

## HISTORICAL CRITICISM: A BRIEF RESPONSE TO ROBERT THOMAS'S "OTHER VIEW"

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Thomas's basic thesis has merit: the view that the Gospel writers wrote independently from one another should be taken much more seriously than it has of late, and evangelicals should be careful to make certain that when using the techniques of historical criticism they don't fall prey to the non-historical presuppositions of the higher critics. The problem is that the article characteristically overstates its position and is presented in a polemical style that does not invite dialogue. Thomas's position seems clear—all of us who use form or redaction criticism in any sense or who hold either to Markan or Matthean priority are *de facto* denying the historicity of the Gospels. Several of us—including more than one past and future president of the society—must take issue with these charges. So let me respond by interacting with the article one point at a time.

It is true that the independence view predominated for 1700 years. It is also true that many like Thiessen and Tenney in this century have accepted that view. But we do not determine whether a view is right or wrong by how long it is held, nor by naming people who champion it. A position is decided on the basis of its merits, by comparing its strengths and weaknesses with the arguments advocated by opposing scholars. No issue or doctrine is held on the basis of longevity. If that were the case, Dr. Thomas could no longer be a dispensationalist, since that position is only 170 years old. It is the view of many evangelicals, including myself, that the data itself favors a literary dependence view. Arguments for the superiority of the independence view must proceed on that basis rather than an *a priori* assumption that dependence must of necessity deny historicity.

Thomas's recitation of the "recent debate" (pp. 99–100) is also highly suspect. What is missing in his potted survey is the acknowledgment that after 1985 there was a markedly different tone in ETS regarding the viability of an evangelical using the critical tools from within a framework of inerrancy. In the fourteen years until *The Jesus Crisis* appeared, there were no attacks on the orthodoxy of evangelical redaction critics. To me this is the most troubling aspect of the book. Is a new period of inquisition being established in which the criteria of heterodoxy are set by one group of scholars? It is one thing to disagree regarding literary dependence and the use of critical tools; it is quite another thing to declare that such positions entail a denial of the historicity of the material.

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There are several other questions that must be raised. When I discussed the impossibility of harmonizing the Synoptics with John, he argued that I was “assuming non-historicity” (p. 100). On what ground? My whole discussion was of the chronology of Jesus’ life, not of the reliability of the four Gospels. On the basis of John’s three passovers (2:13; 6:4; 12:1) one could posit a two-year ministry, but in the Synoptics it seems there is a one-year ministry (one passover and one trip to Jerusalem). In truth there is no purely chronological arrangement in any of the Gospels. This does not mean there is no chronology, just that no Gospel writer organized his material on the basis of a week one/week two or month one/month two pattern. A “footsteps of Jesus” approach is highly speculative and virtually impossible because we cannot know with any degree of certainty how to organize all the stories into a Tatian-like chronology. Let us consider just Matthew 8–9 in such a harmony: 8:1–4 = Mark 1:40–45; 8:5–13 = Luke 7:1–10; 8:14–17 = Mark 1:29–34/Luke 4:38–41; 8:18–22 = Luke 9:57–62; 8:23–27 = Mark 4:35–41/Luke 8:22–25; 8:28–34 = Mark 5:1–20/Luke 8:26–39; 9:1–17 = Mark 2:1–22/Luke 5:17–39; 9:18–26 = Mark 5:21–43/Luke 8:40–56; 9:27–31 = Mark 10:46–52/Luke 18:35–43; 9:35–38 (only in Matthew). It is very difficult to make a case that all these are different events; but when you note how different the order is in the three Gospels (e.g. 8:1–4, 14–17 reverses the order of Mark), it is difficult to make a case for a chronological framework. Thomas argues that there is “a close chronological agreement between” Mark and Luke here (p. 105), but that is true only in part. Mark and Luke disagree frequently, as any synopsis will demonstrate (e.g. Luke places the “fishers of men” [5:1–11] and the Beelzebub controversy [11:14–23] in quite different places). The Gospels do not attempt rigid chronological sequence; that is a modern historiographical demand. Historical errors are not involved here because the Gospel writers did not *intend* to organize their material on the basis of strict chronological order.

We can and should harmonize the Gospels,<sup>1</sup> and the purpose is always to support rather than erode a high view of the historicity of the Gospels. There is certainly a difference between traditional harmonization and redactional harmonization, but I agree with Blomberg<sup>2</sup> against Thomas (pp. 104–105) that both are legitimate and must be used properly to settle seeming conflicts between passages. To limit all harmonizing to only one makes the task of demonstrating historical veracity all the more difficult. Evangelical higher critics have always been at the forefront of attempts to support the historical veracity of the Gospels, as in the *Gospel Perspectives* series by Tyndale Fellowship, Craig Blomberg’s *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, or the current multi-year project on the historicity of the Gospels by the Institute of Biblical Research. So when Thomas assumes that I support “non-harmonization and hence non-historicity” (p. 100), he is simply wrong. I do

<sup>1</sup> See the excellent article by Craig Blomberg, “The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 135–174.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 161.

indeed believe there were several trips to Jerusalem as stated by John, but the Synoptics omit the others because they were not giving a chronological portrait. Once more, the key to an evangelical use of the two-source theory is that the Holy Spirit guided the use of Mark and other sources by Matthew and Luke.

Moreover, I have no problem believing that Jesus was an “itinerant preacher” who gave the same teaching on more than one occasion. So the long and short forms of the Lord’s prayer in Matthew 6 and Luke 11 could have been given on different occasions. My problem lies in using that possibility to answer *all* differences. I believe that there were two cleansings of the temple but that the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6 were delivered by Jesus on the same occasion (the Greek term for “plain” means a plateau on a mountain). Eyewitness reports do not mean identical accounts, for each evangelist under the leading of the Spirit was free to select and highlight different aspects of the same account. Redactional changes do not constitute a lower degree of historical accuracy, for they emphasize aspects that Jesus really did do and say, but from the standpoint of the evangelists’ inspired choices. Thus the evangelists are not in any sense “creating new material,” for every nuance reflects the original situation. I believe Jesus did utter the exception clause in Matt 5:32, 19:9. The Great Commission was Matthew’s faithful summary of what Jesus actually said in his resurrection message to the disciples. Thomas is wrong to interpret my view otherwise.

Professor Thomas’s arguments in favor of the independence view (pp. 103–104) are the best part of the article. This is the tone that should predominate. He certainly demonstrates the viability of the independence view. I am not convinced, but I am impressed. The agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark are more frequently used for Matthean priority than for the independence view, but they must be taken seriously. His so-called “random combination of agreements and disagreements” (pp. 103–104) is not really correct. They are not truly random but fit a pattern that demonstrates, I believe, Markan priority.<sup>3</sup> The idea that “let the reader understand” in Mark 13:14 = Matt 24:15 is a side comment by Mark is hardly an “oversight” (p. 104) but is an exegetical decision that can go either way (scholars are equally divided).<sup>4</sup> Thomas is a little too certain of his own views. In fact, this is one of the basic problems with *The Jesus Crisis*. Difficult interpretive problems are presented as if there can be only one view when in fact there are several viable options, and one must proceed carefully and humbly through the data.

<sup>3</sup> For a succinct presentation of this, see D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 32–36. For an excellent work on the whole issue, see M. J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, *Jesus under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8 (ed. F. E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 500 believes it is a saying of Jesus while Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 742 argues that it fits the pattern of Markan comments.

Thomas throws down another gauntlet when he challenges, "Please name an evangelical historical critic who has done extensive work in the Synoptic Gospels who has not as a result of that methodology sacrificed historical accuracy at one point or another" (p. 108). Let me name three—D. A. Carson, Craig Blomberg, and Darrell Bock—but with one caveat. When Thomas says "sacrificed historical accuracy," he means on the basis of his logic. But that logic says that any concept of literary dependence between the Gospels by definition "sacrifices historical accuracy." So I would argue that we should examine his challenge from the standpoint of the ETS, which allows its members to hold a view of literary dependence and to utilize an evangelical form of historical criticism under the umbrella of inerrancy. I believe that all three of the scholars above (as well as myself) hold just as strong a view of inerrancy as do the authors of *The Jesus Crisis*. Moreover, each of the three has defended the historical veracity of the Gospels as strongly in their writings as anyone in history. Thomas adds a strange challenge: "Tell us, to which evangelical should we look as a final authority on what in the Synoptic Gospels is historical and what is not?" (p. 108). Does this mean he is placing himself in that role of "final authority"? Has the Church ever made a single individual the "final authority" on anything? The credal statements of the Church were decided by councils, never by one individual who told everybody what to believe. This is why we have an ETS. None of us is perfect, and we need each other to challenge and correct exaggerations and inaccuracies that we all make as human beings. Thomas centers on "disagreements" between scholars. Do he and his colleagues agree on every issue or on the exegesis of every passage? Disagreement is the heart of scholarship, and it will be a sad day when any school or organization demands that all its members have to agree on every exegetical or critical issue. None of us should ever blindly follow one individual as a "final authority." Rather, we all must examine Scripture and study carefully how the various approaches handle the details of the text. There can be no "rules for engagement" like an independence view or a literary dependence view that determines *a priori* how we approach the Gospels. Instead, we must learn from each other and allow the Gospel data itself to speak first. Then we can see which approach best answers the problems.

Finally, my book on the resurrection narratives and evangelical redaction critics does not distinguish "between theological interpretation and what actually happened" (p. 109). Our belief is that both the tradition and the redaction are faithful representations of what Jesus originally said and did. Thomas does not represent our position at all accurately when he makes such a dichotomy between tradition and redaction. Let me paraphrase his final sentence on redaction criticism (p. 109) and state just as unequivocally that "the literary dependence view would hold that everything reported in the resurrection accounts actually happened." None of those he names—Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, D. A. Carson, Moisés Silva, Robert Stein, or myself—would hold that any element of the resurrection accounts in the four Gospels did not "happen." We all hold to the complete trustworthiness of the

Gospel accounts. We also believe that the logic of *The Jesus Crisis* position is faulty—redaction is not unhistorical when understood properly.

In conclusion, I welcome the challenge provided by the independence view and am thankful for the vigorous defense provided by Eta Linnemann,<sup>5</sup> Robert Thomas, and others. We all need to continue the dialogue and listen to one another, for there is always more to learn. However, we need to avoid exaggerated claims and charges of heterodoxy leveled against one another. Neither the independence view nor the literary dependence view has pride of place in the pantheon of critical schools. We all stand together and need a “hermeneutic of humility” that avoids *ad hominem* arguments and listens carefully to each other so that we can always learn better how to allow the Gospels to speak for themselves as God’s Word.

<sup>5</sup> Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* (trans. Robert Yarborough; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).