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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>⁷And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.”</p> <p>⁸But 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>⁹For 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>¹⁰When 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>¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹²while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹³And 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>⁶And 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>⁷Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed.</p> <p>⁸For 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>⁹When 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>¹⁰And 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.