Disagreement in the Greco-Roman Literary Tradition and the Implications for Gospel Research

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The purpose of this investigation is to compare and contrast the fourfold Gospel with four categories for understanding the motif of disagreement within the Greco-Roman literary tradition. I examine 16 Greco-Roman authors using more than 40 separate texts in order to document the case for the convention of disagreement. Under each rubric discussed, I undertake a comparison with and contrast to the fourfold Gospel. The net result of this investigation concludes that, in contrast to the four examined literary criteria, the authors of the fourfold Gospel should not be charged with intentionally contradicting each other.

Key Words: contradiction, disagreement, complementation, supplementation

Although the specific subject of contradictions is rarely undertaken,\(^1\) a frequent claim among NT scholars is that the Gospels are tainted with contradictions and discrepancies.\(^2\) Current criticism generally stereotypes and stigmatizes the Evangelists for outright disagreement with the intent


2. For the frequent charge that the Gospels are tainted with contradictions and discrepancies that cannot be accounted for, see Robert Morgan, “The New Testament Canon of Scripture and Christianity Identity,” in Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons: The Unity of Scripture and the Diversity of the Canon (ed. John Barton and Michael Wolter; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003) 151–93, esp. p. 152, in which Morgan includes a concise one-page summary of David Strauss’s influential work Life of Jesus and then concludes with its impact, “Far from a harmonious symphony we find conflict and disagreement in the first as in every generation
to replace or displace a prior Gospel. This modern scholarly construct usually proceeds along the following lines: Matthew writes to correct Mark; Luke then edits Matthew and Mark; finally, John revises them all. It is commonplace in NT scholarship to read that one or two of the four Evangelists were motivated by the desire to replace Mark. John B. Gabel and Charles B. Wheeler represent well this position by offering this reading of the Synoptics: “As in the case of Luke, we must assume that Matthew found Mark’s Gospel inadequate and intended to replace it with his own, not merely to supplement it.”

Regarding the viewpoint of the Evangelist Luke, D. Moody Smith writes “Apparently, Luke wrote his Gospel to supplant earlier and less adequate accounts, which in all probability included Mark.” Mark Goodacre parallels a similar view: “Luke is making clear that he is critical of his predecessor’s work and that his radical reordering of Matthew is in Theophilus’s best interest.”

Regarding the Gospel of John, Harold W. Attridge offers a further view that John “is not simply an extension of other narratives. This Gospel offers a judgment on whatever predecessors there may have been, be they a Signs Source or a Synoptic Gospel. They were not to be supplemented, but displaced.” An even stronger view is that of Mary Ann Tolbert, who suggests that “the later writers had more malign than benign intentions in relationship to Mark and actually wished to supplant Mark’s interpretation of Jesus with their own.”

Current criticism also comes packaged with the charge that the Gospels engage in the actual concealment of damaging evidence. These
claims allege that critical scholarship has irreparably damaged the idea of their canonical unity and any attempt to repair such damage is tantamount to patching holes on a sinking ship. In comparison to previous assessments, recent NT scholarship has raised the issue of contradiction to a more aggressive level, escalating the intensity within the fourfold Gospel to a deliberate and intentional motive to disagree. The present trend has the characteristics of a borderline official academic protocol: in the literary relationship between the Gospels, contradictions are assumed; these assumptions witness to a speculative agenda to displace a prior Gospel; these displacements are evidence of a hypothetical antagonism among the four Evangelists.

To simplify the above sequence, present scholarly trends may be reduced to a refined twofold premise: (1) a literary relationship between the Gospels and (2) consequent intentional disagreement. This interconnection creates a conditional link or dependence between these two premises: the first is able to exist and survive without the second; the second, however, cannot survive or succeed unless the first is granted. In this investigation, it will be argued that the first does not assume the second. The thesis of this article assumes a priori the first premise but challenges the second. A disclaimer, however, is appropriate here. I do not want to distort the current state of affairs; there are scholars who defend in print the premise of supplementation. But the particular focus of this investigation takes a slightly different approach to supplementation. Our purpose will argue that, when measured against the motif of disagreement in Greco-Roman authors, deliberate contradictions and intentional disagreements are not present in the canonical Gospels.

Inasmuch as presupposition should not eclipse objectivity, the optimism of this study’s premise requires a realistic question, followed by rigorous testing. In respective order, we start first with an appropriate query: what do we mean by contradiction? Admittedly, one person’s contradiction may be another person’s variation; one scholar’s suspicion may be another’s conviction. By what objective criteria can a consensus be established on what is an incontestable contradiction? Using the ancient...
model of Greco-Roman conventions, a contradiction in this study will be considered legitimate if it is stated in clear and straightforward language. This investigation thus focuses narrowly on intentional contradictions that evidence deliberate and, in some cases, even adversarial intent to disagree and displace a peer.

Correlatively, this study does not seek to resolve from the Gospels alleged, falsely contrived, or imaginary contradictions. Also, it is not our purpose to debate oblique subtleties and mundane minutiae. For example, this study does not seek to resolve cases such as when the sun was setting (Mark 1:32 or Luke 4:40) or how many sandals the disciples were to wear (Mark 6:9 or Matt 10:10). I leave the resolution of questions such as these to the individual exegetical commentaries.

Our focus is to concentrate on identifying the literary conventions of contradiction. Once identified, the next task will be to consider the implications for these conventions in Gospel research.

Overall, this study contends that in comparison with the language of disagreement as conventionally used in the Greco-Roman literary tradition, Luke, for example, does not contradict either Matthew or Mark. From the perspective of the Greco-Roman literary tradition, a case in point is the death of Pompey’s child. Both Velleius Paterculus and Suetonius record that the child was a son. Dio Cassius, however, records that it was a daughter. How could there be a disagreement on such a basic issue? Obviously, this is not a detail that really concerned any of these three Roman historians. In other words, these three Roman historians do not stop to consider the evidence; they are clearly not interested in reconciling any divergency, and they make no comment on another possibility. Clearly, though, the sources for the life of Pompey indicate that a child suffered a premature death. The variation in the tradition obviously still needs clarification.

By extension, how can this information apply to the Gospels? A similar case...
in point may be the actual time the sun was setting when Jesus entered Jericho. Although the timing of Jesus’ entrance is a valid question for study and does need explanation, its value for this present investigation is not of material importance because, like the issue of Pompey’s child, there is an absence of literary convention signaling an intention to disagree.

We arrive now at the proposed testing. It will be salutary to analyze how ancient critics express dissent and how they clearly and unequivocally contradict their literary predecessors. Within the parameters or conventions of contradiction, how do critics in antiquity present their opposing points of view? To answer this question, the four Evangelists will be placed within the larger context of Greco-Roman authors in order to compare how disagreement with a predecessor or a peer is conventionally expressed. Although the relationship of the four Gospels and modern literary criticism is not a new subject, I would like to approach the topic from an unexplored vantage point. For the most part, the efforts of literary critics have been directed toward locating the Gospels within the genres of history, biography, encomium, or science. The approach taken here is a more limited and telescoped view—to ascertain the essential characteristics of pinpoint disagreement, whether by historian, biographer, scientist, encomiast, philosopher, or even poet. In biography, for example, it is true that the conventions of this genre do not call for disagreement to the degree


16. I include poetry even though the objective of a poet is not to present particular historical truth (Aristotle, Ars poetica 1451a/9.1–3). Nevertheless, poets do criticize one another as, for example, Horace does in Satirae 1.10.51–52, when he even asks: “Come now, I ask, do you a scholar find nothing to fault in the great Homer?” Horace indicates that not even Homer is exempt from criticism, implying that if the great Homer is not safe then no one can escape from the barbs of critics. Of course, it should not be left unsaid that Horace found great pleasure in reading Homer. See also W. D. Davies, “Canon and Christology,” in The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 19–37, esp. p. 28: “A sophist could even call Homer a liar and hold him up to ridicule: so Dio of Prusa, Discourse 11.”
that the genre of history does. However, whenever disagreement surfaces in biography, it follows along the lines developed in this study. Therefore, disagreement is not a respecter of genre, this investigation will consider how disagreement and contradiction function over several genres. We will examine 16 Greco-Roman authors using more than 40 texts. In order to provide a workable model, albeit modern, Morton S. Enslin may be helpful, because he records his own personal objection against divine revelation in the following statement:

But there are equally clear variations and flat contradictions, known to every student of the gospels and evident to every reader who will take the trouble to read the accounts in a modern Harmony of the Gospels. Thus the convenient explanation that the gospels are unique writings, a part of Holy Scripture, and not to be judged by usual literary standards, but that, like the Old Testament, they were divinely inspired, and thus the authors were supernaturally guided and controlled . . . shivers on the rock of contradiction.

Enslin, in a most engaging and energetic manner, has raised the issue of literary standards. Consequently, I would like to appeal to Enslin’s own colorful expressions. Three pivotal elements in his protest stand out: (1) he clearly and pointedly makes known his disagreement with those who champion divine revelation; (2) he explains his own reasoning: anyone who will take the time to read a Harmony of the Gospels will reach the same conclusion; and (3) he even provides a metaphor—a view such as supernatural revelation will “shiver on the rock of contradiction.” Enslin’s objection to divine revelation suggests three useful criteria for determining a contradiction: (1) language characterized by plain statement and direct disagreement (a “flat contradiction”), (2) reasons given, and (3) obvious displeasure—even colorfully and metaphorically expressed. The only

17. R. Burridge, What Are the Gospels? (2004) 53, states: “Genre is a crucial tool for the study and interpretation of a text in that it provides a form of contract between author and reader, giving a set of expectations for both composition and interpretation.” This certainly applies to genre, but crossing genres does not require further refinement of how contradiction is expressed.

18. The following authors are included: Appian, Arrian, Cicero, Dio Cassius, Diodorus Siculus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Herodotus, Horace, Josephus, Livy, Pausanias, Plutarch, Polybius, Strabo, Thucydides, and Velleius Paterculus.


20. An equally passionate view of the Gospels as full of “flat contradictions” is that of Geza Vermes, The Authentic Gospel of Jesus (London: Penguin, 2004) 370, who says: “They patently represent irreconcilable variations; indeed again and again they display flat contradictions.” Vermes and Enslin use very similar language and thought; they are both equally convinced that the Gospels contain flat contradictions and anyone with a measure of intelligence should be able to recognize such conflicts. Furthermore, their expressions also support my thesis that serious contradictions, whether modern or ancient, contain the overlapping characteristics of clear disagreement, reasons given, and emotion expressed. Thus, their very own conventions are a suitable exhibit of how disagreement actually functions. Although Vermes and Enslin provide ample evidence from their own objections that genuine disagreement is
omission in this threefold classification is the specific mention of whom he is refuting. Enslin simply uses the umbrella expression “the convenient explanation that,” which he may have used obliquely in order to avoid giving offense. However, he has attached his own name to the document, thus providing another marker in the language of disagreement.

I submit Enslin’s manner of writing in order to investigate the language of disagreement and the rhetoric of correction. The above example will be adopted as an amiable model in order to compare it with the language of contradiction as found in ancient Greek and Roman authors. The reason for setting the investigation up in this fashion is to compare ancient expressions with modern in order to set the results alongside the four Gospels.

Plain Statement and Direct Disagreement

An informative starting point is Diodorus Siculus, a compiler of Greek history, lore, mythology, and topography who lived approximately 80–20 B.C. In his Bibliotheca historiae (4.2.1), he describes the difficulties involved in compiling accurate information about Greek mythology: the sheer antiquity of these myths complicates the task of discovering the real truth; the variety of the different kinds of heroes and multitude of demi-gods tempts readers to treat these stories with contempt; but “the greatest obstacle of all” (τὸ δὲ μὲν γὰρ καὶ πάντων ἀτοπώτατον) is the number of disagreements among the mythmakers.21 Diodorus then proceeds to his first myth, that of the god Dionysus (4.3.4–5.6). In this account, he mentions unknown sources of the myth by using the verb “they say” (φάσι) eight times22 and by alternating with the verb “they say” (λέγουσιν) five times.23

It is conventional to mention alternate versions without in any way minimizing the value of one’s own work. All historians and biographers do this; whether one considers the Gospels to be biography or history is immaterial. The point is that none of the four Evangelists ever uses the conventional expression “some say . . . others say.” Luke 1:1–3 cannot be used to imply this. There are other ways of interpreting Luke at this point. Generally, the inclusion of statements such as “some say . . . others say” is used to acknowledge either diversity in the tradition or it is a subtle way of admitting that the writer himself does not know and neither do others. Therefore, the absence of such conventional expressions may suggest that the four Evangelists are not writing under the handicap of ignorance. Four people standing on the four corners of an intersection who witness an

voiced in the definite language of clear statement, reasons given, and displeasure visibly expressed, such concrete and unambiguous expressions are not to be found in the four Gospels.

21. The word Diodorus uses for “disagreements” is ἀσύμφωνος, suggesting that a disagreement is an unharmonious and dissonant clash. See also 5.6.1, where he uses the verb διαφωνεῖν to describe disagreements among historians. LSJ lists the following definitions for this word as: musical “dissonance,” architectural “displeasure to the eye,” and literary “contradiction” or “disagreement.”

22. Bibliotheca historiae 4.2.1, 5; 4.3.4; 4.4.2, 3, 4; 4.5.3–4.

23. Bibliotheca historiae 4.1.7; 4.4.2, 4, 5; 4.5.3.
accident in the center will offer four different versions of the wreck. This does not imply contradiction or disagreement. It is a matter of perspective. Other than direct disagreement, variations in the four witness accounts are to be expected. Although there seems to be no significance to the change of verbs other than variety, the more salient point is that informational dissonance in a narrative can be characterized by the presence of confusing sources in which one source claims one thing and a second source claims another.

Returning now to Diodorus, toward the end of this narrative account of the exploits and achievements of Dionysus, he stops to assist the reader with an explanation for how there could exist two separate versions of this god. Here is his understanding: “and so the men of later times, being unawares of the truth and being deceived because of the identity of their names, thought there had been but one Dionysus.” Diodorus in direct and point-blank language states his view: “the men of later times, being ignorant or unawares of the truth, were deceived” (ἀγνοοῦτας μὲν τάλητες, πλανηθέντας). In other words, dissonance in the tradition is due to ignorance. This ignorance, then, is spelled out for the reader. This kind of language or reader assistance is not found in Matthew to describe Mark, or in Luke to describe Matthew or Mark, or in John to describe the other three. Most notably, this language is absent from Luke’s genealogy describing Matthew’s. Inasmuch as ignorance of the real facts has also been lodged against the Evangelists, this omission of assistance to the reader explaining disagreement in a tradition may be raised as a red flag against current and repetendous scholarly contentions with the Gospels.

24. Translation by C. H. Oldfather in the LCL.
25. 4.4.5. A similar complaint can be found in Polybius (12.4.d.1): “Timaeus, while making a great parade of accuracy, in my opinion, falls very far from the truth.”
26. See Eric Franklin, Luke: Interpreter of Paul, Critic of Matthew (ed. Stanley E. Porter; JSNTSup 92; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), esp. p. 370: “Luke’s handling of Matthew is seen to be one controlled by caution: it amounts to no more than a guarded use of the first Gospel’s perspective and exhibits a critical attitude to much that it contains. Luke is in fact a critic of Matthew.” Indeed, language of this kind can be found within the NT but only to describe either those outside the community of faith or the past behavior of those now inside the family of faith. The language of clear disagreement, however, is not in any of the four Evangelists to register objections against the others.
Livy’s *Ab urbe condita* (1.24) may serve as another notable contrast to the Gospels. Livy, as it were, allows us to look over his shoulder and view him working on a problem as he endeavors to decide to which people (the Curiatii or the Horatii) a set of triplet brothers belonged:

> Horatios Curiatiosque fuisset satis constat, nec ferme res antique alia est nobilior; tamen in re tam clara nomencl error manet; utrius populi Horatii, utrius Curiatii fuerint. *Autores utroque trahunt.*

[That they were Horatii and Curatii is clear enough, and hardly any other ancient tradition is more notorious; nevertheless, in spite of the celebrity of the affair, an uncertainty remains in regard to the names—to which people, that is, the Horatii belonged, and to which the Curiatii. Historians are drawn to both sides.]

Livy, we are informed, is trying to sort out a discrepancy in his sources. What complicates his choice is the combination of the fame of the affair: “there is nearly none more notable” (*nec ferme res antique alia est nobilior*). Nevertheless, there still remains in the tradition an error or uncertainty regarding these names (*tamen in re tam clara nomencl error manet*).29 The presence of *tamen* (“nevertheless”) suggests that the historical value of the affair should have created a more unified tradition, but this is not the case; an error or uncertainty prevents agreement. This unsettled issue causes a split decision among the historians (*autores utroque trahunt*). As we place these Livian admissions alongside the fourfold Gospel, the following cardinal contrasts emerge: no Evangelist confesses to a similar dilemma of having to decide between two compelling options; no Evangelist acknowledges confusion in the tradition, either in a previous Gospel or the hypothetical document, Q;30 no Evangelist admits to division among his peers. Likewise, there are no nebulous point-blank assertions (such as “they err”) in the Gospels of an accusing nature directed toward an unnamed Evangelist.

There is one further example demonstrating the rubric of disagreement. The Roman historian Velleius Paterculus in his *Historia romana* (1.7.2–4), writing during the age of Augustus Caesar, reports that there are “many errors and discrepancies among the authorities” (*maximique erroris et multum discrepantem auctorum opinionibus*) regarding the distant past of Rome. With some of these authorities Paterculus is in agreement (*quibus equidem adsenserim*). But there is one in particular that is in grave error and must

29. Livy uses *error* in both senses: either “error” (27.16.6) or “uncertainty” or “perplexity” (9.45.16). Although the Latin *error* tempts one to jump to the conclusion that Livy has in mind the idea of “error,” the context argues more for “uncertainty.” However, I have left the word “error” in the text as a possibility. It is true that Luke wants Theophilus to know the “certainty” of things he has learned (Luke 1:4); this, however, does not insinuate that Theophilus is uncertain about anything he believes because of something he may have read or heard from another Gospel.

30. Going all the way back to Herodotus (1.95.1), it was customary to admit different versions or “paths” (ἄλλας λόγων ὁδός) regarding the subjects an author was treating. For a discussion of how Herodotus sorts out the truth, see David Branscome, “Herodotus and the Map of Aristagoras,” *CA* 29 (2010) 1–44, esp. p. 34.
be singled out for correction. This is the mistaken view of Marcus Cato (*sed M. Cato quantum differt!*), regarding the issue of a date. Although Paterculus concedes that Cato is known for his conscientiousness, nevertheless, he cannot side with him on the dating of Capua. It must be stated that judgments such as this from Paterculus cannot be found in the four Gospels. Although there have been claims of “sharp” disagreements alleged against the Evangelists, these claims, so far in our investigation, do not measure up to the standards of Greco-Roman convention.

What, therefore, do these contrasts suggest? One possible answer is that the Gospels occupy unique genre ground that exempts them from having to resolve issues such as variations. That is, the Gospel writers give no evidence of being under obligation to tackle variations in the tradition. Another possible solution is that the four writers were completely unaware of fellow Evangelists and their respective Gospels. This investigation, however, assumes the contrary; there is a literary relationship. Yet another possible explanation is that the four Evangelists have utterly failed in their responsibility to confront alleged contradictions in the Gospel tradition. What, therefore, do these contrasts suggest? One possible answer is that the Gospels occupy unique genre ground that exempts them from having to resolve issues such as variations. That is, the Gospel writers give no evidence of being under obligation to tackle variations in the tradition. Another possible solution is that the four writers were completely unaware of fellow Evangelists and their respective Gospels. This investigation, however, assumes the contrary; there is a literary relationship. Yet another possible explanation is that the four Evangelists have utterly failed in their responsibility to confront alleged contradictions in the Gospel tradition. What, therefore, do these contrasts suggest? One possible answer is that the Gospels occupy unique genre ground that exempts them from having to resolve issues such as variations. That is, the Gospel writers give no evidence of being under obligation to tackle variations in the tradition. Another possible solution is that the four writers were completely unaware of fellow Evangelists and their respective Gospels. This investigation, however, assumes the contrary; there is a literary relationship. Yet another possible explanation is that the four Evangelists have utterly failed in their responsibility to confront alleged contradictions in the Gospel tradition. What, therefore, do these contrasts suggest? One possible answer is that the Gospels occupy unique genre ground that exempts them from having to resolve issues such as variations. That is, the Gospel writers give no evidence of being under obligation to tackle variations in the tradition. Another possible solution is that the four writers were completely unaware of fellow Evangelists and their respective Gospels. This investigation, however, assumes the contrary; there is a literary relationship. Yet another possible explanation is that the four Evangelists have utterly failed in their responsibility to confront alleged contradictions in the Gospel tradition.

**Reasons Given**

When Greco-Roman writers openly disagree with either a peer or a predecessor, they usually explain the reason for this disagreement. Strabo is a suitable example for this rubric. Strabo, born 64/63 B.C. and living to about A.D. 21, writes in book 1.2 of his *Geographica* that he feels it necessary to correct the errors of Eratosthenes so that his readers will know what teachers they should follow. Strabo at 1.2.2 faults Eratosthenes for a “serious weakness of judgment” (ἵκανὴν ἁσθένειαν . . . γνώμης); at 1.2.3 Strabo claims that Eratosthenes “contradicts himself” (ἐαυτῶι μάχεται); at 1.2.7 he instructs the reader that his predecessor “makes many mistakes” (πολλὰ διαμαρτάνει); and at the end of 1.2.7, Strabo feels that the mistakes


32. For an exception, see, for example, Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; trans. James E. Crouch; Hermeneia, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 75: “That neither of the evangelists tries to reconcile the differences must be seen as an indication that the classical assumption of the literary independence of Matthew and Luke is correct.”
of Eratosthenes now require a more detailed exposure. Thus, at 1.2.8 there begins a series of treatments prefaced with the phrase “first of all” (καὶ πρῶτον). This method of itemizing is characteristic of Strabo as he tends to order his objections in a sequential manner. He has a critical mind; it is orderly, analytical, and systematic in judgment. At 1.3.22, he begins a series of objections with an orderly structure: ἐπὶ τὰ ἑξῆς . . . ἑξῆς δὲ . . . ἑξῆς δὲ (“next in order . . . next”). In between, he hammers and chips away at the mistakes of his predecessor. In Book 2 he varies his sequences with a literary change of pace: “first of all . . . again” (πρῶτον μέν . . . πάλιν); or “neither . . . nor” (οὔτε . . . οὔτε). This internal variation is bracketed by the outer and more familiar ἐν τοῖς ἑξῆς . . . ἑξῆς δὲ (“in what follows . . . next”). In all these systematic and detailed objections, Strabo constantly registers his disapproval of Eratosthenes by enumerating reasons.

Toward the end of his first book (1.2.35), Strabo mentions a plurality of writers who create their compositions with a tendency to confuse myth with history. This is his initial objection: they fashion free creations (ὁι δὲ πλάττοντες). He then passes quickly to mention an even greater reason for dismissing these writers—they “contradict one another” (τὸ ἐναντιοῦσθαι). Strabo does not stop there but proceeds to offer additional insight into how these writers demonstrate their opposition to one another: they add their reasons why for disagreement (προστιθέντας καὶ διὰ τί). It should be noted, however, that Strabo is not claiming that the insertion of “reasons why” proves contradiction; rather, he suggests that by indicating such reasons this further compounds the case for disagreement and makes it easier to fault errors. His statement clearly suggests that, when one writer wants to contradict another, providing “reasons why” is part of the convention of disagreement.

There is more. In book 2, Strabo expresses his personal displeasure with a writer named Hipparchus: sometimes Hipparchus makes false assumptions about Eratosthenes; at other times he is correct in his censure. Strabo, however, faults Hipparchus for not correcting Eratosthenes! In other words, Strabo may be the only reliable source for faulting critics. Clearly, Strabo is out to protect his readers from an anaclitic trust in unreliable writers. By linking together the two geographers (Eratosthenes and Hipparchus), Strabo is taking on two leading authorities who are best viewed as competitors. This follows his programme as stated in the prologue (1.2); he desires to instruct his readers in whom to follow. By naming names, Strabo can undermine his predecessors while at the same time elevating his own stature. From Stabo’s point of view, credibility is damaged, opportunity is missed, and authority weakened when rival names are left out of the record. In his judgment, it is inappropriate to leave out the opposition. Nothing can be gained by such a tactic; it is, therefore,

33. Geogr. 1.3.21, 22, 23; 1.4.2, 7.
34. Geogr. 2.1.12–13; 2.2.21.
35. Geogr. 2.1.22 to 2.1.23.
advantageous to include names and identify competitors. Furthermore, reasons supplied bolster his case and commend him to his reading public. From this Strabean data, I see no parallel evidence supporting the view that Luke wrote to supplant Mark, or that any of the four wrote to replace any of the others. Given the conventions of biography, geography, or history, authors make known their intentions when they are supplanting, correcting, or finding fault.

The above viewpoints fail to answer a needed question: if Matthew and Luke absorbed 90 percent of Mark in order to displace him, why do both Evangelists engage in the task of allegedly replacing Mark? Was Luke dissatisfied with both Mark and Matthew? Does Luke think that Matthew’s effort to undermine Mark was a failure and now he must correct the corrector? The direction of this study pursues a different route by counterproposing that Luke does not acknowledge disappointment with either Mark or Matthew.

Polybius may also serve as an adequate guide for understanding the convention of disagreement from the perspective of reasons given. In book 2.56.1 of his Historiae, Polybius introduces Phylarchus into his narrative because he is a rival at variance with the more reliable historian, Aratus. Because Aratus is the preferred source, Polybius finds it necessary (ἀναγκαῖον ἡμῖν) to “minutely examine” (διευκρινεῖν) the failings of Phylarchus as they are measured against the more dependable Aratus. First of all, Phylarchus continually brings before his readers unnecessary horrors in order to sensationalize (2.56.2–16). Phylarchus not only sensationalizes his narratives but he also includes falsehoods out of ignorance (2.58.12–13). There is then a short break in the narrative. This break is subsequently followed at 2.59.1, where Polybius resumes his resumé of Phylarchian errors with the word πάλιν (“again” or “furthermore”). He thus indicates that he is not yet finished with Phylarchus. At 2.59.3, there is a passing note that what has been shown about the weaknesses of Phylarchus is now sufficient; yet at 2.59.7 Polybius must include more corrections. This list of shortcomings, however, is not complete; at 2.61.1, the account continues with χωρὶς τούτων (“apart from these things”), hinting that there are still more failings to report: exaggeration and elaboration. At 2.62.1, the list of complaints continues to roll on: “further” (οὐ μὴν ἄλλα τῶντις ἔξης). When he arrives at 2.63.1, a final conclusion appears imminent. He guides the reader with a τούτῳ (“to this”); then, he takes off again, finally laying to rest the subject at 2.63.6. Polybius also reveals his motives for this visceral dissecting of Phylarchus. It is twofold: (1) he desires to explain why he prefers the tradition as passed down from Aratus, and (2) he desires to demonstrate the faulty historical principles of Phylarchus. In order to do this, he must itemize and defend his reasons. In all of this, Polybius presents himself as one who feels the weight of responsibility pressing on him to protect his reading public.

Velleius Paterculus in his Historia Romanae provides another motive for supplying reasons. After listing the age of Pompey at his death as 58 years, Paterculus refers to writers who, owing to “excessive preoccupation”
(nimium occupatos), have failed to give the correct age of the great man. Paterculus cannot allow this error to go uncorrected and unmentioned. He feels slightly apologetic, though, for bringing up the failures of others and adds: “I have added this remark not for the sake of criticizing others, but to avoid criticisms of myself.” As a writer who has uneasy qualms about criticizing fellow authors, Paterculus feels justified in protecting himself by setting the record straight.

When we compare a convention such as this with Gospel narratives, what are we to conclude? As compared to the Hellenistic practice of stating reasons, there is no evidence that any of the four Evangelists openly disagrees with another Evangelist by validating such a disagreement with an explanation as to why. However, criticism accompanied by reasons given often characterizes historical writing of almost any kind. Praise and criticism of the tradition inheres as part of the individual historian’s craft—almost as if a default position. Indeed, it is often expressed as a moral obligation to readers. For example, Strabo, addressing Polybius as if the man were still alive, informs him that correcting errors in the historical tradition is obligatory for the historian. But the comparative data under the present rubric suggests that no Evangelist directly disagrees with another (especially in an orderly sequence) and then apologizes for such a censure because it seemed necessary to do so in order to protect his own credibility or his audience.

Up to this point, the data provisionally suggest that the Gospels contain no evidence of direct disagreements openly stated; and, tangentially, there are no reasons given. However, the four Evangelists are not without a model for doing so. In Mark 12:18–27, the text records the conflict between the Sadducees and Jesus over the subject of resurrection. The text includes these words (v. 24): “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?” And (v. 27): “You are badly mistaken!” Here we find in the narrative direct disagreement and reasons given. Although this blunt dialogue is credited to the Markan Jesus, this kind of blunt statement cannot be found in one Gospel directed against another Gospel writer. So, according to the Markan text, although the disciples

37. For references to the historian’s duty, see John Marincola, “ἀλήθεια,” Lexicon Historiographicum Graecum et Latinum, vol. 2: Al–Af (ed. Carmine Ampolo, Ugo Fantasia, and Leone Porciani; Pisa: della Normale, 2007) 7–29, esp. p. 28: “He is expected to have a certain completeness in his account, and, in those places where there is controversy, to lay out for his audience conflicting accounts so that they may be decided.” An appropriate example of this fairness to readers may be found in the prologue to Arrian’s Anabasis Alexandri (1.1–2). Arrian explains who the two most reliable sources are and what he will do if they disagree.
38. Geogr. 10.3.5.
40. Another example may be Matthew’s account of Jesus, responding to ancient views with the correction, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago” (5:21, 27, 33). This series of counter-statements has Jesus looking back on a remote past and offering corrections to
could find precedent in Jesus’ manner of criticizing the Sadducees for their lack of correct biblical knowledge, we find no such criticism directed toward a fellow Evangelist. As a negative example, it will be instructive to introduce a finding from the Jesus Seminar regarding the above text (Mark 12:18–27). The Seminar claims: “For these reasons, many Fellows concluded that the words could not have originated with Jesus.” This judgment by the Jesus Seminar team turns the Evangelist Matthew into the originator of a tactic that he does not even use against Mark (assuming the priority of Mark). My argument, on the contrary, is that Jesus is the true source of the statement, and thus he provided a potential model and precedent for criticism. But the fact is that no Evangelist found it necessary to follow this model in order to fault another Evangelist.

What is the implication of this literary silence? One possible answer is that no Evangelist was actually aware of another Gospel in circulation. Given the general consensus on literary dependence in the Gospels, this would be a hard sell in today’s academic climate. This, of course, is not an argument that consensus equals truth. Consensus, however, cannot be ignored. In fact, this investigation is a response to consensus. An acknowledgement is accordingly repeated here: this investigation is based on the premise that there is, indeed, a literary relationship between the Gospels. The prologue to Luke’s Gospel points toward this relationship. A more likely solution, therefore, is the proposal advocated here: the absence of reasons given is a tacit argument that the Evangelists were not actively engaged in correcting a peer.

**OBVIOUS DISPLEASURE**

Emotion negatively expressed is often present in ancient texts when one author contradicts or corrects another. Positive pleasure would be the opposite—an emotion that some contemporary scholars eschew in their own work.41 Some academics, however, do not disdain a scholarly scoff.42

mistaken views. Nowhere does the author of Matthew, as it were, adopt this pedagogic model and then, facing his readership, pen the words, “You have heard it said (or read in the Gospel of Mark) that an Evangelist said.”


42. For a classical scholar’s reaction to a fellow classicist, see J. P. Gould, “Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens,” *JHS* 100 (1980) 30–49, here p. 42: “When Gomme sums up his position by saying, ‘there is nothing remarkable about the position of women in Athens, except perhaps the special honor paid to them,’ I can only gasp!” For NT scholars, see the review by L. de Blois and E. A. Hemelrijk in *Mnemosyne* 45
order to illustrate this category, Polybius and his assessment of Timaeus may serve as a strong didactic indicator. This evaluation is found in book 4.12.1–16.14 of his *Historiae* and is one of the more caustic criticisms from antiquity in faulting the failings of a fellow historian. Not only does Polybius acknowledge his own motives for writing, but he feels capable of evaluating the motives of others. This is especially the case regarding Timaeus. The *OCD* (1995) lists the dates for Polybius at 200–118 B.C. and the dates for Timaeus at 350–260 B.C. At the minimum, Polybius is writing 80 years after the death of Timaeus, yet he faults Timaeus for a number of reasons—often questioning the very motives of his predecessor. Although Timaeus is not a contemporary, his reputation, like a ghost, may have haunted Polybius. Polybius, it appears, feels some sort of inner compulsion to judge Timaeus for his carelessness with facts—for what he calls “random” or “scattered” (ἀπεχθέια) comments on Africa. Polybius is unsparing in censure and relentless in criticism as he lodges numerous pungent complaints. His most telling comments about this rival occur when he delves into motives. Polybius believes that Timaeus’s judgments are colored or darkened by prejudice.43 Even worse, Timaeus deliberately lies.44 The strongest metaphor of obvious displeasure comes into play when Polybius accuses Timaeus of using language and descriptions that are not even found in a house of prostitution.45 Polybius clearly has a taste for expressing strong and biting language toward a rival. What should not remain unsaid is Polybius’s own expression of actual bitterness toward Timaeus (12.15.4.). Although he tempers his displeasure with a claim that he is refraining from giving full vent to his hostility (ἀπεχθεία), he nonetheless is quite open and transparent about his feelings.

A further example may reinforce the point. Dionysius of Halicarnassus composed his *Antiquitates romanae* during the reign of Augustus Caesar, writing perhaps up to the year 7 B.C.46 At 2.58.1, Dionysius raises the issue of contradictions and disagreements in regard to his predecessors’ treatment of Numa. Dionysius alerts the reader that he is now going to engage in the task of contradicting (ἀντειπεῖν) previous historians. He even

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43. Polybius 12.7.1: ὡπὸ δὲ τῆς φιλονεικίας ἐπισκοτούμενος; and 12.10.6: δῆλος ἐστι συνειδός αὐτῷ κατὰ πρόθεσιν ἐγερομένως.

44. For some of the more trenchant statements accusing Timaeus of deliberate lying, see *Historiae* 12.7.6; 9.1; 10.6.

45. *Historiae* 12.13.2: Οὔδὲ τὸν ἀπὸ τέγους ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος εἰρησμένων σωιτίς. Literally, “neither (would) anyone among those who under the roof employ the body.”

expresses his displeasure and dismay at these former treatments. He then mentions how many earlier historians (πολλοὶ, “many”) have written incorrectly about the date in which Numa lived, thereby erroneously placing him in the lifetime of Pythagoras and consequently contradicting the known facts of universal history. Dionysius next proceeds to provide even stronger evidence making it impossible that Numa and Pythagoras could have been contemporaries. This he does by showing that the city of Croton did not exist during the time of Numa. Dionysius does stop to consider the possibility that another wise man by the name of Pythagoras could have been the center of the controversy. This he dismisses because the sources do not allow such a conclusion. Other examples could be supplied. As applied to the four Gospel accounts, this Greco-Roman literary principle of stating reasons why with expressions of displeasure when demurring with a peer or predecessor is revealing.

A brief mention of another case may be helpful. J. Enoch Powell, staking out a claim that Matthew was the first Gospel, offers the view that Mark was “flummoxed” over what he read in Matthew. The word “flummoxed” suggests strong bewilderment. Unless direct statement is present in a text, emotion of this sort cannot be assumed. Because we are not in a position to read Mark’s body language (such as facial expressions), the plain meaning of words must be our guide in understanding his state of mind. Intentionality that is unexpressed is normally considered to be an ulterior motive. Without clearer evidence, Mark should not be faulted as possessing ulterior motives. In my judgment, therefore, a fair and ame-
nable analysis of Powell’s assertion of Mark’s bewilderment at Matthew deserves dismissal as misguided.

We must affirm that hostility or even a lesser displeasure of one Evangelist expressed against another is notably and ostensibly missing in Gospel texts. This absence of acerbic attacks, bitter rebukes, and chilling challenges adds further weight to the thesis of this study that there are no deliberate disagreements in the fourfold Gospel tradition. Furthermore, this omission of such criticisms may suggest an unusual unity.

As I close this section, it may be helpful to bring in one of the main criteria for establishing authenticity in Jesus research; this is the criterion of embarrassment. We begin with Anthony Le Donne’s recent description:

The supposition that the Gospels contain invented material is predicated upon the notion that early Christianity had motive to invent material as they commemorated Jesus’ post-Easter significance. This commemoration tended to exalt Jesus in several ways and decrease or eliminate details that cast him in an embarrassing light. Because of this, episodes that do indeed contain such details are not easily explained as Christian invention.51

Further in his book, Le Donne then illustrates how his understanding of the criterion of embarrassment functions. He compares the details of Mark 8:22–26 with Matt 9:27–31 and says: “As briefly discussed, Mark 8:22–26 seems to have embarrassed Matthew. Luke has likely omitted this story altogether for similar reasons.”52 Because the Markan text reveals a case of progressive rather than instantaneous healing, and Matthew never records a case of progressive healing, this supposedly indicates redactional invention on Matthew’s part (due to feelings of embarrassment) and memory on Mark’s. In other words, Matthew, due to his own offended sensitivities, actually sanitizes the episode by omitting Markan material from the tradition; whereas Mark, for his part, is relying on the tradition as he has received it. I will confine my comments here only to the notion of embarrassment. If this is a literary situation of genuine embarrassment on the part of Matthew for the alleged awkward details in Mark, this is an unusual way of recording this embarrassment. Feelings of embarrassment are evidence of displeasure. Writers truly experiencing embarrassment over details or defects found in a peer normally register these reactions. In such cases, expressions of displeasure are the norm. This holds true for both ancient and modern writers. For example, I note James D. G. Dunn’s reaction to Robert M. Price’s view that Jesus is a myth: “Gosh! So there are


52. Ibid., 176.
still serious scholars who put forward the view that the whole account of Jesus’ doings and teachings are a later myth foisted on an unknown, obscure historical figure.” I take Dunn’s “Gosh” as a mild and subtle, tongue-in-cheek emotional expression of ironic amazement originating in embarrassing feelings of surprise. Such expressions are absent in the four Evangelists’ literary relationships with one another.

**THE NAME OF ADDRESSER AND ADDRESSEE(S)**

There is one last category to discuss—the issue of identity. Not all Greek historians identify themselves. The tendency, however, is to acknowledge one’s personal name. An example of this tendency is Cicero’s *Pro Archia* 26, which mentions how philosophers will heap scorn on the pursuit of seeking glory and fame, yet they will still attach their name to their essays: *Ipsi illi philosophi etiam in eis libellis quos de contemnenda gloria scribunt nomen suum inscribunt; in eo ipso in quo praedicationem nobilitatemque despiciunt praedicari de se ac se nominari volunt* (“Even philosophers themselves in the very books in which they censure [the pursuit of] glory, include their own names. By the very thing in which they deem as worthless—fame and notability—they wish to have their names attached”).

The power of literature to confer “immortality” can be traced back to Homer in poetry, and in prose to both Herodotus (1.1) and Thucydides (1.22.4; 2.43.3, 64.5). Herodotus states in the prologue that he does not want the great deeds of men to fall into oblivion. Thucydides was also clearly aware of the enduring power of literature to confer fame as well as simultaneously to establish an author in the national consciousness by writing of the greatest war ever fought (1.4); he envisions his work as being a “possession forever” (*κτήμα τε ἐς αἰεί*, 1.22). Hence, both historians ride the coat tails of great deeds. The Hellenistic poet Callimachus was also aware of the power of poetry to confer immortality when he referred to his deceased friend Heracleitus’ verses as not being subject to death.

Diodorus Siculus at 1.1.5 records the ability of history to confer “the glory of immortality” (*τῶι διὰ τῆς δόξης ἀθανατισμῶ*); at 1.2.3 he mentions the voice of history as able to keep alive the deeds of men “for evermore” (*ἄπαντα τὸν αἰῶνα*); at 4.1.4 he

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54. See T. Hidber’s comparison “Arrian,” and “Appian,” in *Narrators, Narratees, and Narratives in Ancient Greek Literature* (ed. Irene De Jong, René Nünlist, and Angus Bowie; Leiden: Brill, 2004) 165–74, 175–85. As Hidber shows, Arrian clearly identifies himself in the first person; Appian, as if in direct contrast to the former, leaves unsaid his identity but assumes everyone knows who he is.

55. See also Velleius Paterculus, *Historia Romanae* 2.16.2, where he will not allow a false sense of modesty to deprive his kin of “glory” (*gloria*) by not acknowledging the loyalty of his great-grandfather toward Rome. See also Mary Jaeger, “Cicero and Archimedes’ Tomb,” *JRS* 92 (2002) 49–61, esp. p. 49: “A great mound bears witness to Achilles’ death at Troy, but the outburst of the competitive Alexander testifies that a poem is a better memorial than a tomb.”


refers to the power of history to sing appropriate praises “for all time” (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα). I note also Cicero’s letter addressed to Luceius in which he is searching for a qualified author to write his biography. Cicero presents this historian with the proposal to write an embellished account of the famous orator’s life. Cicero’s ultimate quest is for literary immortality. A further extravagant tribute to the power of prose to confer immortality is to be found in Velleius Paterculus, Historia Romanae 2.66.3–5. Paterculus reveals, like a two-edged sword, how literature glorifies Cicero and viliﬁes Marc Antony. Clearly, poets of Latin verse and writers of Latin prose were cognizant, like the Greeks, of the power of literature to confer a kind of immortality.

Regarding poetry, Horace, in Epodi 3.30, after the opening two lines in which he refers to his poetry as a “monument more lasting than bronze and more impressive than a pyramid” (monumentum aere perennius regaliqu siu pyramidum altius), goes on to say: “I will not completely die, for many parts of me will escape the death-goddess. On and on shall I grow, ever fresh with the glory” (non omnis moriar multaque pars mei vitabit Libitinam; usque eos postera rescam laude recens); at 4.8 he further praises poetry: “Nor has time destroyed what Anacreon once celebrated” (Nec siquid olim lusit Anacreon delevit aetas); and at 4.9 he continues: “Many heroes lived before Agamemnon, but all were unmourned for and unknown, overwhelmed by a long night because they lacked a sacred poet” (vixere fortes ante Agamemnona multi; sed omnes inlacrimabiles urgentur ignotique longa nocte, carent quia vate sacro).

Given the fact that Greco-Roman authors seek glory, fame, and literary immortality through the written and published word, it is a striking and stunning anomaly that none of the four Evangelists attach their names to their respective Gospels. Authors and literary critics who want to be taken seriously and who are writing to offset, correct, or overthrow something previously written in a similar genre include their name. The signiﬁcance of this omission is that it tells against any intentional contradiction, especially one aimed at correcting an alleged error in the tradition. Previous publications about a notable person provide subsequent authors the opportunity to enrich their own portfolio by disparaging their antecedents. The converse is also true: an author’s self-deﬁnition can be enhanced by attaching his name to the well-established reputation of a predecessor, as long as the predecessor’s fame does not undermine the successor. The extraordinary person of Jesus offers the Evangelists the occasion to elevate their prestige by pointing out the shortcomings of rival writers. This attempt to denigrate is noticeably absent from Gospel texts. Furthermore, each Evangelist was aware that he was writing about a truly transformational ﬁgure. With so much at stake in terms of potential personal prestige, are we to believe

58. Ad familiares 5.12/15. See also Cicero’s Pro Archia, passim.

that in the guise of subtleties they would camouflage their true intention to contradict one another? Are we to believe that overt objection has been concealed beneath the sheath of covert criticism? The literary conventions of Greco-Roman writers and, indeed, the proclivities of human nature do not suggest such a conclusion.60

If their motive was to correct or replace a current alternate version, is it possible that four authors could write four independent accounts of the same significant person (Jesus) without attaching their names to their respective documents? Although this is theoretically possible, it does not strike us as plausible. However, if part of their purpose was to counter a Gospel already in circulation, is it realistic to believe that four independent writers could write of the same influential person without acknowledging one of these Gospel writers?61 Is it possible to contemplate that they would contradict the others without a specific reference to a name? Considering the contemporary belief among many scholars that the Evangelists contradict one another, one needs to ask: if this is true, why the omission of names? Concealment of identity for the sake of personal protection does come to mind. This motive, however, would only account for the writer, not for the absence of an alleged Evangelist in error.

We must consider further how this rubric of naming names actually works by means of example. Appian in his *Historia romanae* mentions his name in the preface (line 15.11) and indicates some of his qualifications to write on the chosen subject: he has reached the “highest places” (πρῶτα ἥκων) in his native country, as an orator has pled cases before emperors (βασιλέων), and has served as a procurator by the will of emperors. Undoubtedly, this accolade of achievements serves the intended purpose of establishing authorial credibility. The example of Polybius may further reinforce the point. He indicates that he has selected as his theme the great document (the Roman Constitution), the greatest achievement (the Roman Republic), and some of the greatest men (among them, Scipio). By hitching his wagon to the star of such outstanding luminaries, he has thereby increased the potential for his own distinction and celebrity. He accomplishes this literary achievement by attaching his name.62 Furthermore, Polybius clearly sets out to establish his own credentials for writing a new history.

60. A possible exception may be noted. Catullus 49 is perhaps an example of stinging criticism couched in ironic flattery. If taken as a piece of irony, it is clearly aimed at Cicero as his name is included in the poem. Catullus identifies himself as the author. For a discussion of this poem, see W. Jeffrey Tatum, “Catullus’ Criticism of Cicero in Poem 49,” *TAPA* 118 (1988) 179–84.

61. Thucydides in his prologue (1.2, 22) to the Peloponnesian War most likely makes an oblique reference to Herodotus. The two historians are not covering the same subject, but Thucydides makes it clear that he is not writing a book that will bring pleasure to the ear. If he has Herodotus in mind, his quarrel is with style, content, and perhaps even purpose. It is to be noted that Thucydides prefers to write a more austere work than a work with the capacity to entertain. He is surely contrasting styles and purposes with the word μᾶλλον ἢ (“rather than”). No such contrasting insinuation is expressed in the four Gospels.

62. Although Polybius prefers the use of the plural “we,” he does not avoid using his own name (12.2.1).
of Rome by distancing himself from the two most notable predecessors until his time: Philinus and Fabius. He singles out Philinus four times, with other references implied. 63

As Polybius views it (ός ἔμοι δοκεῖ), the account of Philinus is “full of inconsistencies” (τῆς πασῆς ἐστὶν ἄλογίας πλήρη). Polybius then tops off his introduction or “digression” 64 by asserting that he will always follow “the order of events” (τον ἐξής λόγον) and so guide his readers into a true understanding of the war. A comparison between Polybius and Luke in their respective programmatic statements yields both contrast and likeness. Regarding the likeness, both claim to give an orderly account and both use the expression ἔμοι δοκεῖ (“it seems to me”). Luke, however, directs these impressions toward himself, while Polybius directs these impressions toward the failings of his predecessors. Regarding the contrasts, Polybius names his competitors, mentions their faults, and seeks to justify why his readers should prefer his version of events to all others. Luke does none of this.

The absence of any attempt to promote one’s name and to advance one’s literary reputation in the four Gospels is a strange silence. Of course, Luke comes quickly to mind, especially because he refers to Theophilus as “most excellent.” Although Luke records (1.1–3) “it seemed good to me also to write up an account” (ἔδοξεν κἀμοὶ παρακολοθηκότι), this statement reveals only Luke’s personal response to the Gospel tradition. There are no pejorative tones or insinuations of displeasure. Rather, the opposite is really the case; whatever qualities the Gospel forerunners possessed, Luke attributes the same to his own work. 65 Clearly, the presence of the καθώς indicates correlation rather than correction. He concedes, though, that “many others” (πολλοί . . . οἱ ἀπ’ αὐτός ταῦτα) have written respective accounts concerning Jesus. 66 Luke, therefore, places himself later in the sequence but,

63. Polybius 1.14.1, 3; 15.1, 1. 12.
64. What he calls a παρεκβασις (1.15.13).
66. It is not clear how we are to take the πολλοί ἐπιχείρησαν of the opening verse. For a pejorative take on the “many,” see Ambrose, Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam 1.1: sic et nunc in novo testamento multi evangelia scribere conati sunt, quae noni mammularii non probarunt, unum autem tantummodo in quattuor libros digestum ex omnibus arbitrati sunt eligendum. . . . Non conatus est Matthaeus, non conatus est Marcus, non conatus est Iohannes, non conatus est Lucas. Dom Gabriel Tissot, in his Traité sur l’évangile de S. Luc (ed. Dom Gabriel Tissot; Sources Chrétienes 45; Paris: du Cerf, 1956) 44 n. 1, says: “Comme son guide, Ambroise distingue les évangiles canoniques de leurs contrefaçons apocryphes.” This explanation by Ambrose is not impossible. Tissot has rightly interpreted Ambrose’s words. But the question arises: is Ambrose correct? Against his reading is the pronoun κἀμοί. Whatever his predecessors have undertaken, Luke claims the same for himself—no less, no more. Luke admits that he is further down the literary line but not that he is any better. The verb ἐπιχείρην, however, requires comment. Does it imply that the “many” attempted to write a narrative but failed? The references listed by BAGD lead in this direction. If this is the case, the κἀμοί makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that
apart from his admitted distance from the original eyewitness source(s), he does not explain how his link in the series varies from the others.67 He especially does not acknowledge that he is correcting anything already circulating in a text format.68 Nor does Luke suggest that his account is necessarily more reliable. François Bovon, however, views the situation differently: “Luke begins with a reference to his predecessors (v. 1), but the manner in which he mentions them shows that he is, at the same time, more or less refuting them.”69 This is a strange argument by Bovon inasmuch as he also acknowledges: “All exegetes agree that the author is making use of the literary forms of the time.”70 Bovon’s claim does not square with the facts of literary convention. Indeed, with the single exception of Luke’s superlative description of Theophilus as κράτιστε (“most excellent”), there are no other comparatives or superlatives in the prologue, especially none situating Luke in a superior position. If Luke felt that his account was more dependable, he certainly did not make use of the right vocabulary to express such a contrast.71 This implies that the third Gospel makes no claim to be either more accurate or the most accurate. Nor does the prologue hint that any rivalry exists between these writers.

It appears that Luke’s intention is to focus uniquely on the person of Jesus without minimizing the value of the other accounts. To be more precise, Luke does not even return later to the vague reference in his prologue to specify any author or oral witness as a possible problem. He acknowledges only that it seemed good to him also to write an orderly account, thus attributing to himself and to his predecessors the positive motive of “good.”72 Taken at face value, his prologue does not reveal the presence

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67. I understand the prologue to chronicle three separate phases: eyewitnesses, the many, and Luke.

68. For an opposite conclusion, see David Laird Dungan, A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1999) esp. p. 16, where Dungan argues that Luke set out to write an account that would be “more orderly, accurate, and true.” Dungan is convinced that the prologue to Luke implies a criticism of rival narratives. As stated above, however, Luke’s language does not reveal an implied criticism. There is no adverb or adjective of comparison in the prologue.


70. Ibid., 17.

71. Luke could have easily, if he had intended so, engaged in combative comparisons such as “more accurately,” “more orderly,” and “more securely.” I note that Polybius in his Histories (12.4.4) does not hesitate to fault Timaeus for less than careful inquiry.

72. Whether the verb δοκέω should be translated as “it seems good to” or simply “it occurs to” is not relevant. Whatever motive the third Evangelist ascribes to his predecessors,
of any negative motives in the third Gospel. Consequently, rivalry and competition should not be introduced as a plausible explanation for why Luke is writing.

Authors engaged in the enterprise of writing of an illustrious and world-changing personality or event do not normally conceal their own personal identity. Although his name ("Luke") may have been attached externally in some way to the third Gospel, for example, a cover letter, the more salient fact is that his name is not included anywhere in the text. The argument presented here is that this absence is significant. This absence suggests two possible factors: (1) the desire to subordinate one’s personal identity in order to keep the focus on the person of Jesus, and (2) the secondary factor indicating that there was no motive to undermine a previous Gospel. Regarding the first reason, an author’s own self-definition is thus submerged into the greater purpose of highlighting the importance of Jesus. Regarding the second reason, the Evangelist does not engage in polemic in order to accent the virtue of his own work over that of others. This would suggest that, although Luke sees himself as continuing or complementing the tradition, he does not see himself as culminating the tradition with the final or most authoritative account. Once again, a disclaimer is appropriate: the argument that the Gospels themselves do not identify actual authors is not intended to serve the form-critical view that the Gospels were produced by communities rather than individuals.

he attributes the same motive to himself. Relative to motive, he does not distinguish himself from the others. For a convincing argument that διοίκω μοί should be understood as "it seemed good to me" (or, "I decided"), see Loveday Alexander, The Preface to Luke’s Gospel (ed. Margaret Thrall; SNTS 78; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 127.


74. See Theo K. Heckel, Vom Evangelium des Markus zum viergestaltigen Evangelium (WUNT 120; Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) 81–90.

75. For the reasonable view that, at the least, a personal cover sheet of some kind would have accompanied a Gospel, see Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen, The Formation of the Christian Bible (trans. J. A. Baker; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), esp. p. 126 n. 92, for his observation, following Dibelius, that it would indeed be an extraordinary omission for Luke not to include his name in a work dedicated to Theophilus. Campenhausen (ibid., 282) further observes how Tertullian rejected Marcion’s Gospel because it was nameless. Working backward from Tertullian’s judgment against Marcion, we would have to conclude that his basic premise for genuine Gospel inclusion was that of antiquity. Therefore, he must have felt confident that he had sufficient evidence to trace the authorship of the fourfold Gospel back to the traditional names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. See also Martin Hengel’s The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ, esp. pp. 48–56, for his convincing arguments that the names of Gospel authors are not later additions but accompanied the Gospels from the very beginning. See also Richard Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 300–305; and esp. p. 415, for his argument that the name “John” indeed accompanied the fourth Gospel, but this does not necessarily prove or imply John, the son of Zebedee. For the contrary view that the Gospels were completely anonymous from the very beginning, see K. Aland, “The Problem of Anonymity and Pseudonymity in Christian Literature of the First Two Centuries,” JTS 12 (1961) 39–49, esp. p. 42.
As a concluding contrast, I mention two writers who offer alternate prologues on the use of names. Arrian in his *Anabasis Alexandri* (1.1–3) explains to his readers the merits of two predecessors: Ptolemy and Aristobulus; their accounts have surpassed all others in the field. Whenever possible, Arrian will follow their narratives; when they differ (ὅσα δὲ οὐ ταὐτά), Arrian will select the more trustworthy account of the two. However, Arrian makes it transparently clear to his readers that his history will surpass theirs: because he is writing about the deeds of the greatest Greek who ever lived, his narrative will match the extraordinary deeds of Alexander (1.12.5). Thus, Arrian claims for himself the ability to outshine his rivals and the capacity to do justice to the accomplishments of the greatest Greek, perhaps even implying that no other authority will ever exceed his. When compared to Luke, several dissimilarities stand out: Luke lays no claim to superiority in the tradition, feels no need to mention names, and does not hint of weaknesses in the tradition that are in need of correction.

Josephus’s prologue to the *Bellum judaicum* also contrasts sharply with Luke’s prologue. Josephus openly identifies himself as the author and mentions several groups of writers worthy of criticism: some were witnesses to actual events, while others were not; whether absent or present, none of them have reported accurately the events they describe; they have even recorded contradictory accounts of the same events in a rhetorical style (ἀσύμφωνα διγήματα σοφιστικῶς ἀναγράφουσιν). Not only that, but Josephus judges that their motives are impure, for they composed out of flattery of the Romans or hatred for the Jews. We thus notice three characteristics of Josephus in this prologue that find no correspondence with Luke: the mention of his name, faulting the failures of predecessors for lack of accuracy in presentation, and the impurity of their motives. On the literary ledger sheet, Luke is clearly on one side and Josephus on the other. Other examples could be provided. Consequently, we have an unusual set of facts: no Evangelist mentions himself and no Evangelist mentions the name of another Gospel writer.

Tracking the data on the personalities of the four Evangelists, the following dots can be connected: in Matt 20:20, the mother of the sons of Zebedee comes to Jesus with a request for a privileged position at his throne. When the ten learn of this request, they are indignant. They do not blame this impertinent request on a doting mother but, rather, zero in on the two sons (James and John) and their desire for preeminence. The implication, as perceived by the other disciples, is that the two brothers have used their mother as an advantageous lever to gain a higher position and to outmaneuver the other disciples. Dionysius of Halicarnassus reports an analogous incident in his *Roman Antiquities* (2.61.1). Right after the death of Romulus, Dionysius reports that the Roman senate lapsed

76. For example, see Plutarch’s *Solon* 27.1.
77. Inasmuch as the Gospels have been compared to OT historical books, this is unusual even in comparison with 1 and 2 Kings. The two books of Kings make use of at least eight different sources.
into quarreling among themselves as to who would have greater authority. It is interesting that the four Evangelists do not fall victim to seeking a prominent place for themselves in their respective Gospels. Once again, we are brought face to face with another crossroads decision: because the disciples are pictured as vying for prestige and prominence, and because Evangelists do not identify themselves, does this not create a wall of separation between disciples and Evangelists? How can we remove the disparity between the profile of the disciples seeking honor for themselves and anonymity of the Gospels?

Inasmuch as men of letters define themselves in contrast to or in relationship to others, what does one do with such omissions? Several possibilities emerge: rivals are not mentioned because to do so would possibly endanger or diminish the credibility of the author as captious and caviling; rivals are omitted because it would draw unwelcomed attention to them; rivals are omitted because there are, in fact, none to be included.

**Conclusion**

At this final juncture of the investigation, necessity dictates a critical query: is it possible to nail down any valid observations for Gospel research? Does a substantive implication present itself? Throughout this article, constant reference has been made to the contrasts between the four Gospels and disagreement within the Greco-Roman literary conventions. Given the nature of ancient literary dissent, we propose four additional implications.

**The Limitations of This Investigation**

This inquiry has at least three limitations. First, what are the possible implications of the unusual omission of names in the fourfold Gospel? The limits of this investigation do not permit a positive answer to that question. Other than the elimination of dissent, data from this study do not explain the absence of names in the Gospels. Second, the absence of an adversarial spirit in the four Gospels cannot adequately explain variation in the fourfold Gospel. This study principally establishes what the Gospels are not; however, these findings open the door to considering what the fourfold Gospel is. The information extracted can, therefore, provide a spur to further engage the Gospel texts for understanding the value of variations. Third, a question is left begging: do the above data completely eliminate the possibility of minor, oblique, or subtle contradiction? No, not...
completely.79 This admission, however, should not detract from the major premise of the study in that the rhetoric of dissent is by nature openly candid, often bluntly direct, and clearly straightforward. Consequently, the artifice of subtle sleight of hand disagreement does not offer great promise for deciphering the significance of variations in the tradition.

The Data Give a Basis for Questioning Current Scholarly Trends

Viewed strictly from the specific vantage point of direct disagreement from the Greco-Roman literary tradition, the assertion that the Evangelists contradict each other must be considered suspect. A claim for Gospel disension such as this is a worthy candidate for doubt and a cause for complaint. The premise that no Gospel writer, in clear and direct language, quarrels with any other Evangelist does not appear as an arbitrarily forced conclusion. Nor does this conclusion qualify as simplistic. Rather, the premise has emerged naturally from the comparative study of the texts themselves. Specifically, when placed alongside the measuring stick of Greco-Roman literary models, it cannot be established, for example, that Matthew was out to replace Mark—a common contention in NT scholarship.80 Nor has John purposed to replace the Synoptics—another common assertion among NT scholars.81 It is an axiom of current NT scholarship that there is a

79. If the supposition is that the author of the Gospel of John was not aware of the Synoptics, it cannot be established, therefore, that deliberate disagreement is in mind.
81. See D. Moody Smith, “John and the Synoptics in Light of the Question of Faith and History,” in Faith and History: Essays in Honor of Paul W. Meyer (ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Otto Betz; Eerdmans, 1990) 74–89. Moody begins with reflections on Hans Windisch’s Johannes und die Synoptiker: Wollte der vierte Evangelist die älteren Evangelien ergänzen oder ersetzen? (1926) 76: “Windisch proceeded on the traditional view that John knew and was familiar with all the synoptic gospels, but because they were inadequate representations of the gospel as John understood it, he wrote a gospel to supersede them and in doing so found most of their content useless.” After surveying the literature and the problem of the differences between John and the Synoptics, Moody returns to the challenge raised by Windisch (p. 83): “As we earlier observed, the major differences between John and the other Gospels have traditionally been understood in terms of supplementation. Either John was to supplement the other gospels, or vice versa, or both. Windisch has shown the difficulties of that perspective once the protective aura of canonicity is allowed to fall away. (By ‘aura of canonicity’ I mean the implication, tacitly drawn from the canonical status of the other gospels, that John would have accepted their adequacy and authority.)” Moody goes on to argue that the term supplementation is too weak and displacement may be too strong; he further observes (p. 87) that “with the rise of higher criticism and the questioning of the tradition of apostolic authorship, John’s differences from the synoptics began to count against its historical reliability.” See also D. Moody Smith, “John and the Synoptics,” NTS 26 (1980) 425–44, esp. p. 429: “So it comes about that the only satisfactory resolution of the conundrum posed by John’s wide divergence from the synoptics is the one Windisch adopts, namely, that John wrote to displace the other gospels, because he found them inadequate vehicles for the Christian proclamation as he understood it.” Smith acknowledges the difficulty of this position (John never recognizes the existence of the synoptics, let alone “polemizes” against them) but in the end finds it less troublesome.
direct literary relationship in the Synoptics from one Gospel to another.\textsuperscript{82} Whether adopting the two-source hypothesis (priority of Mark and Q), the Griesbach theory of composition, or the Farrer hypothesis, specialists operate on the premise that there is a literary connection among the first three Gospels. Without staking out a position on the issue of literary relationship but simply making use of it, the conclusion seems unavoidable that the omission of direct disagreement is a striking anomaly.

**Greco-Roman Conventions Allow Us to Defend Canonical Unity**

Another contrast to the absence of direct disagreement in the fourfold Gospels may be found in the style of the *Gospel of Philip* (v. 17): “Some say Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. They err. They do not know what they say.”\textsuperscript{83} Two characteristics of this post-fourfold Gospel document stand out: (1) the reference to an unidentified “some” and (2) the accusation that they are in error. Noticeable in the four Gospels is the absence of any reference to a nebulous “some say.” Such an oblique referent would leave the reader wondering who these “some” could be. Equally significant is the presence of criticism (“they err”). This twin set of indicators help to mark a distinct boundary line that facilitates the distancing of the Gospel of Philip from the canonical unity of the fourfold Gospel. Likewise, we may consider the more popular *Gospel of Thomas*, not for the presence of direct disagreements, but for the attribution of a personal name.\textsuperscript{84} If it is conventional for a particular genre (such as, for example, the Gospels) to dispense with the name of the writer, then the subsequent presence of a name such as Philip or Thomas creates a wall of separation from the original pattern. Unless further research in the area of the Greco-Roman literary traditions can clearly overthrow the major findings of this study, the canonical unity of the four Gospels is worthy of confidence.\textsuperscript{85} This would suggest

\textsuperscript{82} E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies represent well the consensus in their *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM, 1989) 51: “Whatever the reasons, the synoptics are so close to one another that virtually all students of them have concluded that the relationship depends on direct literary copying from one gospel to another, or from common sources. It is especially to be noted that there is extensive verbatim (word-for-word) agreement in Greek, which can hardly be explained by independent knowledge of the saying of Jesus in Aramaic.”

\textsuperscript{83} *The Gospel of Philip: Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Gnosis of Sacred Union, Translation from the Coptic and Commentary by Jean-Yves Leloup* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2004) 51. See also p. 21: “Those who say that the Lord first died, and then was resurrected, are wrong.” And p. 69: “Those who say that there is someone in the sky are mistaken.”


\textsuperscript{85} The early church was aware of variations within the Gospel tradition. These variations, though troublesome, did not overthrow their confidence in the Gospels as unified products of divine inspiration. For associations with the concept of canonical unity, see James C. Vanderkam, “Questions of Canon Viewed through the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *BBR* 11 (2001) 269–92.
that, instead of contradictions in the Gospel record, canonical unity leads more in the direction of complementation. The most identifiable finding of this study is that, in comparison to Greco-Roman conventions, direct disagreement does not characterize the fourfold Gospel. Or, we may state this conclusion in a softer tone: given the nature of these conventions, it is most likely the case that when two biblical texts (such as the genealogies in Matthew and Luke) appear to contradict, this must not be viewed as a case of outright contradiction but, rather, may suggest a relationship of complementation.

Scholarly Work Alleging Contradictions in the Gospels Is Excessive

The results of this investigation recommend restraint. Recognition of Greco-Roman literary practice would caution us to tone down the language of contradiction, especially the use of abrasive adjectives such as

Parallel associations usually admit theological concepts such as inspiration, revelation, and authoritative Scripture.

86. For a moderate or intermediate view, see Christopher W. Tuckett, “Jesus and the Gospels,” in The New Interpreter’s Bible (ed. Neil Alexander; vol. 8; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 70–86, esp. p. 74: “Are we to believe that Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey three or four times in almost (but not quite) identical circumstances and each evangelist recorded a different occasion accurately? And such an idea becomes even more ludicrous with other events . . . Much more plausible, then, is the view that these different accounts in our Gospels represent different reports of the same incident, and the differences may reveal something more about the way in which a tradition was told and used later.” Tuckett is using variations in the tradition to trace development within the tradition. However, there is another way to cut the cake. Variations may not necessarily connect to development in the tradition but to purpose, perspective, and selectivity. Variations, also, need not point to contradictions or disagreements. See also C. H. Dodd, The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953) 446, who, in evaluating the issue of whether the fourth Gospel is complementary to the Synoptics, says: “I believe that the course which was taken by Leben-Jesu-Forschung (‘The Quest of the Historical Jesus’) during the nineteenth century proves that a severe concentration on the Synoptic record, to the exclusion of the Johannine contribution, leads to an impoverished, a one-sided, and finally an incredible view of the facts—I mean, of the facts, as part of history.” See also Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays, “Seeking the Identity of Jesus,” in Seeking the Identity of Jesus (ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 1–24, esp. p. 8: “we should receive all four together as complementary testimonies, about the complex figure of Jesus the Christ. If this is so, it follows that no single historical reconstruction of Jesus of Nazareth can supplant the fourfold testimony of the Gospels as a more adequate account of his identity.” A similar conviction may be found on p. 19.

87. In this light, a more plausible explanation may be that four Gospels mirror the narrative sections of the OT. See, for example, Edwin A. Abbott’s The Fourfold Gospel: Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913) 15, which noted nearly a hundred years ago: “It comes nearly to this, that the Fourth Gospel was, in one respect, related to the Three as the Book of Chronicles was related to the Books of Samuel and Kings. In the LXX, the Book of Chronicles is entitled Paraleipomena, ‘Things Passed Over’, or ‘Things Omitted’, that is to say, things omitted in Kings and added (as a supplement to Kings) in Chronicles. Somewhat similarly it was supposed by ‘the ancients’ that John supplemented the Synoptists. ‘The ancients’ did not indeed mention Kings and Chronicles. Had they done so, they would doubtless have recognised that the tone and the spirit of the Evangelist were very different from the tone and the spirit of the Chronicler. But they said that the Evangelist supplemented the earlier gospels. And the title of Chronicles in the LXX implies that the Chronicler supplemented Kings.”
sharp and blatant. If the results of this study stand up to the scrutiny of cross-examination, it would indicate the further necessity to refine the language of scholarly discourse and return to terms such as variation and complementation. Modern scholarly language to describe Gospel variations as “blatant disagreements,” “flat contradictions,” and “sharp contrasts” is unsatisfying, unnecessary, and unsubstantiated when compared to the practice and profile of the Greco-Roman literary tradition of dissent. Inasmuch as current NT scholarship continues to assume contradiction, those who see the issue otherwise may find some comfort that the matter is not so cut and dried. For those who are hesitant to jump on the scholarly bandwagon that claims contradictions in the Gospels, perhaps the above investigation will offer an alternative worth considering.