment that no solution to the Synoptic Problem is without its problems, they still cling to the theory that the gospel writers depended on the works of each other in some manner. Without such literary collaboration, the Synoptic Problem does not exist,⁹⁴ but they practice a wholesale neglect of that possibility. They are content to cite the theory of Matthew's and Luke's dependence on Mark and Q as the majority opinion and to build on that as a foundation. They acknowledge the absence of absolute proof of the theory,⁹⁵ but are unable to provide any widely accepted solution to plug its holes. This is why McKnight must admit, "But we can never be totally certain about some of these matters since we can never be totally confident of a solution to the Synoptic Problem."⁹⁶ The consequence of that theory's being wrong is a trashing of most of the research done on the Synoptic Gospels over the last hundred years.⁹⁷

⁹⁴Linnemann, *Synoptic Problem* 149-52

⁹⁵E.g., McKnight, *Synoptic Gospels* 37; R. H. Stein, "Synoptic Problem," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. by Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992) 790; Carson, "Matthew" 13-14; Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* xlvi-xlviii; Blomberg, *Matthew* 40-41.

⁹⁶McKnight, *Synoptic Gospels* 89. Robert H. Stein expresses the uncertainty of the two-document solution by calling it the "least worst!" of the proposed theories ("Is It Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?" *JETS* 22 [June 1979]:117 n. 8).

⁹⁷A. J. Bellinzoni describes the situation thus: "Since Markan priority is an assumption of so much of the research of the last century, many of the conclusions of that research would have to be redrawn and much of the literature rewritten if the consensus of scholarship were suddenly to shift. . . . Were scholars to move to a position that no consensus can be reached about the synoptic problem or that the synoptic problem is fundamentally unsolvable, we would then have to draw more tentatively the conclusions that have sometimes been drawn on the basis of what were earlier regarded as the assured results of synoptic studies" (*The Two-Source Hypothesis, A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Arthur J. Bellinzoni, Jr. [Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1985] 9). Such a shift is in progress (cf. France, *Matthew* 25, 29-49). It remains to be seen how long it will take for the consensus to change.

Is it not more reasonable to drop the ill-supported and dubious assumption of literary dependence and thus dispense with the insoluble difficulties it creates?⁹⁸ Would this not furnish a better basis for responding to the destructive conclusions publicized by the Jesus Seminar? It is futile for evangelicals to attempt responses to this Seminar when they employ the same tainted methodology.⁹⁹ The difference between them and the Jesus Seminar is only a matter of one person's opinion against another's. For both a gulf is fixed between historical precision and the gospel records. Subjective criticisms of the Seminar's findings are at best peripheral. Those of radical persuasion merely turn the tables and show how evangelicals are dehistoricizing just as they are, though perhaps not to the same extremes.¹⁰⁰

The only way to objectify historical reliability is to accept the historical accuracy of Scripture throughout. J. Gresham Machen insisted on historical precision and would have been extremely perturbed if he had known evangelicals would eventually embrace historical-critical methodology. He voiced the objection of those who

⁹⁸Cf. France, *Matthew* 41-46.

⁹⁹For reminders that evangelical respondents to the Jesus Seminar employ the same flawed methodology, see for example Carson, "Matthew" 15-17; Blomberg, *Matthew* 37; Wilkins, *Matthew* 8; Bock, *Luke* 9; idem, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 90, 99; McKnight, *Synoptic Gospels* 37-40; Gregory A. Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God?* (Wheaton: Victor, 1995) 136-37, 204, 295-96 n. 13; Witherington, *Jesus Quest* 46-47, 50-52, 96, 187, 260-61 nn. 29, 30, 32. Compare these with the methodology of the Jesus Seminar (Funk *et al.*, *Five Gospels* 9-14). The Jesus Seminar's addition of the Gospel of Thomas to the sources Mark, Q, M, and L is the only exception to the parallelism in methodology.

¹⁰⁰John Dart's article about evangelical responses to the Jesus Seminar, "Holy War Brewing over Image of Jesus," illustrates how unconvinced the radical wing remains in spite of the responses (*Los Angeles Times* [10/28/95]:B12-B13). In assessing the effectiveness of recent evangelical efforts to refute the Seminar, Dart concludes, "That traditional [i.e., evangelical] viewpoint may also be an increasingly hard sell to a skeptical American public." He adds, "Biola University's Michael Wilkins, co-editor of the first book to take on the Jesus Seminar, said it will be harder to promote orthodox Christianity in the next century, and perhaps easier for the notion of Jesus as a non-divine sage to gain a following."

in his day advocated a Christianity independent of history when he wrote, "Must we really wait until the historians have finished disputing about the value of sources and the like before we can have peace with God?"¹⁰¹ To this he responded, ". . . If religion be made independent of history there is no such thing as a gospel. . . . A gospel independent of history is a contradiction in terms."¹⁰² In an endorsement of Machen's position, Lippmann writes,

The veracity of that story was fundamental for the Christian Church. For while all the ideal values may remain if you impugn the historic record set forth in the Gospels, these ideal values are not certified to the common man as inherent in the very nature of things.¹⁰³

He continues, "The liberals have yet to answer Dr. Machen when he says that `the Christian movement at its inception was not just a way of life in the modern sense, but a way of life founded upon a message.'"¹⁰⁴

Harrisville and Sundberg correctly analyze Machen's response to Historical Criticism when they note, "Christianity is wed inextricably to the particularities of a history that are open to investigation and have the specificity and integrity to risk falsification."¹⁰⁵ Christianity in its fundamental nature is "grounded in an historical narrative; it depends upon the claims of external events. To separate the ideas and values of the faith from their history is to cut the nerve of Christianity."¹⁰⁶ Cutting that nerve is precisely what

¹⁰¹J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946) 121.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

¹⁰³Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) 32.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰⁵Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 195.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 201; cf. Lippmann, *Preface to Morals* 32 f.

Historical Criticism does, as Machen seems to have seen years ago. The methodology therefore has no place in evangelical scholarship.

The inerrancy of the gospel records is a guarantee that they are accurate in every detail. Divine and human elements entered into composing the biblical record. The prevalence of the divine over the human guarantees the precision of every part of Bible history.