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Table of Contents

In Memoriam: Harold H. Zietlow (1926–2011)	3
Epistles before Gospels: An Axiom of New Testament Studies David P. Scaer	5
Moses in the Gospel of John Christopher A. Maronde	23
Rectify or Justify? A Response to J. Louis Martyn's Interpretation of Paul's Righteousness Language Mark P. Surburg	45
The Eucharistic Prayer and Justification Roland F. Ziegler	79
The Reception of Walther's Theology in the Wisconsin Synod Mark E. Braun	101
Righteousness, Mystical Union, and Moral Formation in Christian Worship Gifford A. Grobien	141
Theological Observer	165
God's Word, Three Views, One Bible	
The Mission of the Church in an Age of Zombies	
One Nation under God: Thoughts Regarding "Patriotic Services"	

Book Reviews	184
Books Received	191

Epistles before Gospels: An Axiom of New Testament Studies

David P. Scaer

An axiom is defined as “a proposition regarded as self-evident truth.”¹ For most of us, our introduction to axioms came in a geometry class when we were given the definitions of straight lines, circles, triangles, and other shapes and required to accept them without question. Axioms are just how these things are, and they are not restricted to geometry. They are the rules by which the game is played, and agreeing to them is required before joining in. Without axioms, the foundational principles in each situation would have to be proved again and again, and so knowledge could hardly advance. We would forever be going back to square one. All branches of knowledge, sciences, philosophies, and theologies have axioms. Their truthfulness is prior to our encountering them; they border on intuitive knowledge. Even the definition of an axiom is an axiom. In ordinary discourse the idea of an axiom might be expressed by the phrase “of course.” By saying “of course,” the speaker or writer cuts off all challenges and does not intend to prove the truthfulness of what he says.

Under closer examination, some axioms may not prove to be above challenge. The authors of the Declaration of Independence claimed that it was “self-evident” that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but this was less than self-evident to George III, as well as to the slave holders who pledged their lives and fortunes in signing the document.

At the foundation of every field of knowledge, including religious systems, are axioms, truths that are self-evident to those constituting the guild adhering to them. Since challenging an axiom threatens a guild’s self-understanding, the challenge is resisted or ignored for the sake of self-preservation. Challengers are in need of conversion. Axioms, or we could call them “principles,” are determined by the majority assumption at a given time. Key is the phrase, “at a given time,” because an axiom can be

¹ Webster’s *Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, Publishers, 1969), 62.

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changed. In any academic discipline, including New Testament studies, the past is cluttered with non-functional axioms. Rapprochement among groups with different foundational axioms borders on the impossible and can only succeed with each group recognizing its own axioms. Taking the log out of one's eye is asking too much, but at least the presence of a large piece of wood in one's field of vision is a step in the right direction.

Axiomatic for Lutherans is the law-gospel principle undergirding and permeating all theology. Luther taking James off his canonical rolls may have been prevented had he examined his own axiom on justification. When different definitions and applications of the law-gospel axiom surfaced in the Missouri Synod in the 1970s controversy, its application to theology had to be abridged.

I. Two Axioms of Historical-Critical New Testament Scholarship

In working with reports that go back as close to the raw data as possible, historical studies claim an objectivity different or superior to disciplines like philosophies or theologies. Historical principles have an axiomatic objectivity that faith and philosophy do not, or so the claim is made. Separating faith and history goes back at least as far as René Descartes. Objectivity is presumed by methods identifying themselves as historical-critical; they approach the biblical texts with no preconceived ideas—or so it first appears. Since it is better to speak of historical methods in the plural, as opposed to a single method, the goal of raw objectivity is compromised, if it ever existed.

Historical-critical methods in Jesus research use principles. On the one hand, the principle of analogy holds those deeds and words of Jesus are more likely to be authentic if their parallels can be found elsewhere. Precedence is the key. Simply put, if what Jesus said or did resembles what other contemporary Jews said or did, there is a better chance that the reports of these things are authentic. A prominent proponent of this principle is N.T. Wright.

On the other hand, the principle or criterion of dissimilarity holds that words or events attributed to Jesus that have parallels in Jewish and early Christian communities are less likely to be authentic.² Rudolph Bultmann came to fame with this method, but Bart Ehrman holds honors now. For example, if there are parallels between the Gospels and the epistles of Paul,

² Robert M. Price, "Jesus at the Vanishing Point," *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 58–60.

one can be almost certain that the gospel account is an interpretive construct of the early church. This approach assumes that the epistles were written before the gospels, and so Paul becomes the standard for judging what comes authentically from Jesus in the Gospels and what does not.

These opposing axioms of similarity and dissimilarity provide the basis for determining whether the resurrection belongs to real history.³ Ancillary is the question of what real history is. Before tackling this question, the scholar determines which axiom will determine how the data is analyzed. From these principles, other principles, which also function as axioms, are derived. Alongside the axiom that the epistles precede the gospels⁴ is a second axiom that Mark was the first Gospel. The priority of the epistles over the gospels and the priority of Mark among the Gospels are lines on the field on which the hermeneutical game is played. A student will most likely confront these axioms at secular or mainline college religion classes and some seminaries.⁵ A clue to recognizing an axiom is its introduction by such phrases as “many scholars,” “most scholars,” and “widespread opinion.”⁶ Historical biblical principles may not be axioms in the purest sense, but they are axioms in the sense that they are assumed to be true with little or no argumentation. Call them functional axioms. Agnostic biblical scholar Robert M. Price puts the dagger into approaches advancing on the backs of axioms and says, “*consensus is no criterion*”⁷—even if he happily resorts to consensus in advancing his own

³ For a discussion of the various methods used by historians to test authenticity, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 2nd ed. (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 201–206.

⁴ So Luke Timothy Johnson, who states that the three synoptic gospels “are in many respects the most distinctive documents in the NT canon. They are not, however, the first composed,” *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 155. Also Mark Allen Powell: “The gospels come first in the New Testament, but they were not the first books to be written; all four of them were probably written after the death of Paul, and thus they must be later chronologically than any of the letters Paul wrote.” *Writings of the New Testament*, 49. Also Martin Hengel, who calls “the letters of Paul (the only written testimonies prior to Mark) . . .” “Eye-witness memory and the writing of the Gospels,” in *The Written Gospel*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Donald A. Hagner (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 80. Also, “Of lasting value is that Mark was Luke and Matthew’s source (in this order),” 74.

⁵ Mark Allen Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 128. A popular textbook is Bart D. Ehrman’s *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶ Johnson, “*The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*,” 159.

⁷ Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point,” 61; emphasis original. He continues, “That trust may not rest with the majority, every theory and individual argument must be

arguments. Before throwing stones, axioms or unexamined principles undergird how we do theology in general and not only in biblical studies. So let's lay out the markings on the field for how the game is ordinarily played.

II. The Field of Play according to Historical-Critical Axioms

The argument goes as follows. Mark as the first Gospel was written after Paul had been martyred,⁸ and so the latter's authentic and even inauthentic epistles (like Colossians and Ephesians) may also have preceded Mark.⁹ Paul began writing epistles at least twenty years or maybe thirty years before Mark wrote his Gospel. His last epistle appeared shortly before his death, and so the apostle went to his death never putting his hands on or hearing a Gospel.¹⁰ Within these axioms is a diversity of theories or hypotheses about a writing, such as dating, destination, and audience. Diverse views on dating Paul's epistles does not challenge that Mark, as the oldest surviving Gospel, was written only after Paul had brought his literary career to an end.¹¹ Paul, who could not provide the eyewitness testimony that the Eleven did, and those writing in his name were exercising an authority in the church before the appearance of Luke and Matthew, who claimed to preserve Jesus' words.¹² Here we may cautiously use *ipsissima verba*. Even without making this claim, the words and deeds of Jesus are found on every page of the Gospels. The epistles tolerate only a hunt and peck method. Irony of ironies, Matthew, which is often placed as the last synoptic gospel, came to be regarded as the standard of Jesus' teaching as soon as it was written. It not only occupied center stage, but was pretty much the only act in town.

evaluated on its own. If we appeal instead to 'received opinion' or 'the consensus of scholars,' we are merely abdicating our own responsibility, as well as committing the fallacy of *appeal to the majority*."

⁸ So, for example, Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 128.

⁹ Powell places these between AD 62 and 67 in *Introducing the New Testament*, 247.

¹⁰ Paul's Thessalonian correspondence as the first New Testament writing has widespread support. Johnson is confident that this correspondence "marks the probable beginning of Christian literature." *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, 281. Also Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, 212. But if Galatians was written before the Council of Jerusalem in AD 49, it may be his first epistle. Others say that if it was written to northern Galatia, it was written in the mid-50s; See Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 309–310.

¹¹ Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 403–404.

¹² Hengel takes specific note of this; see "Eye-witness memory and the writing of the Gospels," in *The Written Gospel*, 82.

To summarize the axioms of the historical-critical method: between Jesus' resurrection and the writing of Mark (AD 70), a period of about forty years, Christian communities had epistles but no written Gospels, at least not any that have survived. It is this assumption that we want to address.

III. Mark, Matthew, Luke, and "Q"

Most scholars hold that Matthew and Luke incorporated Mark or earlier forms into their Gospels. By their calculations, these two Gospels could have hardly been written much earlier than the 80s, or even as late as AD 90 for Luke and AD 100 for Matthew.¹³ According to this scenario, in the ten to thirty years after Mark wrote his Gospel, Luke and Matthew obtained copies of Mark and became sufficiently versed in it to include its materials in their own accounts.¹⁴ The intense attention that Matthew and Luke supposedly gave to Mark in writing their Gospels cannot be found anywhere in the post-apostolic period.¹⁵ Whatever in Mark impressed Matthew and Luke in writing their gospels did not resonate with the early apostolic fathers; fascination with Mark did not last long in the late first century.

A complementary axiom to Markan priority is that Matthew and Luke incorporated sections of the hypothetical Q document or one of its editions into their Gospels.¹⁶ Without written Gospels, oral tradition until AD 70

¹³ The advanced theology of Matthew, such as the "Father-Son-Holy Spirit" formula, suggests a date of AD 100 or even after. W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr. note that some scholars hold that Matthew was the first gospel and written before AD 70. They follow the majority view that Matthew was written in Greek, is dependent on Mark, and reflects a prosperous community which hardly corresponds with Jerusalem. See *Matthew 1-7, Matthew: International Critical Commentary*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988-1997), 1:140.

¹⁴ Powell notes that "where Matthew incorporates about 500 of Mark's 649 verses into his Gospel, Luke retains only about 350 verses of Markan material." *Introducing the New Testament*, 155. So also Hengel, "Of lasting value is that Mark was Luke and Matthew's main source (in this order)." "Eye-witness memory and the writings of the Gospels," 74. This simultaneous development of the gospels with Ephesians, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and the Pastorals is noted by Hengel, to which he adds 1 Clement and the epistles of Ignatius (84).

¹⁵ Mark is not the subject of commentaries until the sixth and ninth centuries; see Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 159. Markus Bockmuehl notes that of thirty or so extant gospel manuscripts before AD 300, only one is the Gospel of Mark—fewer than some apocryphal gospels. In his view, the first legitimate commentary on Mark is that of an anonymous seventh-century Irish monk; see "The making of gospel commentaries," in *The Written Gospel*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Donald A. Hagner (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 288-289.

¹⁶ It is arguable that Matthew and Luke's use of Q is an axiom. Consider Ehrman,

was the vehicle for conveying and preserving the teachings and deeds of Jesus. Oral tradition began with the report of the women to the disciples that they had discovered the tomb empty and subsequently had seen the resurrected Jesus. Alongside this oral tradition, Paul's epistles each found a place in church life as they were written. Oral tradition cannot be reconstructed with precision, but scholars posit that Q in one or more of the editions along with proto-Mark constituted the oral tradition from which Luke and Matthew were composed.¹⁷

Proposing Q as the content of a valid Christian oral tradition is not without problems since, as it is reconstructed, it does not contain Jesus' death and resurrection—events that give cohesive meaning to the canonical gospels. What might "take up your cross" possibly mean unless the readers knew about Jesus' death and resurrection? These events and no others defined who Christians were. While Mark was a Gospel to die for (Mark 10:29), Q apparently was not.

Though Q is often seen as synonymous with oral tradition, it was not the tradition that emanated from the first Easter. If Matthew was written between AD 80 and 100 and incorporated material from Q, that would mean that Q was regarded, in some sense, as an authoritative source as late as the beginning of the second century—an assumption for which there is not a trace of evidence! According to this scenario, Q for a while shared the spotlight with Paul's epistles, and then after AD 70 with Mark, Luke, and Matthew as each appeared in church life. Paul's dogmatic theology, especially his Christology, flourished side by side with Q, a collection of Jesus' sayings that is recognized as wisdom religion. Whatever Paul's epistles were, Q was not. Since Matthew and Luke make use of both Mark and Q, it follows that Matthew and Luke were associated with churches that had both Mark and Q in either their oral or written forms. If both documents were influential in the churches in which Matthew and Luke wrote, it has to be asked if these churches failed to recognize that Mark and Q projected vastly different perspectives of what Jesus was all about.¹⁸ By combining such different documents as Mark and Q, Luke and then

"They [Matthew and Luke] both must have used some other source that is no longer available. Scholars call this source 'Q' (short for 'Quelle,' the German word for 'source')." *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, 65. Since the Q document has yet to surface, it is problematic to speak of a final form; thus, earlier editions of Q are designated by Arabic numbers placed after the side of the letter, e.g., Q1, Q2.

¹⁷ See James D.G. Dunn, "Q1 as Oral Tradition," in *The Written Gospel*, 45–69.

¹⁸ John S. Kloppenborg Verbin posits two opposing religions, one dependent on Q and the other whose faith was reflected in Mark; *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), chaps. 4 and 5.

Matthew can be credited not only with great literary accomplishments, but with an ecumenical accomplishment in uniting two diverse forms of Christianity.

However, this raises another question of whether literary and theological geniuses like Matthew and Luke each independently concluded that Mark and Q could be combined with his own materials ("M" and "L," respectively) to create a gospel. Each probably edited these materials. Another scenario is that either Matthew or Luke knew that the other had created a gospel by combining Mark and Q and followed suit.

In the years before Matthew was written, assuming that it was written AD 90–100 and Luke AD 80–90, some churches could have had a lectionary of Q, Mark, and Luke along with some of Paul's epistles. In contrast to Paul's creedal Christianity, Q without Jesus' death and resurrection was hardly indicative of how the Gospels later developed. Paul had made enough visits to Jerusalem that it would be difficult to explain how he could have been ignorant of the Q community in Galilee, and that one or the other would not have recognized the incompatibility of their theologies. Regardless of what was taking place between AD 70 and 100, in the second century Matthew knelled the death toll for Q and made Mark redundant, if it was not already redundant as soon as it was written.

IV. Paul without the Gospels?

Because historical criticism regards Paul's epistles as the only known written sources from the 40s through the mid-60s, it is fair ask what kind of Christianity can be derived from them. Paul is less interested in arguing—not as Matthew does that Jesus is the Old Testament's fulfillment—his dogmatic purposes in forming the beliefs and lives of Christians.¹⁹ In today's terms, he would have been known as a dogmatic and pastoral theologian. In the matter of Christian life, Christ's humiliation provides the basis and the model for the submission of the Philippians to one another (2:1–8). A dogmatic theology with Christology as the chief topic can be constructed from his epistles with subsidiary *loci* on preexistence, deity, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, ascension, and return in judgment. Additional topics are the Holy Spirit and his works, justification, sanctification, ethics, the Church, the Lord's Supper, Baptism, the survival of the soul after death, and the resurrection. He provides topics rather than narratives.

¹⁹ Axioms in two different spheres can be parallel. Thus the Lutheran axiom of justification by faith, which depends chiefly on Paul's epistles, parallels the axiom in New Testament studies that Paul's epistles had literary dominance in the church until AD 70.

His epistles are not completely devoid of data found in the Gospels (e.g., Jesus' birth in Gal 4:4), but make no mention of his mother, unless she is the Mary mentioned in Romans 16:6. He knows of the Twelve, but apart from Peter and John does not give their names. Paul knows Jesus was David's descendant (Rom 1:3), had several brothers, but only names James (1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12; 1 Cor 9:5). His epistles became the basis for creeds—or, more likely, they made use of creedal formulas containing references to Christ's death, burial, and resurrection on the third day (1 Cor 15:3–4). Other creedal data are Christ's ascension (Eph 4:8–10), his session at God's right hand (Rom 8:34), his return, and his trial before Pontius Pilate (1 Thess 4:14–15).²⁰

Paul preserves the words of institution of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23–26), which he places on the night of betrayal, perhaps assuming that his readers know the circumstances and the name of the betrayer. In spite of a profound baptismal theology that connects the rite to Jesus' death (Rom 6:1–11), he makes no mention of its administration with the trinitarian formula, an item contained in the *Didache*. References to preaching the gospel as planting and watering (1 Cor 3:6) can be used to show he knew the parable of the sower. That aside, churches with only Paul's epistles would have had a highly developed theology, but their knowledge of the historical Jesus could be compressed into a creed. His epistles report no miracles and could hardly be the source of a sayings document. Since they were not written as narratives, they only provide an outline or a skeleton of the man in whom readers were urged to believe.²¹ Perhaps it is not going too far to say that the church can live without any one of the epistles, but it needs at least one Gospel. Now, if Paul's congregations relied on just a document like Q, then it is feasible to suggest that Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels to overcome its deficits. With Mark also in hand, they wrote to bring two different and almost competing traditions about Jesus into one document.

²⁰ Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 402–404. Rudolf Bultmann typified the New Testament theology that Paul's chief interest was in the exalted Christ and that he had no or at least a limited interest in Jesus materials that found their way into the gospels. Stephen O. Stout takes issue with this view to show that Paul had a deep interest in the historical Jesus. He does not take what would seem to be the next step in holding that Paul's knowledge of Jesus came from the written gospels. See Stephen O. Stout, "The Man Christ Jesus" in *The Humanity of Jesus in the Teaching of the Apostle Paul* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011).

²¹ James D.G. Dunn, "Remembering Jesus" in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 75: "Missionary preaching was only possible by argument, and this required narration of Jesus' words and deeds"; emphasis original.

V. Gospels and Oral Tradition

James D.G. Dunn holds that the ministry of Jesus had an impact on his disciples. In addition, he holds that Jesus' words in the Gospels, such as the Sermon on the Mount, cannot be ascribed to the church's post-resurrection experiences, a view popularized by Rudolph Bultmann.²² Though for a moment Dunn seems to go in the direction of positing an earlier written Gospel, he goes no further than holding that early Christians relied first on oral tradition, as it was shaped by the communities, rather than written documents. For the sake of clarification, the issue is not whether the first Christians relied on oral tradition, but when that tradition was first transmitted into writing. Here Dunn argues that the evangelists did not copy from manuscripts, but made use of the oral tradition shaped by these communities.²³ Accordingly, Dunn dismisses the two-Gospel view of William Farmer and Michael Goulder, that Mark used Matthew and Luke, because they "conceptualize the history of Jesus tradition only in terms of copying and editing an earlier written source."²⁴

Dunn's critique can be leveled against the two-source theory that Matthew and Luke copied Mark and Q, since in both cases these sources are said to exist in written form. He draws an unnecessarily sharp line between oral tradition and written manuscripts, as if both oral tradition and written manuscripts could not have been used at the same time for transmitting the gospel. Paul expected that the carrier of the epistles would answer questions supplementing what he had written (Col 4:16),²⁵ and so tradition in oral and written form existed side by side. This was the case with the decree of the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:23, 27). Matthew 24:15 seems to be a rubric, suggesting that the lector provide an interpretation of the puzzling phrase, "desolating abomination."

No one will debate that oral tradition found its way into manuscripts, but the reverse was also likely, that written manuscripts shaped the oral tradition. This would have been the case when a document associated with the Twelve was read to communities that up to that time had depended solely on oral tradition. Dunn comes close to allowing for a written gospel as early as the 50s, when he writes that the "'oral period' at the beginning

²² Dunn, "Remembering Jesus," 204-207.

²³ Dunn, "Remembering Jesus," 215.

²⁴ Dunn, "Remembering Jesus," 208.

²⁵ Ephesians 6:21, "Now that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything."

of the history of the Jesus tradition" lasted "say, for about twenty years."²⁶ That would mean that the church began using documents around AD 50, a date contemporary with the writing of the decree of the Council of Jerusalem. This should put to bed the argument that the apostles were so illiterate that not one of them could have written a Gospel. Someone in the Jerusalem church not only could write, but did. Dunn says nothing about why, how, and when the oral word took on written form. Since he holds that oral reports are less susceptible to change than written ones, one has to ask why the oral reports were ever put into writing at all.²⁷

Reasons offered against inscribing the oral tradition are not that foolproof. Paul had no hesitancy to put his views down in writing, and this may have happened as early as AD 40. Considering that Paul put a higher value on a word of Jesus as "a command of the Lord" (1 Cor 14:37) than he did his own, it is astonishing that he, another apostle, or one of their disciples did not commit the oral narratives about Jesus to writing as soon as possible.

To support his argument that a gospel was not circulating in the early period, a time coterminous with Paul's literary achievements, Dunn points to the general illiteracy of the time and "assume[s], therefore, that the great majority of Jesus' first disciples would have been functionally illiterate," though he acknowledges that Matthew might have taken notes.²⁸ He follows with the argument that "written material was not trusted, because it could be so easily lost, destroyed, or corrupted in copying."²⁹ His toying with the idea that Matthew may have been a literate disciple is a crack in his argument that the general population was illiterate, because it would have only taken one literate person to write a Gospel. Illiterate people of means had scribes at their disposal, and such a scribe may have left his signature behind in Matthew (13:52). Peter's desire for compensation in exchange for following Jesus suggests that he was a man of means (Matt 19:27). Had he and the other disciples been dreadfully impoverished, they could have hardly given up that much for Jesus. If a general illiteracy is a reason against an early inscription of the gospels, then their appearance would suggest or even require a rise in literacy in the ancient world and church sometime in the last three decades of the first century, but there is hardly any evidence that suggests this. A general illiteracy should no longer be offered as an argument against early inscription of the Gospels.

²⁶ Dunn, "Remembering Jesus," 210.

²⁷ Dunn, "Remembering Jesus," 209–210.

²⁸ Dunn, "Remembering Jesus," 211.

²⁹ Dunn, "Remembering Jesus," 209.

There are several reasons allowing the Gospels to be written before AD 70. First, the anticipated demise of the Twelve was made real by the martyrdoms of Stephen and then of James, who with his brother John and Peter had special access to Jesus. Second, the spread of the church outside of Judea and Jerusalem to Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and Spain, not to mention Africa and countries to the east, would strain the transmission of the gospel by a memorized oral tradition. Oral transmission works well within a closed society but less so over distances into ethnically different groups.³⁰ Third, while the memories of the Twelve were informed directly by Jesus, the memory of others was informed by hearsay, which is after all what oral tradition is. Finally, if distance measured in space compromises memory, so does distance measured in time.

Apart from any negative assessment of Rudolph Bultmann's detachment of the gospel from history, he got it right in arguing that early churches relied on oral tradition, something that began with the report of the women to the disciples that they had found the tomb of Jesus empty and that one or the other had seen the resurrected Jesus. By the end of that first Easter day, oral tradition was already evolving into a complexity caused by fusing one report with another, almost in the sense of a gospel harmony. An eyewitness account could be affected by hearing the account of another eyewitness and even of those who were not eyewitnesses but heard the reports from others. So, from the beginning of Christianity, first-, second-, and maybe third-hand information was merged into the oral tradition that formed the content of preaching from which the gospels emerged. Eyewitness accounts and second- and third-hand reports were regulated by the apostles in their role as leaders of the communities.³¹ Looking at it this way, Q, with its lack of an account of Jesus' redemptive work and resurrection, could have hardly qualified as an acceptable tradition.

Oral tradition flourishes best in closed communities where it can be more easily controlled, preserved, and passed on by its leaders; that tradition is compromised when it is shared with other communities, especially over great distances.³² Oral tradition could flourish in Jerusalem with its

³⁰ Dunn relies on the work of Kenneth E. Bailey, who suggests that communities are vehicles of oral tradition; what he does not explain is how this works from one community to others separated by great distances. "Remembering Jesus," 212.

³¹ Dunn cites Acts 2:42 to show that particular individuals were designated "to retain and recite the oral tradition." "Remembering Jesus," 213-214.

³² Dunn again relies on Bailey's research on the maintenance of tradition in what Dunn calls "the earliest disciple groups," wherein the tradition was recalled and celebrated. "Remembering Jesus," 213.

surviving eyewitnesses and those who had known them. Paul's missionary journeys changed the dynamics. Gentiles may have found a place in the Jerusalem church, but their inclusion in far-removed, predominantly Jewish communities was another matter. Including outsiders into the membership would only be possible if the outsiders adopted or at least were sympathetic to the group's customs. In turn, the group makes adjustments for the newcomers.

Putting aside the scholarly consensus that the Gospels appeared between AD 68–100, a need for one would have arisen with Paul's journeys in the 40s. In making its decisions known, the Jerusalem Council trusted an oral report to the messengers, but also provided a written document (Acts 15:23–29). So, as early as AD 49, the apostles remaining in Jerusalem—including Peter and James the Lord's brother—saw the value of written documents in carrying the church's message. If Paul's thoughts and the decision of the Jerusalem Council found their way into documents, there is a precedent for the words and deeds of Jesus being transmitted in the same way. Though Q in its oral or a written form might have served that purpose, without a narrative of Christ's death and resurrection it could not have been that document.³³ An earlier form of Mark would have served better than Q, but without a resurrection appearance of Jesus it would have kept these fledgling believers wondering what happened to him.

VI. Paul and the Gospel(s)

If C.H. Dodd is correct in his analysis of the sermons recorded in Acts that were preached for the purpose of converting, then the Corinthians knew that Jesus died for sins, was raised from the dead, would return in judgment, and was Christ and Lord. Acts 2:29 notes his burial, and 10:40 places this resurrection on the third day. These events make up the corpus of what Paul calls the "first things" he delivered (1 Cor 15:3–4). The outline provided in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures," corresponds to Jesus' predictions of his death and resurrection in Matthew (16:21; 17:23; 20:19) and Luke (9:22; 18:33), but not Mark. A third-day resurrection is a topic of the walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:7, 21, 46). Jesus' resurrection is among the important things for Paul, including that it should happen on the third day.

³³ Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q*, chaps. 4 and 5.

If 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 is an early confession, a third-day resurrection is part of it. Paul is not referencing a private revelation, but something he has already delivered to the Corinthians, which in turn he received, probably from Peter and James (Gal 1:18–19). It is arguable that even before his conversion Paul knew of Christ's death from the Jewish rulers, who had a part in it. While the question of why Saul was persecuting Jesus has been understood metaphorically of the church, the writer of Acts has, at this point, not made that connection. So it might be that Jesus saw Saul's persecution of the church as continuing his part in the trial that led to the crucifixion. Paul could have known about a third-day resurrection either from what the apostles preached or earlier from Jewish religious leaders (Matt 26:64; 28:11–16).

In response to the denial of the general resurrection among the Corinthians, what counted was not what Paul knew of Jesus' death, but his personal encounter with the resurrected Jesus. Not only does he list himself last, but in providing a foundation for the resurrection of Jesus, Paul gives the chief place to the Scriptures or to written documents of some sort. The Corinthians know about Jesus' death for sins, his burial and his third-day resurrection "according to the Scriptures" (κατὰ τὰς γραφάς), a phrase that is typically interpreted to indicate fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Scholars are not agreed on which prophecies, but nowhere else in the New Testament is it used to indicate fulfillment. With the definite article in "according to *the* Scriptures" (κατὰ τὰς γραφάς), Paul had in mind not a random document but particular ones that the Corinthians knew by hearing them read; if necessary, they could even have put their hands on them. Only a congregation thoroughly versed in the Old Testament could have put together a conglomeration of references to come up with the conclusion that Jesus would die, be buried, and rise on the third day. A Gentile majority would not have constituted such a congregation, if indeed any congregation would have been capable of this.

In determining which documents Paul had in mind, a clue is located in a third-day resurrection. Esther 5:1 and Hosea 6:2 speak of a third day, but attaching them to the resurrection requires huge jumps in thought. Q has no reference to the resurrection, let alone one happening on the third day, and Mark's predictions of Jesus' resurrection do not include a third-day reference. John places the wedding at Cana on the third day, but seeing a resurrection motif here requires knowledge of other sources. With use of the plural, "the scriptures," Paul is speaking of documents, not of isolated passages (*sedes doctrinae*) as in James 2:8, where "according to the scripture" (κατὰ τὴν γραφήν) precedes a citation of Leviticus 2:19 about

loving the neighbor. It is noteworthy that James does not use the form to show that prophecy has been fulfilled, but where the matter may be found. If Matthew had been written before the Council of Jerusalem and Luke shortly thereafter, they would be likely candidates for the documents to which Paul refers as informing the Corinthians of Christ's death for sins, burial, and resurrection on the third day. These documents would have provided the concrete, permanent reality in which the Corinthians stand, which works salvation, and is preached (1 Cor 15:1-2).³⁴

Though 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 is a creedal form, it should be interpreted as a unit with vv. 1-2, which speak of Paul's preaching of a gospel that was not a bare bones creed, but a narrative in oral or written form about what Jesus had done. Though we might be tempted to understand "gospel" as the antithesis to "law" in a Lutheran sense here, "gospel" for Paul is the proclaimed narrative about Christ. This parallels Matthew, where the gospel as the totality of Jesus' preaching (4:23; 9:35) will be preached throughout the world (ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκοθμένῃ, 24:14). Matthew and Mark include the pericope of the woman anointing Jesus for his burial in their understanding of the gospel (ἐν ὅλῃ τῷ κόσμῳ, Matt 26:13 and Mark 14:9).

Romans 1:3-4 provides another clue that Paul may have used the word "gospel" to refer to a narrative of the life of Jesus: "The gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord." Paul's sermons in Acts contain no reference to Jesus' descent from David, but he assumes that the Christians in Rome already recognize this as part of the gospel. Since Paul or one of his disciples was less than fully enthusiastic about genealogical reality (1 Tim 1:4; Titus 3:9), it is unlikely that he included an isolated genealogical item unless it was part of larger narrative. Paul had not been to Rome, so others, perhaps Peter, had provided details of the life of Jesus, including his Davidic descent. His epistle did not inform them of something they did not already know. Juxtaposing Jesus' Davidic descent with his resurrection in one sentence corresponds to the bracket in which Matthew composed his Gospel by introducing Jesus as the son of David in the Gospel's title and ending it with a third-day resurrection.³⁵ For Paul, Christ's death for sins and his being raised for our justification belonged to the gospel (Rom 4:24-25), but so did Christ's descent from David.

³⁴ "Γνωρίζω δὲ ὑμῖν, ἀδελφοί, τὸ εὐηγγελισάμην ὑμῖν, ὃ καὶ παρελάβετε, ἐν ᾧ καὶ ἐστήκατε, δι' οὗ οὐ σώζεσθε, τίνι λόγῳ ὑμῖν εἰ κατέχετε, ἐκτὸς εἰ μὴ εἰκὴ ἐπιστεύσατε."

³⁵ Luke could also be in view, since David's name appears six times in this gospel's introduction and, like Matthew, concludes with the resurrection.

One argument for a late dating for Matthew's Gospel is the assumption that the evangelist provides in chapter 24 such a vivid picture of the Roman military suppression of the Jewish revolt in AD 66–70 that it could only have written after it happened, *ex eventu*. History is presented as prophecy, but no divine revelation was needed to know that Jerusalem and its temple were headed for a destruction in which one stone would not be left upon another (24:2). Caiaphas is pictured as one who knew this (John 11:50). Revolt was in the air at the trial of Jesus. Jerusalem was a tinder box waiting to be lit. It was only a matter of time. Crucial for the *ex eventu* argument, rendering already accomplished history as prophecy, is taking the abominating sacrilege or desolation (24:28) as a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, though different interpretations of what this might be raise doubts whether the fall of Jerusalem is in view.³⁶ Take out this lynchpin and an argument for a late dating of Matthew is removed.³⁷

A key in determining what is meant by the abominating desolation is how the Greek word “ἄετοί” is understood. Often translated as “vultures” (as in, “where the corpse is, there the vultures will be gathered together”), carnivorous birds eating dead flesh, it can also be rendered as “eagles,” a possible reference to the eagle insignia mounted on Roman military

³⁶ Matthew 24:15, “So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel standing in the holy place (let the reader understand) . . .” George R. Beasley-Murray calls the abomination of desolation “the most puzzling element in the [fifth] discourse.” *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 408. See also Powell, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, 108; Davies and Allison, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988–1997), 3:345–347. Of the four typical interpretations, none is completely convincing. One of the traditional views holds that the phrase is equivalent to Paul's man of lawlessness in 2 Thess 2:3–12, the end-time antichrist. Against this understanding is the view that the antichrist comes at the end time, while the abomination of desolation appears within the experience of Jesus' disciples or Matthew's hearers. Another traditional view is that it refers to the erection of an idol. An older suggestion is that of the Capitoline Jupiter on the site of the temple after its destruction. A more recent theory is that it is a reference to the aborted attempt of the Emperor Caligula to set up his own statue in the temple in AD 40. It is, however, unlikely that either event stirred up apocalyptic expectations among Christians. Still another theory is that the abomination of desolation refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, but by itself this is not a convincing option. A fourth option sees the abomination caused by bringing the military standards with the emperor's image into the temple during its destruction.

³⁷ Douglas R.A. Hare provides the widely-held scholarly view that the abomination of desolation refers “either to the siege of Jerusalem or to the final capture of the temple by the armies of Titus and the offering of pagan sacrifice on the holy site.” *Matthew: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 277.

standards gathered around Jesus' corpse (πτῶμα). Thus, Jesus is speaking of his immanent death by crucifixion and not predicting an event forty years off in the future. A prophecy about Jerusalem's destruction requires that the holy place where the sacrilege stands (Matt 24:15) is the temple, but for Jesus the Jerusalem temple is a den of thieves (Matt 21:13). Jesus has no use for Jerusalem. Another possibility is that the holy place is Golgotha, where his crucifixion stands as an abomination before God. As the stone rejected by builders (Matt 24:42), Jesus presents himself as God's temple in which he makes atonement. Grammatically, the abomination of desolation is a not thing, like the statue, but a person.³⁸

Postscript One

Paul's reference to another New Testament document as Scripture may seem strange, but 1 Timothy 5:18 cites Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7 as scripture alongside of Deuteronomy 25:4. More intriguing, and similar to 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, is Luke 24:46–47: "Thus it is written, that the Christ

³⁸ Davies and Allison claim that Matt 21:42, "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," should be understood in connection with the judgment on the old temple and the establishment of the new one. *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 3:187. If Golgotha was the quarry out of whose stone the old temple was constructed, then the rejected stone, which becomes the cornerstone, remains in Golgotha. So, in this sense Golgotha is "the holy place," where the church as God's new people is established. In Matt 24:15 the word for "abomination" (βδέλγμα) and the accompanying participle "standing" (ἑστὸς), are both neuter, but Mark 3:14 offers the masculine participle "ἑστκότα." Mark is speaking of a person rather than a thing, a view favored by some scholars. The word for "abomination" (βδέλγμα), is neuter in gender and is followed by a neuter participle in Matthew (24:15, ἑστὸς), but a participle that can be both masculine and feminine (Mark 13:14, ἑστκότα). The grammatical gender is not determinative in whether a person or thing is in view, but Mark's change allows for a person. In the context, this person would be Jesus. Since the rubric "let the reader understand" is the only one provided for the liturgical lector in Matthew, its importance also should not be overlooked. But what should the lector understand? Whatever "the desolating sacrilege" is, it is arguably the most important something in the gospel. God ought not to be at Golgotha, but he is! By Mark's adding of "where it ought not to be" before "let the reader understand" (13:14), he reinforces its importance. A widely held view, that the flight from Jerusalem (Matt 24:16–20) refers to Christians abandoning the city before the Romans devastated it for the safety of Pella, overlooks the fact that this city is in a river valley, whereas Jerusalem is already in the mountains. Rather, Jesus is speaking of his disciples fleeing the impending doom associated with his own in apocalyptic language taken from the account of Lot and his family fleeing to the hills to escape the judgment coming upon Sodom (Gen 19:17). Our case for dating the origin of the gospels before AD 70 cannot rest on the interpretation of one passage, but the argument for a late date—that the destruction of Jerusalem is in view—has the same problem, and others as well.

should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Luke might be referring to his own prediction in 9:22, but this hardly comes close to what is found in 24:46–47. Could this be Luke’s compilation of several references taken from Matthew, especially with the reference “all nations.” Again, it is hardly likely that the Old Testament is in view.

Postscript Two

One reading of Galatians 1:11–12 may suggest that Paul received the content of the gospel directly from Jesus in an encounter³⁹ not unlike the one Mohammed had with Allah or Joseph Smith with the angel Moroni. This requires translating the Greek “δι’ ἀποκαλύψεως” as an extraordinary intervention into the ordinary affairs of life, as might be suggested by the English “apocalyptic,” a word derived from that Greek word. So, in this case, the sense would be that the exalted Jesus actually relayed the content of the gospel to Paul during the three years he was in Arabia (Gal 1:17–18). This content would have been the same that the historical Jesus had given to the Twelve and others over a three-year period. Since Peter’s confession was in response to what the Father had revealed to him through the preaching of Jesus and not a direct mystical encounter, there is reason to doubt that Paul experienced a mystical, ecstatic, or apocalyptic encounter with Jesus. Like others of his generation, he had eyes but did not see and ears but did not hear. He was fully informed of what Jesus was doing and teaching before the crucifixion, but this knowledge did not lead him to a conviction of who Jesus really was.

³⁹ Vs. 11–12: “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive (παρέλαβον) it from man, nor was I taught (ἐδιδάχθην) it, but it came through a revelation (δι’ ἀποκαλύψεως) of Jesus Christ.”