The Synoptic Gospels

Moving Literature or Apostolic Texts?

TORSTEN LÖFSTEDT

Torsten Löfstedt is associate professor of religious studies at Linnæus University.

torsten.lofstedt@lnu.se

Introduction

Ever since the Diet of Worms in 1521, Evangelical Protestants have claimed that Scripture is the foundation of their faith; church traditions and papal decrees are fallible, but Scripture is trustworthy.[1] The Vulgate, the Latin translation of Martin Luther's (1483–1546) day, was not reliable, however; Luther sought to base his theology on Erasmus of Rotterdam's (1466–1536) reconstruction of the original Greek text instead.[2] But Erasmus' reconstruction was not perfect either. Since Erasmus's day, ever more New Testament manuscripts have been discovered, and the reconstruction has to be continually revised; the Nestle-Aland text is currently in its twenty-eighth revised edition. What text is it that serves as firm foundation for Protestants? The answer given by fundamentalists of the Princeton school was the original "autographs."[3] Individual copies of the texts evidently contain errors, but the original autographs are infallible. These manuscripts are of course not extant, but fundamentalists were persuaded that reconstructions of the original text were so accurate that their absence did not

1. The term "Evangelical" has been used in various ways since the Reformation. As is discussed below, I use it in reference to Protestants that seek to grant Scripture the highest authority in matters of faith.

2. See Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture*, Milton Keynes 2004, 143–144 and references there.

3. Cf. International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21 (1978), 296: "it is necessary to affirm that only the autographic text of the original documents was inspired"; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Grand Rapids, MI 1994, 91: "The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact."

in fact matter. On this point the Chicago Statement, which continues in the tradition of the Princeton fundamentalists, reads:

> We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original. We deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of Biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.[4]

But the fact remains that these autographs are not available, and we cannot claim on the basis of anything but faith that we can reconstruct the original texts "with great accuracy." Textual critics have argued that the whole idea that we can reconstruct the original text of the New Testament is fallacious. At best we can reconstruct the earliest reconstructable text, which might not be the same as what the original authors wrote.[5]

Some scholars argue that the great amount of variation between the manuscripts says something significant about the attitude the early church had to these writings. These texts were moving texts, not static texts. And that, in their view, is how it should be. The terms "moving text," "living text," or "living literature" have been used for liturgical texts such as church orders and hymnals which may be continually modified by the ecclesiastical institutions.[6] When a text primarily serves as a foundation document for an institution or as historical source material it is essential that the original formulations are not altered, but moving texts which are produced for practical use may be continually updated. F. L. Cross explains:

> Unlike literary manuscripts, liturgical manuscripts were not written to satisfy an historical interest. They were written to serve a severely practical end. Their primary purpose was the needs of the services of the Church. Like timetables and other books for use, liturgical texts were compiled with the immediate future in view. Their intent was not to make an accurate reproduction of a model.[7]

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4. International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, "The Chicago Statement", 291.

5. Michael J. Holmes, "From 'Original Text' to 'Initial Text': The Traditional Goal of New Testament Textual Criticism in Contemporary Discussion", in Bart D. Ehrman & Michael Holmes (eds), *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, Leiden 2012, 637–688.

6. To avoid giving the impression that fixed texts cannot be full of life, I prefer the term "moving text" to "living text."

7. F. L. Cross, "Early Western Liturgical Manuscripts", *Journal of Theological Studies* 16 (1965), 63–64, quoted in Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and*

In the case of moving texts, the rights of the author are of secondary importance to the needs of the community using the text. The author is treated more as an editor or compiler, and his work is not treated as an artistic creation.[8] Some scholars argue that the books of the New Testament (including the Gospels) have also from the beginning been moving texts which have continually been modified in the process of editing, copying, and in making ever new translations. We do not have access to the original Greek text of the New Testament. What we do have is a standard text that is continually being revised as new manuscripts are found and earlier finds are reevaluated.

For many Christians, the notion that the New Testament is a moving text is likely to be problematic. David Brown notes that "the view that Scripture has the supreme authority within the Church [is] one of the main points of modern ecumenical consensus."[9] This is a consensus that Brown wishes to challenge in his thought-provoking book *Tradition and Imagination*. How Christians respond to this challenge will depend on where they in practice embody authority.[10] Linda Woodhead, building on Ernst Troeltsch, speaks of three ideal types of Christianity, depending on where followers embody authority: church Christianity, Biblical Christianity, and mystical Christianity.[11] For those who consider authority to be embodied in the institution of the church (many Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and mainstream Protestants would belong to this category) and for Christians of the mystical type who locate authority in their spiritual experiences (many progressive Christians would belong to this category, as would some Charismatics), the changing Biblical text need not cause a crisis of faith. But for those who locate final authority in the Biblical text, a moving text presents a serious challenge. One such group are Evangelicals. Gary Dorrien, in a rewording of George Marsden's definition, defines Evangelicalism as:

> a Christian movement that emphasizes the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of scripture, the real historical character of God's saving work recorded in scripture, salvation to eternal life based on Christ's redeeming death and resurrection, the importance of evangelism and missions, and the importance of a spiritually transformed life.[12]

Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy, London 2002, 4.

8. Bradshaw, *The Search*, 5 uses the term "living literature" to refer to "material which circulates within a community and forms a part of its heritage and tradition but which is constantly subject to revision and rewriting to reflect changing historical and cultural circumstances."

9. David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change*, Oxford 1999, 111.

10. I distinguish between where followers in practice embody authority and where the denominational leaders say the supreme authority is found.

11. Linda Woodhead, *Christianity: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2014, 57–58.

12. Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, Louisville, KY 1998.

As I discuss in the section that follows, some scholars hold that the ascription of final authority to Scripture alone is untenable in light of the fact that the Biblical text has continually been revised. I will as an intellectual experiment seek to find whether this challenge to the Scripture principle can find a coherent response from within the framework of Evangelicalism or whether the Evangelical position on the authority of Scripture must be modified or even abandoned in the name of intellectual honesty. I will take my examples from the Synoptic Gospel tradition where the notion of moving texts is especially relevant.

Parker and Brown: The Gospels Have Always Been Moving Texts

D. C. Parker has written extensively about the notable manuscript Codex Bezae which differs considerably from other New Testament manuscripts. This manuscript dates from the fifth century, but Parker believes it belongs to a textual tradition originating in the mid-second century. He asks:

> Does this remarkably free text preserve the earliest Christian attitude to the tradition? That is, does its freedom reveal that it preserves the spirit of the primitive use of Jesus' words, precisely because the letter has been altered? If that is the case, then the quest for a single authoritative text is in itself a distortion of the tradition.[13]

Parker suggests that Codex Bezae does indeed preserve the earliest Christian attitude toward its own tradition. He notes that a comparison of Hebrew manuscripts based on the Masoretic text shows that copyists were capable of making rather exact copies when that was their intention. The considerable variation between New Testament manuscripts shows that the copyists did not intend to make exact copies.[14] If true, this observation has theological repercussions. If early copyists believed that they could make changes to the text that better conveyed Christ's message to his church at a given time, why should we not be able to do so today? If the early copyists were not bound by the letter of the text, why should we be? As Parker puts it, "the definitive text is not essential to Christianity, because the presence of the Spirit is not limited to the inspiration of the written word."[15]

Building on Parker, David Brown argues that the New Testament, both in translations and in the reconstructed Greek, is and has always been a moving text.[16] This implies that even if the New Testament authors were divinely inspired, references to a pristine New Testament text that would be the ultimate

13. D. C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels*, Cambridge 1997, 202.
14. Parker, *The Living Text*, 199.
15. Parker, *The Living Text*, 211.
16. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*.

arbiter of divine will are misguided.[17] Brown notes that the words of the Biblical texts, the context in which they were heard, and their interpretation have been subject to change. Through lectionaries, members of the church have through the centuries heard Biblical texts in contexts other than the publications of which they originally were a part.[18] In Brown's view, this is nothing inherently negative, but is part of a process that accords with God's will. One might say that moving texts are necessary for a living community. In short, Brown argues, "to describe one period of the community of faith's history as revelation and the rest as mere tradition generates a contrast which cannot be sustained."[19] This conclusion is in some respects in line with a paper I wrote rejecting the doctrine of the silence of the Spirit, concluding that there are no grounds for assuming that the gift of prophecy ceased after the apostolic age.[20] But it is counter to Luther's understanding of the grounds of theology, and assumes that final authority in actuality lies with the church as an institution rather than with a fixed body of Scripture.

Brown and Parker are provocative. Their books are well argued. In some cases, I find that they overinterpret some of the key data and the premises on which they are based are not as strong as they imagine, but it is primarily the conclusions that they draw that I find faulty. I will begin answering Brown and Parker by looking at the charge that the Gospel texts were always fluid. I will focus on a few well-known examples of how Gospel texts have been modified and ask what implications this has for Evangelicals and other Christians who consider Scripture to be the ultimate source of authority.

Who May Change the Gospels?

Mark is considered to be the oldest of the Gospels. We might have expected that Mark's account of Jesus' words and deeds would have been recognized as such a holy text that no one would dare change it. But that was not the case. Manuscripts of Mark's Gospel differ on numerous points. Joanna Dewey notes that it is the Gospel with proportionately most variation.[21] While some changes are trivial copyist errors, others are clearly intentional. Evidently copyists felt free to improve on or correct the version of Mark's text that they had access to. I will not look at the variation between manuscripts of Mark's Gospel (the reader

17. James D. G. Dunn, *New Testament Theology: An Introduction*, Nashville, TN 2009, 158. See especially Parker, *The Living Text*. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 169 prefers the term "moving text."

18. Parker, *The Living Text*, 12, 95.

19. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 112.

20. Torsten Löfstedt, "The Silence of the Spirit: A Critique of the Cessationist View of the Canon", *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 89 (2013), 127–138.

21. Joanna Dewey, "The Survival of Mark's Gospel: A Good Story?", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2004), 505.

is referred to Metzger's *Textual Commentary* for a discussion of the most important variations) but will reflect on two early reworkings of Mark's material.[22]

Two copyists who take especially great freedom with Mark's text are known in church tradition (and on the titles of manuscripts) as Matthew and Luke. Scholars agree that Matthew and Luke both used Mark's Gospel as a basis for their texts. Matthew's Gospel in particular may be considered an expanded version of Mark's; approximately 90 per cent of Mark's Gospel is included in Matthew, while only about half of Mark is included in Luke.[23] Matthew and Luke evidently approached Mark's Gospel as a living text, feeling free to rework it and expand on it.[24] The written Gospel was evidently not so sacrosanct as to make it off-limits to change.

Matthew and Luke made significant changes to the Marcan text, and yet all three documents are considered inspired and authoritative by the Christian church. There are of course historical explanations for their inclusion in the canon; it was long held that Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote their accounts independently of each other; Matthew's Gospel was considered the oldest of the three. But for Evangelicals today who take findings of critical scholarship seriously, this poses a dilemma. As Brown and Parker show, just as Matthew and Luke revised Mark's text, so later copyists revised Matthew's and Luke's texts. Why do Evangelicals not consider these additions authoritative? Why do they only allow Matthew and Luke to change the Gospel text?[25]

As Brown notes, one way to justify Matthew's and Luke's revisions of Mark and to question later changes to the texts is by appealing to the Gospels as historical witnesses. In theory, later texts, including additions to the Gospels, may be just as inspired as the original texts, but they would not be as reliable as historical witnesses.[26] This is a significant difference. It is hard to underestimate the importance of historical truth for the Christian faith, even in its first century.[27] Even though Mark's aim was not purely historiographic, he does provide information about what Jesus did. He refers to several minor characters by name, including the women who found Jesus' tomb open, presumably because

22. Bruce M. Metzger (ed.), *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., Stuttgart 1994.

23. Donald A. Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction*, Grand Rapids, MI 2012, 196, 229. Cf. Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, Cambridge 1995, 8: "One might view Matthew's Gospel as a new edition of Mark with an extended introduction and a totally revised internal structure."

24. See Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 174. Contra Dwight Moody Smith, "When Did the Gospels Become Scripture?", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000), 10, who holds that this does not mean they did not consider it Scripture. As Scripture it was authoritative, but not necessarily unchangeable.

25. See Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 7.

26. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 114. I have developed this argument (which Brown rejects) in greater detail in an earlier article. Torsten Löfstedt, "In Defence of the Scripture Principle: An Evangelical Reply to A. S. Khomiakov", *Evangelical Quarterly* 83 (2011), 49–72.

27. Cf. 1 Cor. 15:17–19; 2 Pet. 1:16.

they served to vouch for the accuracy of his report.[28] Matthew and Luke similarly had some historiographic intentions; in Luke's case this is especially clear (Luke 1:1–4).

Where they differ from Mark, Matthew and Luke may well have built on eyewitness accounts. The authors of both Matthew and Luke are likely to have spoken with people who had worked with Jesus. People in the early church continued talking about what Jesus had said and done even after the first Gospel had been written down. The authors of Matthew and Luke supplemented Mark's Gospel with traditions that they judged to be historically reliable, having received them from reliable persons or trusted written sources;[29] this is at any rate what Luke implies in his preface to the Gospel (Luke 1:1–4). The fact that Matthew and Luke have independently of each other included many of the same teachings of Jesus that were not found in Mark's Gospel (the so-called Q material, which were probably largely oral traditions),[30] could also be taken to suggest that they generally used material that they believed was reliable rather than inventing traditions.

One can easily muster arguments in favor of the historical reliability of all three Synoptic Gospels. Brown argues, however, that attempts to defend the unique status of the canonical Gospels on the grounds of their status as historical witnesses do not hold. He questions the reliability of the Gospels as historical sources. He notes that even if they were written by eyewitnesses, they are not necessarily reliable, as eyewitnesses do not always understand the significance of what they see.[31] The evangelists themselves make it very clear that during his earthly career even those closest to Jesus misunderstood what he said.[32] Here it seems Brown overstates his case. Although the disciples were often confused during Jesus' ministry, it does not follow that they remained in uncomprehending darkness even after the resurrection. Their post-resurrection understanding of who Jesus was and what he had said and done was that teaching on which the Christian movement was founded and therefore has unique authority.

Brown does have a point, however. As source material for knowledge of the historical Jesus the Gospels are somewhat problematical. Critical scholars question the historicity of the visit of the magis and the flight to Egypt in Matt-

28. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Grand Rapids, MI 2006, 39–66.

29. Analyzing a quote of Papias, Bauckham concludes: "For the purpose of recording Gospel traditions in writing, Evangelists would have gone either to eyewitnesses or to the most reliable sources that had direct personal links with the eyewitnesses. Collective traditions as such would not have been the preferred source." Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 34. See also Parker, *The Living Text*, 203–204.

30. James D. G. Dunn, "Reappreciating the Oral Jesus Tradition", *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 74 (2009), 1–17.

31. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 114.

32. See for example Mark 4:10; 6:52; 7:18; 8:17; 9:32; 10:24; John 2:21–22; 12:15–16; 13:7.

hew's Gospel. They likewise question the details of Luke's birth narrative, and they note that it is quite difficult to reconcile the accounts given by Luke and Matthew.[33] In addition, Matthew and Luke take considerable liberties with the Marcan text, making stylistic changes, rearranging Mark's material, and even skipping large sections of text (e.g. the Great Omission – Luke skips Mark 6:47–8:27a). One may note in response that apart from the events surrounding the crucifixion, Mark does not seem to intend to give an exact chronology and usually no causal connection between the various events in the narrative is made. If the other evangelists rearrange these events for their purposes, truth claims are not necessarily affected.[34] Yet clearly, Matthew and Luke are not handling their source material with the care that modern historians would like.

The freedom with which Matthew and Luke treat Mark's text suggests that they considered the Gospel the property of the church, rather than something belonging to Mark. It has been noted that neither Matthew nor Mark clearly refers to themselves in the text, unlike Paul who in his letters usually makes a clear claim to authorship. This suggests that the texts were commissioned by a community.[35] Matthew's aim was not strictly historical; Clark H. Pinnock writes, "The way Matthew begins his Gospel [...] and the way he structures his book [...] sound rather 'scriptural'. It is as if he wanted his readers to regard his book as Christian Scripture."[36] Matthew was writing a text that could be used in the liturgy,[37] and he treated the Gospel that Mark had recorded as a living text that he was free to revise to better suit the needs of the church.

Historians have questioned the reliability of Matthew and Luke, but the church still uses their work with confidence, because these Gospels are more than just historical source material. In light of the fact that Christians consider the changes made by Matthew and Luke to Mark's text to have the same authority as Mark's text, even if these changes are not always historically plausible, one might ask with Brown why theologians have disdain for the Christmas stories that combine Matthew's magi and Luke's shepherds or that interpret the magi as kings. Why may these not be considered inspired compositions even if they are not historically accurate?[38] Does not the New Testament itself witness to the fact that tradition was not given once and for all, but is something that has developed in church communities over time through the guidance of the Holy

33. See Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, Oxford 1999, 36–40.

34. Hagner notes regarding Matthew, that the "deeds and words of Jesus [...] have [usually] been collected and arranged topically," and adds "seldom is there an interest in chronology." Hagner, *The New Testament*, 199–200. Also, p. 175: "It was not the purpose of Mark, nor of Matthew or Luke, to be concerned with chronology."

35. Cf. Hagner, *The New Testament*, 212: "Matthew is a 'community book', written to meet the needs of a particular readership."

36. Clark H. Pinnock & Barry L. Callen, *The Scripture Principle: Reclaiming the Full Authority of the Bible*, 3rd ed., Lexington, KY 2009, 79.

37. Thomas B. Kilpatrick and Philip Carrington separately argue that Matthew's Gospel is a kind of lectionary. Hagner, *The New Testament*, 211.

38. See Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 72–105.

Spirit? How then can Evangelicals continue to insist on the unique authority of Scripture?

Apostolic Teaching and Historical Accuracy

The Gospels have a unique role as witnesses to the historical Jesus. But it is not only in their role as witnesses to Jesus' life that these texts have a unique authority. Evangelicals (together with many other Christians) hold that they have unique authority because they were authored by men Jesus had chosen to be his apostles, or by people who worked closely with the apostles. The Synoptic Gospels relate that Jesus selected certain men to be apostles (Matt. 10:1–4; Mark 3:13–19; Luke 6:12–16). The apostles filled several functions; symbolically they correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel, for example (cf. Matt. 19:28). More significantly for the argument made here, in addition to being present when Jesus taught in public, they had been given private teaching by Jesus (cf. Mark 4:34) and were commissioned by him to spread his teaching (cf. Mark 3:14).[39] Not all apostles were writers of Scripture; the church includes in the canon writings attributed to only three of the original twelve apostles: Peter, John, and Matthew, but historically the church has taught that Mark and Luke were disciples of the apostles (Mark is said to have served as Peter's interpreter (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13),[40] while Luke worked together with Paul); thus they are considered authorized interpreters of Jesus. According to Matt. 16:18–19, Peter had been authorized to lead the church after Jesus' departure, which especially involved giving authoritative teaching.[41] Matt. 18:18 suggests that similar authority was given the other apostles. The apostles might not be perfectly accurate historians, but they had been trained by Jesus himself to interpret his words and deeds for his church, and were in a better position than later generations

39. Pinnock & Callen, *The Scripture Principle*, 75–76; Hagner, *The New Testament*, 110–113. Several scholars have studied Jesus' teaching in the light of rabbinical teaching methods and consider it likely that his disciples accurately recalled it even though it was delivered orally. See Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, Lund 1961; Birger Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition*, Peabody, MA 2001; Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community*, Stockholm 2001; Rainer Riesner, "Jesus as Preacher and Teacher", in Henry Wansbrough (ed.), *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, Sheffield 1991, 185–210.

40. See Papias 3:15. On the Papias quote, see further Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 202–239. Many other early Christian witnesses agree that Mark's Gospel was written by John Mark, who based it on Peter's preaching. W. R. Telford dismisses this evidence, reasoning that "the later church fathers were almost certainly dependent upon Papias." W. R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, Cambridge 1999, 10. But as R. T. France notes, no arguments are given in support of this assertion. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, Grand Rapids, MI 2002, 37.

41. Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher*, 245–253. On loosing and binding or locking as metaphors related to interpreting Scripture, compare Matt. 23:13 (Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher*, 249). "[Matt.] 16:17–19 portrays Peter – the foundation of the church – as the historical person through whom Jesus' teaching authority legitimately is to be extended to the rest of the disciples." Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher*, 253.

to know what Jesus had actually taught and done, and were therefore after the resurrection also in a better position to interpret his words and actions.

Historically, in determining which Gospels should be included in the canon, the criterion of apostolicity was central. Thus, the Gospels according John and Thomas both had claims to apostolicity, but Thomas' claim was rejected in part because its teaching was too unlike that of the other Gospels.[42] Apostolic authorship of the canonical Gospels has been questioned, however. Take Matthew for example. The church has traditionally taught that this Gospel was written by Jesus' disciple Matthew (Matt. 10:3), but it is strictly speaking an anonymous composition (like Mark and Luke).[43] Raymond Brown summarizes the standard critical view thus: "canonical Matt was originally written in Greek by a noneyewitness whose name is unknown to us and who depended on sources like Mark and Q."[44] The earliest reference to Matthew in connection with the authorship of the Gospels is a cryptic sentence by Papias: "And so Matthew composed the sayings in the Hebrew tongue, and each one interpreted [or: translated] them to the best of his ability."[45] Matthew's Gospel shows no sign of originally having been written in Hebrew, however. If Papias' quote says anything about this Gospel, it suggests that what we now call the Gospel of Matthew incorporates material that the apostle Matthew collected.[46] It was then redacted by someone else, perhaps a disciple of Matthew. (That can of course not be proven. Whoever he was, he was presumably well-connected and well trained, to have been given this task of writing Scripture by a church community.)

The apostolicity of other Gospels has also been questioned. While good cases for authorship by apostles or their co-workers have been made, Brown does not agree that the Gospels should be considered uniquely authoritative even if they were written by people who had studied under the earthly Jesus; "even if something is definitely shown to have been on the lips of Jesus himself, that cannot of itself establish its irreducible authority."[47] The reason he gives is that after

42. Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.25.6–7.

43. Luke does not refer to themselves by name in the text, but he does use the first person pronoun in the introduction to Luke and on occasions in Acts, thereby claiming some form of authorship. Matthew may indirectly identify himself as the author by substituting the name "Matthew" for "Levi" in the narrative about the calling of the tax collector (compare Matt. 9:9 and Mark 2:14), and by "the addition of the words 'tax collector' to the name 'Matthew' in the listing of the Twelve in 10:3." Hagner, *The New Testament*, 215.

44. Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York 1997, 210–211. Brown's italics.

45. Bart D. Ehrman (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, Cambridge, MA 2003, 103. The alternative translation is also Ehrman's.

46. Interacting with this passage, Donald Hagner concludes, "Matthew the apostle is [...] probably the source of significant portions of the Gospel." Donald Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: 33A. Matthew 1–13*, Dallas 1993, lxxvii. See also Hagner, *The New Testament*, 215–217; Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 223–224.

47. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 115. Indeed, Jesus' command to not go anywhere among the Gentiles (Matt. 10:5) is cancelled after the resurrection (Matt. 28:19).

the resurrection, the disciples came to see Jesus' teaching in a different light. This fits with what John writes in his Gospel: the disciples did not appreciate the significance of Jesus' words until after the resurrection (2:22; 12:16; 20:9). They nevertheless had an advantage over later generations in having heard those words (together with similar teaching that they did not record) and knowing the context in which they were spoken. Evangelicals can hold that even if they are not historically exact, the authors of Matthew and Luke are in a better position to understand Jesus' intensions than people of later generations, since they could consult with people who had been taught by Jesus. Thus there is good reason to value the apostolic text over an ever-changing text.

How Do Imperfect Manuscripts Affect the Scripture Principle?

In the case of most New Testament books it is not hard for Evangelicals to make good cases that they were written by apostles or by people who worked with the apostles, even though mainline scholars may fail to be convinced.[48] The criterion of apostolicity does not solve all problems for the Evangelical, however. Even if good arguments were made for the apostolic authorship of every book in the New Testament, the variation in manuscripts remains a problem for those who consider Scripture the ultimate authority. Obviously, not all variant readings represented in the manuscripts can echo the apostles or their students. How should Evangelicals deal with the fact that it is not always clear which reading is the best? And how might they handle passages that are found in the New Testament but that cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered to be of apostolic origin? A few suggestions on how to handle the reality of a changing text, incorporating advice given by Jeffrey Kloha, follow.

Rather than pretend that our Greek New Testaments are perfect reconstructions of the original autographs, it seems reasonable to admit that in some instances we are not clear on what the earliest text said. In fact, some variation may even be the work of the original authors. (To take a more modern parallel: five manuscripts of the Gettysburg address, all written by Abraham Lincoln, have been preserved; they are not identical in wording.[49]) How should Evangelicals handle ambiguous passages? In addition to always interpreting a passage in its larger textual context, interpreters of Scripture must be cautious in putting too much weight on a single reading or a single verse.[50] Kloha suggests that Evangelicals consider manuscript versions using the same categories Eu-

48. Evangelicals do not have to prove that these works are authentic. It is enough that plausible arguments for their authenticity, that take into due consideration alternative explanations, be made.

49. http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm, accessed 2018-01-22.

50. Jeffrey Kloha, "Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections on the Ongoing Revisions of the *Novum Testamentum Graece*", in Achim Behrens & Jorg Christian Salzmann (eds), *Listening to the Word of God: Exegetical Approaches*, Göttingen 2016, 204: "As a preacher, my sermon should not hinge on a difficult variant."

sebius (263–339) had to distinguish between books that people claimed to be Scripture. The texts that the church agreed were authentic were *homolegomena*; the four Gospels belong to this category. Those that the church considered to be "spurious and false," such as the Gospel of Thomas, he called *notha*. In some cases there was no consensus regarding whether a text was authentic or not; these were designated as *antilegomena*. Kloha suggests that those alternative readings where there is still no consensus regarding which one is the earliest be designated as *antilegomena*. In such cases Kloha counsels not to consider either reading "independently authoritative," but to grant them only a "secondary authority."[51] In his opinion, the church should not base doctrine solely on a variant reading whose authenticity is debatable.[52]

How should Evangelicals handle cases where it seems no extant manuscript version corresponds to the original? The use of conjectural emendations in critical editions of non-Biblical texts is normally not considered problematic, but it has been discouraged by leading New Testament scholars such as Bruce Metzger and the Alands.[53] Where scholars suspect that an individual verse is a late addition, but have no manuscript evidence in support of that hypothesis (as in the case of John 21:24–25), it seems the only responsible approach for an Evangelical is to continue to treat that verse as an integral part of the text even if critical scholars may find it stylistically odd; otherwise the critical scholar risks usurping the position of the author.

How Does Mark's Gospel End?

The ending of Mark's Gospel presents us with a related problem. The oldest manuscripts of Mark's Gospel have an ending that seems unsatisfactory to many, speaking of the fear and silence of the women at the empty tomb and not describing the promised encounter with Jesus (cf. Mark 14:28). Some scribes were content to leave the text with a seemingly inadequate ending (thus the codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus), others inserted an ending from another (now lost) Gospel text,[54] and still others composed new endings on the basis of the other Gospels and Acts, or (in the case of Codex Washingtonianus) some apocryphal text. These copyists, like Matthew and Luke, treated Mark (or at least this part of Mark) as a moving text.

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51. Kloha, "Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections", 198.

52. The example Kloha, "Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections", 198 works with is John 1:18.

53. For a discussion of a proposed emendation of a New Testament text (Acts), see Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 393–395. On the use of conjectural emendation in New Testament textual criticism, see Jan Krans, "Conjectural Emendation and the Text of the New Testament", in Bart D. Ehrman & Michael Holmes (eds), *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, Leiden 2012, 613–635.

54. "In view of the inconcinnities between verses 1–8 and 9–20, it is unlikely that the long ending was composed *ad hoc* to fill an obvious gap; it is more likely that the section was excerpted from another document, dating perhaps from the first half of the second century." Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 105.

On the basis of internal evidence, such as word choice, textual critics conclude that "the earliest ascertainable form of the Gospel of Mark ended with 16.8."[55] But is this how the Gospel originally ended? The editorial committee for the UBS Greek New Testament considers it most likely that "the Gospel accidentally lost its last leaf before it was multiplied by transcription."[56] Some assume that the ending was still extant when Matthew and Luke revised Mark, and have used these other Gospels to reconstruct the ending.[57] Parker disagrees with these scholars; in his view we have a Gospel which originally did not include a resurrection appearance.[58]

Depending on which ending of the Gospel that we read, we will have quite different understandings of Mark's message. For most of its history the teachers of the church have read Mark with a longer ending than is accepted by critical scholars today, and even though most modern Bible translations prefer the short ending of Mark, they also include (typically in brackets) one of the longer endings. Readers of course often overlook the brackets, because they know how the story is supposed to end. But if we read the text as originally ending on the note of the women's fear, "all manner of ambivalences become visible in the text."[59] We note recurring references to misunderstandings, doubt, and hesitation on the part of the disciples. In Parker's view, the first readers were in roughly the same situation as the disciples, and in these last verses of Mark's Gospel they are invited to identify themselves with the disciples in their fear as they anticipate a meeting with the risen Christ.[60] If they are consistent, those who claim to proceed from Scripture alone should follow Parker's example and read Mark as ending with verse eight, however inadequate that ending may seem. If they instead harmonize Mark with Matthew and Luke, they will be composing new Scripture, like Reynolds Price does in *Three Gospels*.[61]

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55. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 105.

56. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 105.

57. Cf. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, Grand Rapids, MI 1993, 1021 and references there.

58. Parker, *The Living Text*, 143. See also p. 144: "It cannot be believed that the evangelist knew no accounts of resurrection appearances. But, remarkably, he decided that a Gospel did not need them." Similarly Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Minneapolis, MN 2007, 801: "It was only after Matthew, Luke, and John became widely known that the ending of Mark seemed deficient." Eusebius of Caesarea affirmed that accurate copies of Mark end with "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." See further James A. Kelhoffer, "The Witness of Eusebius' *ad Marinum* and Other Christian Writings to Text-Critical Debates concerning the Original Conclusion to Mark's Gospel", *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92 (2001), 78–112.

59. Parker, *The Living Text*, 145.

60. Parker, *The Living Text*, 145

61. Reynolds Price, *Three Gospels*, New York 1996.

The Pericope of the Adulteress: An Authoritative Post-Apostolic Addition to Scripture?

In one case all serious scholars agree that a Gospel text has been modified at a late date, but churches still accept the change as canonical. This is the pericope about the adulteress (John 7:53–8:11). It is clear that this passage was not originally a part of John's Gospel, as it is not found in the older manuscripts of John and as it differs linguistically from the rest of John.[62] In one group of manuscripts (Family 13) it is included after Luke 21:38. Still, most editions of the New Testament include this text in John's Gospel, sometimes setting it off in square brackets. Modern lectionaries continue to include this text, even though its position in the canonical Gospels has been rejected by critical scholars.[63] Thus, it is still presented as a Gospel reading, even though it may not originally have been a part of any of the canonical Gospels. If Evangelicals accept this late change, why do they reject others? Kloha argues that one should in fact not accept this change. He considers it spurious (*notha*) and concludes that it "should not be used in the church's teaching and preaching."[64] To which one could respond with Parker, even if it is not used in the church's preaching, anyone who has heard the story will be affected by it, "and we cannot read or think as we would had it never existed."[65] It is a part of the personal Gospel of most Christians, whether critical scholars regard it as authentic or not.

Can the canonicity of the pericope about the adulteress be defended without changing our understanding of the Gospels as apostolic texts to seeing them as constantly moving texts? Some have suggested that this passage may have earlier been a part of the Gospel according to the Hebrews; it seems that it is this text that Eusebius refers to in *Church History* 3.39.16.[66] Another intriguing possibility is this that it was originally part of Luke. Parker notes that this passage fits linguistically and in terms of content much better after Luke 21:38 than in John, and suggests tentatively that this passage was part of an earlier version of Luke, that Luke himself removed as he revised his Gospel.[67] Church

62. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 187–189. For a critical survey of research on this passage, see Chris Keith, "Recent and Previous Research on the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7.53–8.11)", *Currents in Biblical Research* 6 (2008), 377–404.

63. Parker, *The Living Text*, 95; "Fifth Sunday of Lent", in *Lectionary for Mass*, vol. 1, Chicago 1999, 1075; "Fjärde söndagen efter trefaldighet", in *Den svenska evangelieboken*, Arlöv 1983, 276–277. This passage is, however, not used in any Sunday readings of the LCMS lectionary *The Lutheran Hymnal*. Kloha, "Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections", 203.

64. Kloha, "Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections", 202–203.

65. Parker, *The Living Text*, 102.

66. Cf. Olof Andrén's comment in his translation of Eusebius' *Church History*. *Eusebios Kyrkohistoria*, Skellefteå 1999, 117. There is also a reference to this passage in *Didascalia Apostolorum* 7.2:23.

67. Parker, *The Living Text*, 101. On the Lucan language of this passage, see Keith, "Recent and Previous Research", 380. Keith, who does not believe this passage was originally part of Luke, notes "there is no manuscript evidence of [the *Pericope Adulterae*] in Luke until the eleventh century" (p. 386).

leaders made sure that the pericope of the adulteress was included because they deemed it was of apostolic origin and it made an important theological point.[68] To them it was evidently less important into which Gospel it was inserted as long as it was preserved for posterity.[69] The integrity of John's Gospel as a historical document was less important than the preservation of a narrative about Jesus that they judged theologically sound. Although the matter is far from settled, there are grounds for arguing that the passage is of apostolic origin. I therefore consider the pericope an *antilegomenon*, rather than *notha*, contrary to Kloha. Thus, it should continue to be read in church services, but not as a part of John's Gospel, and it may continue to be used to construct doctrine, but not independently.

The Apostolic Text as an Ideal

Do Evangelicals have to modify their view of Scripture in light of the fact that the actual text of the New Testament has changed continually? I would argue that they do not have to give up on the authority of the reconstructed New Testament text, although they must keep in mind that the reconstructions are never final and that textual critics are fallible. It is true that changes occurred each time the text was copied by hand. While some were careless errors, others, as Ehrman shows, were theologically motivated,[70] and still others (e.g. Matthew and Luke, the alternate endings of Mark and the addition of the pericope of the adulteress to John) were substantial revisions of the earlier texts incorporating additional source material. This does not mean that the church has enshrined a changeable text as norm. It should be recognized that there have also been those who have tried to preserve the original apostolic texts as best as possible. This may be one reason that Mark's Gospel was canonized, even though it does not contain much that is not also found in Matthew. Parker writes, "[i]t was only with the emergence of powerful church leaders from the fourth century that standard texts began to emerge."[71] This does not mean that earlier generations valued a changeable text over having manuscripts that were as close as possible to the original documents. They might not have been aware of how many changes had been made to the text by copyists trying to be true

68. It seems that Eusebius recommends keeping this account, which he knew from the Gospel of the Hebrews. Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.39.17. For a thorough study of the reception of this passage in the early church, see Jennifer Wright Knust, "Early Christian Re-Writing and the History of the *Pericope Adulterae*", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14 (2006), 485–536.

69. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Grand Rapids, MI 1991, 333–334. This is not to say its inclusion in John was done at random. Keith shows how the pericope's inclusion in John makes narrative sense. Keith, "Recent and Previous Research", 381–383.

70. Bart D. Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*, Oxford 2011. Some of Ehrman's interpretations are answered in Tommy Wasserman, "Misquoting Manuscripts? The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture Revisited", in Magnus Zetterholm & Samuel Byrskog (eds), *The Making of Christianity: Conflicts, Contacts, and Constructions. Essays in Honor of Bengt Holmberg*, Winona Lake, IN 2012, 325–350.

71. Parker, *The Living Text*, 200.

to the original. Early Christian congregations could not afford good copyists: Holmes suggests, "well-intentioned but unsupervised and largely undisciplined amateurs, not professionals, will have been the most frequent transmitters of the text of the New Testament."[72] It was perhaps only in the fourth century that the church had the resources to train qualified copyists and to pay for their work, and only the established church had the resources to establish the original text, involving collecting several different manuscripts of the same text and evaluating their differences. Early theologians such as Origen (185–254), Eusebius, and Jerome (347–420) who had the possibility of comparing manuscripts did so, in an attempt at identifying the original reading.[73] Augustine (354–430) advises in *De Doctrina Christiana*, "[f]or those who are anxious to know the Scriptures ought in the first place to use their skill in the correction of the copies, so that the uncorrected ones should give way to the corrected."[74] He was aware that there were many errors in the manuscripts and he did not consider that in any way ideal.

Brown and Parker argue well for embracing the movable text and a continuously developing tradition as the ideal. But it is not hard to make a case for a conservative view of Scripture, one that values the actual words of the apostles higher than later developments. We can obviously not prove whether it is those who have tried to preserve (or when necessary to recreate) the original text that were led by the Spirit, or those who have intentionally incorporated new readings and interpretations into the text. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the church was developed in a Jewish context, according to which God spoke to his people primarily through covenant Scriptures. As Pinnock argues, given the cultural context "it was natural for the early Christians to receive new covenant scriptures in much the same way."[75] Early Christians apparently shared the rabbinical attitude of the inviolability of Scripture. As Childs notes, "the lack of Christian redactional activity on the Old Testament" is striking.[76] A central question with regard to this is how soon the Gospels came to be treated as Scripture. Holmes notes that on a "macrolevel" the Gospels and Acts are quite stable. With the notable exceptions of the alternative endings in Mark and the pericope of the adulteress in John, almost all manuscripts of the Gospels consist of the same pericopes in the same order; the variation that is found

72. Quoted in Parker, *The Living Text*, 120.

73. Cf. Parker, *The Living Text*, 24; Kloha, "Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections", 197. It must be admitted that they were not always as strict as we might wish; regarding other contradictory advice Eusebius gave regarding how to handle the ending of Mark's Gospel, see Kelhoffer, "The Witness".

74. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, II.14/21, also quoted in Kloha, "Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections", 180.

75. Pinnock & Callen, *The Scripture Principle*, 42. One could also cite various scriptural passages in support of an unchanging Scripture (e.g. Isa. 40:8, Matt. 24:35, John 10:35), but such passages are themselves originally additions to what had earlier been considered Scripture.

76. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible*, Minneapolis, MN 1992, 75.

is primarily on verse level.[77] Manuscripts of other texts (including various pseudepigrapha) show much greater variation in content. Matthew and Luke were not considered mere copies of Mark that could be endlessly expanded on, but authoritative works of their own right. Holmes grants that on the level of verses and individual words it can be hard to distinguish the work of Matthew and Luke from the work of common scribes. He continues:

> On the macrolevel, however, the differences between authors and scribes are clear. Authors wrote new beginnings that clearly distinguished their work from that of others, rearranged the sequence and grouping of individual sayings in distinctive ways, moved episodes forward or back in the narrative, and composed distinctive ways of ending their version. Scribes did not.[78]

Holmes concludes that contrary to what Parker claims, the Gospels are the kind of texts that do have originals. Attempts at reconstructing the "earliest transmitted form" of the Gospel text are in his view "theoretically justifiable."[79] It is not unreasonable to expect that there have always been church leaders who strived to preserve and transmit the writings of the apostles in as uncorrupted a form as possible. While we cannot prove that the earliest reconstructable text is the same as what the original author wrote, it is not unreasonable for Evangelicals to assume that this is the case. ▲

SUMMARY

Some scholars hold that the ascription of final authority to scripture alone is untenable in light of the fact that the Biblical text has continually been revised. I seek to find whether this challenge to the Scripture principle can find a coherent response from within the framework of Evangelicalism. I discuss some significant textual modifications in the Synoptic Gospel tradition that challenge the Evangelical position. I conclude that the Gospels are the kind of texts that do have originals and that attempts at reconstructing the text are justified. While we cannot prove that the earliest reconstructable text is the same as what the original author wrote, it is not unreasonable for Evangelicals to assume that this is the case.

77. Holmes, "From 'Original Text'", 672–674.
78. Holmes, "From 'Original Text'", 676.
79. Holmes, "From 'Original Text'", 677.