

“I can think of no one in the world better qualified to write a defense of biblical inerrancy than my lifelong friend Vern Poythress. Serious Bible readers all recognize that there are differences between accounts of the same events in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and no responsible reader can simply sweep these differences under the rug. But can all of the accounts still be reconciled with a belief in biblical inerrancy? In this book, Poythress provides an outstanding resource that carefully analyzes every important Gospel passage where an inconsistency or a contradiction has been alleged. He draws on the rich resources of centuries of church history and his own remarkable wisdom in analyzing human linguistic communication to provide a sure-footed, thoughtful, humble, and even spiritually challenging guide to these key passages. This is the best book I know of for dealing with Gospel difficulties. It is profoundly wise, insightful, and clearly written, and it will surely strengthen every reader’s confidence in the trustworthiness of the Bible as the very words of God.”

Wayne Grudem, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies,
Phoenix Seminary

“Shall we defend biblical inerrancy with arguments that are naïve and unconvincing? Or shall we assume that discrepancies among the Gospels cannot be resolved? Vern Poythress shows us that we need not make such a choice. Clear, convincing, accessible, and practical, *Inerrancy and the Gospels* is everything we need in a book on this topic. While sharpening readers’ skill at harmonization, Poythress also develops a thoughtful, God-honoring foundation for addressing Gospel difficulties and the spiritual challenges that accompany them. I want every student, every pastor, and every skeptic I know to read this book—and recommend it to their friends.”

C. D. “Jimmy” Agan III, Associate Professor of New Testament,
Director of the Homiletics Program, Covenant Theological Seminary

“When Vern Poythress has chosen to write on a particular subject, the resulting book has always been (in my memory) the best book on that subject. This one is about the inerrancy of Scripture, dealing particularly with problems in the Gospel narratives, and I know of nothing better in the field. It is fully cogent, very helpful, linguistically sophisticated, and, above all, faithful to the Scriptures as the word of God.”

John M. Frame, J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy,
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida

“It is all too common today to bemoan harmonization, but there is value in pursuing the real possibility that differences in the Gospels can and should be seen as complementing one another in their presentation of truth. Vern Poythress’s *Inerrancy and the Gospels* uses a self-authenticating approach to Scripture to argue that harmonization does give insight in how the Gospels work. This is a study well worth reading and considering, regardless of whether one accepts the self-authenticating model or not.”

Darrell L. Bock, Executive Director of Cultural Engagement, Center for
Christian Leadership; Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies,
Dallas Theological Seminary

“Vern Poythress has the unique ability to make a complex subject understandable to anyone. In this book he tackles head-on the age-old issue of how to harmonize the four Gospels. In so doing, he helps us understand how they should be not only harmonized, but also appreciated for their unique and vital witness to the truths of the person and work of our incarnate Savior. This is an excellent introduction to the study of the Gospels.”

S. M. Baugh, Professor of New Testament, Westminster Seminary California

“Vern Poythress’s *Inerrancy and the Gospels* is of perennial value, but is especially timely given both the popularization of critical theories about the Gospels and the migration of some scholars from evangelical to critical approaches. He exemplifies his forebear Ned Stonehouse’s engagement with critical scholarship by not only playing defense, but also gleaned positive insights from synoptic comparisons. The hermeneutical principles that he articulates are in keeping with Scripture’s self-authenticating character and demonstrate a knowledge of contemporary developments in hermeneutics. The examples he uses to illustrate those principles are varied while including the typically most challenging harmonizations. Scholars and pastors alike who wish to understand and proclaim the unity and variety of the Evangelists’ witness will want to thoroughly digest what Dr. Poythress provides here.”

Michael J. Glodo, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies,
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida

“Let’s be honest. Bible-believing Christians sometimes struggle to understand apparent discrepancies in the Gospels. Poythress’s book *Inerrancy and the Gospels* is now on the top of my list to recommend to students who are seeking a biblically faithful resource on this issue. It is up-to-date, balanced, and historically informed. I plan to adopt *Inerrancy and the Gospels* as a required textbook for my New Testament survey course.”

Robert L. Plummer, Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In this work, Vern Poythress, one of evangelicalism’s leading proponents and defenders of inerrancy, traverses the difficult terrain of Gospel harmonization. With theological acumen and exegetical sensitivity, Poythress equips the reader with the categories, distinctions, and reading strategies needed to study the Gospels in the way that God has intended. The result is magnificent—Poythress shows us how a proper understanding of harmonization enhances our appreciation of the rich unity and diversity of the Gospels. I warmly commend this work to students, pastors, and scholars alike.”

Guy Prentiss Waters, Professor of New Testament,
Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi

INERRANCY
AND
THE GOSPELS

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PART ONE

THE CHALLENGE
OF HARMONIZATION

1

DIFFICULTIES IN THE GOSPELS

In the centuries after the Bible was written, the church recognized that it was the word of God and treated its contents as trustworthy.¹ But in modern times some people have come to question that conviction. Moreover, there are difficulties in some of the details in the Bible. For example, comparisons between accounts in the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, turn up a large number of differences, some of which are easy to appreciate positively, but others more difficult. In this book we are going to look at a sampling of these difficulties, with the goal of treating them in harmony with the conviction that the Bible is God's word.

We are looking at this topic partly because we can often learn more from the Bible if we consider difficulties carefully and do not merely skirt around them. But we will also try to lay out some principles for dealing with difficulties. Other books have considered the broad question of the historical reliability of the Gospels.² Still other books have discussed the general issue of the authority of the Bible, and some of these books have done a very good job indeed.³

¹See, for example, John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982). The Jewish recognition that the Old Testament was the word of God laid the foundation for Christians' understanding of the Old and New Testaments together.

²On defending historical reliability, see chap. 11 below.

³I think of Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (repr., Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967); Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration*, with introduction by Roger R. Nicole (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, 3rd ed., ed. N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Philadelphia:

The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible

Without re-covering the ground of these books, we may briefly summarize the teaching of the Bible on the subject of inspiration.⁴ The Bible is the word of God, God's speech in written form. What the Bible says, God says. Two classic texts summarize the meaning of inspiration.

All Scripture is *breathed out by God* and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men *spoke from God* as they were *carried along by the Holy Spirit*. (2 Pet. 1:21)

In addition, Jesus testifies to the authority of the Old Testament in his explicit statements, in the ways that he quotes from and uses it, and in the way that he understands his own life as the fulfillment of it.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, *not an iota, not a dot*, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matt. 5:17–18)

Scripture cannot be broken. (John 10:35)

Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should *the Scriptures* be fulfilled, that *it must be so*? (Matt. 26:53)

If we claim to be followers of Christ, we should submit to his teaching.

Many aspects of Scripture testify to its divine origin. But it is through the Holy Spirit working inwardly in the heart that people become fully convinced that it is the word of God.⁵

Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967); Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *God's Word in Servant-Form: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck on the Doctrine of Scripture* (Jackson, MS: Reformed Academic, 2008); Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority*; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 353–494; D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010). Readers should also note the principal qualifications with respect to presuppositions and method in Cornelius Van Til's "Introduction" to the 1967 edition of Warfield, *Inspiration*, 3–68.

⁴See also the summary in John Murray, "The Attestation of Scripture," in *The Infallible Word*, 1–54.

⁵"We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverend esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire

Dealing with Difficulties

When we have become convinced that the Bible is God's word, we can consider the implications. We can ask, How should we proceed in particular cases of difficulty when we come to the Bible with the conviction that it is God's speech to us?

My primary challenge in accomplishing this task is myself. I am a finite, fallible human being. I am also affected by remaining sin. And sin affects biblical interpretation. So I cannot be an ideal example. Of course, neither can anyone else subsequent to the apostles. God designed the church, the people of God, to work together. We strive together, "with all the *saints*," to comprehend "what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:18). We help one another. In particular, any contribution I may make builds on the insights of others before me. And if I do a good job, my contribution becomes in turn a source of help for others after me. So you must understand that this book represents part of a path toward a future fullness of knowledge, when we will know God "even as [we] have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

Foundations

Because I am building on what others have done, I will not repeat the work of other people who have argued for the authority of the Bible as the word of God. Nor will we revisit the issues covered in my earlier book *Inerrancy and Worldview*.⁶ There I indicate ways in which an understanding and acceptance of the biblical worldview contributes to understanding the Bible positively and honoring its authority.

If we reckon with the fact that God is personal and that he rules the world personally, we have a *personalistic* worldview that has notable contrasts with the *impersonalism* that characterizes a lot of modern thinking.⁷ The robust personalism of the Bible helps to dissolve some difficulties that trouble

perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts" (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5).

⁶Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

⁷We may note that the personal God of the Bible is distinct from spirits and gods postulated in other religions. Animistic religion believes in many personal spiritual beings. But since it does not acknowledge one personal Creator, the deepest roots for the world still end up being impersonal. Islam believes in one Allah, but its adherents follow rules without having a personal relationship to him. So even a monotheistic religion can be characterized by an impersonalistic atmosphere in practice.

modern people if they read the Bible against the background of modern impersonalism. This contrast between personalism and impersonalism is important when we deal with the Gospels. I will draw on the contrast when necessary, but will not repeat in detail the reasoning in the earlier book.

In addition, both this book and *Inerrancy and Worldview* rely on a broader understanding of God, science, language, history, and society, an understanding informed by the Bible and at odds with modern thinking.⁸ When we take biblical teaching seriously, it certainly leads to a revised approach to how we understand the Bible. But it also leads us to revise how we analyze virtually all modern ideas, including ideas about meaning and interpretation. We will draw on this understanding when needed, without reviewing the entire territory.

⁸See Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999); Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009); Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

I cannot within this book enter into extended discussion of modern critical approaches to the Bible. I offer only the following summary: we should practice humility and self-critical awareness about our assumptions; we should take seriously the fallibility of human sources outside the Bible. But we should not endorse modernity. One of the points in my books is that a whole spectrum of assumptions and interpretive frameworks belong to the modern world, and that critical interpreters within our modern situation are not nearly critical enough of these frameworks. They cannot be, because they have no solid place to stand from which to engage in criticism. They have not been willing to accept the Bible as a secure guide on the basis of which they can sift through the good and bad in the world of ideas.

2

AN EXAMPLE: THE CENTURION'S SERVANT

We begin with an example. Matthew 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10 contain accounts about Jesus's healing a centurion's servant. How do we deal with the differences? Here are the two accounts,¹ side by side:

Matthew 8:5–13	Luke 7:1–10
<p>⁵When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, ⁶"Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly."</p>	<p>¹After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ²Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. ³When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to</p>

¹In this book I use the English Standard Version (ESV). If we use the original Greek text, we can now and then see further small similarities and differences not fully visible in English. But many of the most important differences come through well enough in English. So, for simplicity, we will customarily use English. I will refer directly to the original languages only at times when a significant extra feature needs to be noticed.

John 4:46–54 has an account of healing at a distance, showing some similarities to the accounts in Matthew and Luke. But it concerns an official's "son," which indicates that it is a different event from the one narrated in Matthew and Luke (Luke 7:2 has "servant, slave," [Greek *doulos*], which contrasts with being a son; see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 312).

Matthew 8:5–13	Luke 7:1–10
<p>⁷ And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.”</p> <p>⁸ But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof,</p> <p>but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.</p> <p>⁹ For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”</p> <p>¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.</p> <p>¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹² while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹³ And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.”</p> <p>And the servant was healed at that very moment.</p>	<p>have you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.”</p> <p>⁶ And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.</p> <p>⁷ Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed.</p> <p>⁸ For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”</p> <p>⁹ When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”</p> <p>¹⁰ And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.</p>

The most notable difference between the two accounts lies in the role of the “elders of the Jews” and the centurion’s “friends” in Luke 7. There the elders and the friends serve as intermediaries; Luke does not indicate that the centurion meets Jesus face to face. By contrast, in Matthew 8 there is no mention of intermediaries. What do we say about this difference?

The Possibility of Multiple Events

In any case that deals with parallel passages we have to ask whether they recount the same incident or two different incidents. In this case there are many similarities between the two accounts. The centurion’s speech given in Matthew 8:9 is almost identical to Luke 7:8. We can safely conclude that we are dealing with two accounts of one event. So there is a genuine difficulty.

A Solution by Several Stages of Events

We can profit from the insights of previous generations. Consider one solution that has been offered. Norval Geldenhuys and others have put forward the idea that there were several stages in the encounter between Jesus and the centurion.² The centurion first sent elders of the Jews (Luke 7:3–5), then sent friends (Luke 7:6–8), then came in person and repeated some of what had been said earlier (Matt. 8:5–9). Geldenhuys gives this explanation:

When we bear in mind the parallel account in Matthew viii. 5–13, we must picture to ourselves that after the centurion had sent his friends to Jesus he also went to Him himself. Owing to the seriousness of the circumstances and his inner urge to go to Jesus himself, notwithstanding his feeling of unworthiness, he overcame his initial hesitation. Luke emphasises the fact that the centurion sent friends, while Matthew only states that the centurion went to Jesus. And so the two Gospels supplement each other.³

This possibility results in a clean explanation in which Matthew and Luke each mention a complementary portion of the total interaction. Such an explanation is customarily called a *harmonization*, because it attempts to show that the two passages are in harmony.

Geldenhuys recognizes that there is still a minor difficulty. In Luke, the centurion states explicitly that he is unworthy (7:6), and that is why he has sent others instead: “Therefore I did not presume to come to you” (7:7). Yet, according to Geldenhuys, the centurion nevertheless changed his mind and *did* come in the end for a face-to-face meeting. On the surface, his coming in person appears to be in tension with his expressed plan *not* to come. But Geldenhuys supplies possible motivations by reminding us of the “seriousness of the circumstances,” by postulating an “inner urge” to come to Jesus, and by labeling his original attitude “initial hesitation” rather than a firm resolve not to come because of his unworthiness. Is all this possible? It is. Human motivations and decision making are complex and often include some wavering or change of mind.

Geldenhuys's picture of the events also results in a certain notable repetition. In Luke 7:6–8 the friends give a speech expressing the centurion's request and his reasoning about authority. The same speech occurs in Matthew 8:8–9, using almost identical words. Geldenhuys's reconstruction interprets these accounts as records of two distinct speeches, one by the friends and one by the centurion in person. This too is possible since the friends were sent

²Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 220; likewise Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 322.

³Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 220.

by the centurion, and the centurion told them what to say. In Geldenhuy's picture of the event, the centurion repeated in person what he had said to his friends earlier. We may ask why the centurion thought he had to repeat his speech, since his friends had already delivered it. But human motivations are complex. Particularly in a situation of distress, such as the emotional turmoil the centurion experienced, he might in spite of himself repeat what he knew had already been said.

So Geldenhuy's reconstruction of the events is possible. Is it the only possibility? Augustine and Calvin have offered another explanation.

Representatives Acting on Behalf of the Centurion

Saint Augustine in about AD 400 wrote *The Harmony of the Gospels*, in which he discussed a large number of difficulties.⁴ He believed that the Gospels have divine authority,⁵ and he consistently tried to show that the differences between the Gospels were not due to error but exhibited harmony. His work has formed the background for many later attempts.⁶ When comparing Matthew 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10, Augustine explains:

How can Matthew's statement that there "came to Him a certain centurion," be correct, seeing that the man did not come in person, but sent his friends? The apparent discrepancy, however, will disappear if we look carefully into the matter, and observe that Matthew has simply held by a very familiar mode of expression. . . . This [the practice of using a representative or intermediary], indeed, is a custom which has so thoroughly established itself, that even in the language of every-day life . . . [we call men] *Perventores* who . . . get at the inaccessible ears, as one may say, of any of the men of influence, by the intervention of suitable personages. If, therefore access [to another person's presence] itself is thus familiarly [in everyday speech] said to be gained by the means of other parties, how much more may an approach be said to take place, although it be by means of others.⁷

John Calvin offers a similar explanation:

Those who think that Matthew and Luke give different narratives, are led into a mistake by a mere trifle. The only difference in the words is, that Matthew

⁴Augustine, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, in vol. 6 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 65–236. Augustine's text is hereafter cited in *NPNF1* by book, chapter, and paragraph.

⁵*Ibid.*, 2.12.28: "that word of God which abides eternal and unchangeable . . . the most exalted height of authority"; see also elsewhere throughout the work.

⁶See, for example, M. B. Riddle, introduction to Augustine, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, 67–70.

⁷Augustine, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, 2.20.49.

says that *the centurion came to him*, while Luke says that he sent some of the Jews to plead in his name. But there is no impropriety in Matthew saying, that the centurion did what was done in his name and at his request. There is such a perfect agreement between the two Evangelists in all the circumstances, that it is absurd to make two miracles instead of one.⁸

A more recent scholar, R. T. France, writes as follows:

His [Matthew's] omission of the *means* of the centurion's approach to Jesus is a valid literary device to highlight the message of the incident as he sees it (on the principle, common in biblical and contemporary literature, that a messenger or servant represents the one who sent him to the point of virtual identity).⁹

As a further illustration of the principle, Craig Blomberg points to Matthew 27:26 and Mark 15:15.¹⁰ Both verses report that Pilate scourged Jesus; but, given the social and military protocol of the Roman world, Pilate would not have taken up the scourge in his own hands. The verses mean that Roman soldiers would have physically handled the scourge, acting on Pilate's orders. That is to say, the Roman soldiers represented Pilate because they acted under his authority. Pilate *did* scourge Jesus, though he did not do it "in person" but through representatives acting on his behalf. Likewise, the centurion really *did* address Jesus, but he did it by means of persons acting under his authority and on his behalf—the elders and friends represented him.

Is such a reconstruction of the events possible? According to Augustine and Calvin, it is. In fact, they obviously prefer it to a more elaborate reconstruction such as Geldenhuys offered. They regard their simpler reconstruction as more likely. Both Augustine and Calvin are vigorous defenders of the divine authority of the Bible. They express no doubts about the accounts being truthful and correct. Rather, they show that they assume each account to be true when they undertake to give an explanation that harmonizes the two. The main difference they have in comparison with Geldenhuys is that they consider the possibility that the centurion acted through representatives.

Though Augustine and Calvin think that their reconstruction is likely, it is still tentative. So is the reconstruction by Geldenhuys. We have the accounts in Matthew and Luke, which are inspired by God. They are what God says and are therefore trustworthy. That is the conviction we have and the basis on which we work. But we do not have a third account, also inspired, to tell

⁸John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 3 vols., trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 1:378.

⁹Richard T. France, "Inerrancy and New Testament Exegesis," *Themelios* 1 (1975): 17.

¹⁰Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 176.

us exactly how the original two accounts fit together. We make our own reasoned guesses, but they are fallible. We do not have complete information. Our reconstruction, though it may be plausible, is subordinate to the Gospel accounts as we have them.

Positive Role of Differences

We can also ask what positive contribution each Gospel record makes in its distinctiveness. The Gospel of Matthew offers a simpler account in some ways. It does not require the additional linguistic complexity that arises when an account makes explicit the roles of the elders of the Jews and the friends that the centurion sends. For example, the material in Luke 7:3–5 about the Jewish elders does not need to be present in Matthew's version, and Luke 7:6, which mentions the friends, finds a simpler analogue in Matthew 8:7. The statement in Luke 7:7, "Therefore I did not presume to come to you," is also not in Matthew. By omitting some details, Matthew puts greater concentration on the main point: Jesus has power to heal at a distance, merely by speaking a word.

Though Matthew's account is shorter, it does contain one significant piece that does not occur in Luke, namely Matthew 8:11–12: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." A similar saying occurs in Luke 13:28–30, in the context of a different episode.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.

In both passages Jesus warns hearers about religious presumption. In Matthew 8:5–13 the centurion's faith contrasts with the lack of faith within Israel (8:10). This contrast makes it appropriate for Jesus to warn Israelites not to presume on enjoying messianic salvation merely because they are Israelites, apart from faith on their part. Similarly, Luke 13:22–30 warns Israelites not to depend on the mere fact that Jesus ministered among them (13:26) or that they see themselves as heirs of the patriarchs (13:28).¹¹

¹¹Thus, I see the parallels between Matt. 8:11–12 and Luke 13:28–30 as due to the fact that Jesus said similar things in similar circumstances. We leave this issue to one side in order to concentrate on the more notable difficulty, which has to do with the relation between Matt. 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10.

Matthew shows repeated concern for the unique role of the Jews and the issue of Jewish rejection of Jesus. Matthew alone has the expression “sons of the kingdom”: “the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness” (Matt. 8:12). These “sons of the kingdom” are Jews who are resisting his ministry. They have the privilege of having a certain nearness to “the kingdom,” that is the kingdom of God, and yet, tragically, they “will be thrown into the outer darkness.” Matthew alone includes the pointed threat, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits” (Matt. 21:43). Matthew, more than the other Gospels, emphasizes the Jewishness of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–17). Twice Jesus emphasizes his ministry “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:6; 15:24). But Jews who presume on their heritage are in danger of being left out.¹²

This theme is important to Matthew. It comes out pointedly in our first passage, Matthew 8:5–13, because Jesus commends the centurion for his faith and contrasts this commendation with the failure in Israel: “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith” (Matt. 8:10). The centurion was a Roman soldier, not a Jew. His Gentile character comes more starkly to the foreground in that Matthew does not mention “elders of the Jews” as intermediaries.

Luke, by contrast, explicitly mentions the Jewish intermediaries. The intervention of the intermediaries is not the final reason why Jesus answers the centurion's request. It is the centurion's faith, not the merit of the Jews, that leads to blessing (Luke 7:9). But Jews who wanted to rely on their privileges might nevertheless be tempted to overlook this point and take refuge in the special role that the centurion appears to create for them. The passage in Matthew helps to remove this mistaken notion. All in all, Luke and Matthew do not disagree in substance about the role of the centurion's faith or the role of Jewish religious privileges. They do differ in *emphasis*. And that difference in emphasis has practical value when Matthew is addressing a Jewish sense of privilege.

Now let us turn to Luke. What kind of emphasis do we find when we read the account in Luke? Like Matthew, Luke makes the point that Jesus has the power to heal at a distance. In addition, the fact that the centurion is a Gentile still comes out in Luke 7:9. The Gospel of Luke as a whole, together with Acts, has a theological interest in the theme that salvation is going out to the nations (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). This theme is confirmed when we see Jesus ministering to the centurion. Matthew and Luke agree in this respect.

But does Luke have, in addition, some distinctive emphasis? By mentioning the Jewish elders, Luke makes plainer the centurion's humility. The elders say prominently, “He is *worthy* to have you do this for him” (7:4). The centurion himself, by contrast, states plainly that he is “not worthy” (7:6). That is, he

¹²See France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 310–11.

means that he is not worthy of having Jesus perform a healing for him, which is why he sent the elders of the Jews, whom he considers more worthy than himself. And in addition, he is not even “worthy to have you come under my roof” (7:6)! “Therefore,” he says, “I did not presume to come to you” (7:7), which again expresses his humility.

The Gospel of Luke has humility as a theme. “He [the Lord] has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Luke 1:52). “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14; see 14:11). Luke devotes attention to social outcasts and marginalized people: women, the poor, the sick, tax collectors, Gentiles (Luke 4:18; 7:21–23). Luke 7:1–10, by explicitly including the role of the intermediaries and by including the contrast between “worthy” (7:4) and “not worthy” (7:6), has highlighted the theme of humility and of Jesus’s mercy to the “unworthy.”

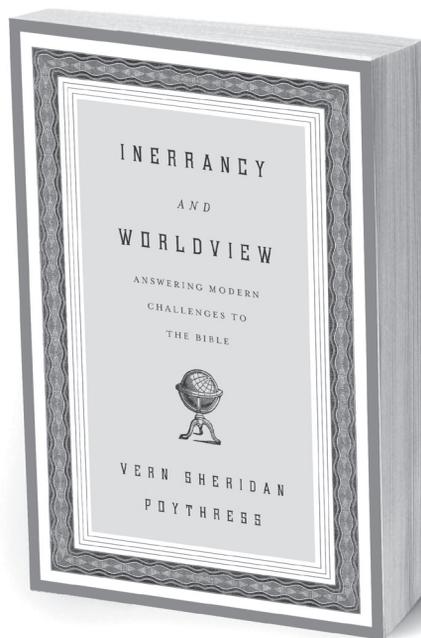
In addition, Luke indicates that Jesus’s compassion extends even to people who are not directly present in front of him. He takes the trouble to answer a request from someone whom he has never met face to face.

In sum, Matthew and Luke have distinctive emphases; Matthew emphasizes the centurion’s *Gentile* status, and Luke emphasizes his *humility*. Both of these emphases say something significant about the kingdom of God and Jesus’s ministry. First, the kingdom of God will include Gentiles and all who come to Jesus in faith. Jews who do not trust in Jesus are excluded. Second, those who enter the kingdom must come in humility, recognizing that they do not deserve the benefits that God offers.

Both emphases are valid. Both are actually exemplified in the incident with the centurion’s servant. In fact, at a deep level the two emphases imply one another. If God welcomes the humble, it implies that people do not receive God’s kingdom and his salvation because of their supposed qualifications or worthiness. Therefore, Jews cannot depend on their privileged religious position. Conversely, if Jews do not enter the kingdom of God on the basis of their religious privileges, it implies that not only they but everyone else must enter in humility. In coming to God, no one may take pride in himself or his alleged worthiness; everyone must humble himself.

It is worthwhile to think about how the two emphases harmonize in the two accounts of the same episode. It is important that we respect the trustworthy character of the Gospels. But it is also valuable to acknowledge their distinctiveness. We are richer by having the two Gospels draw attention to distinct aspects of the meaning of the events and the meaning of the kingdom of God. We can appreciate what God is doing more deeply than if we just had one account, or if we just paid attention to our reconstructed idea of the events and not to the Gospels’ distinctive ways of explaining the events.

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