



GOSPELEVIDENCE **SERIES 2**

DIRECT SPEECH in the **GOSPELS**



BEN VAN NOORT

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in the
GOSPELS

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“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ...”

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Jesus Christ
(Matthew 7:24-25, 28)

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Introduction, Resurrection of the Gospels

In my former book *Unmasking the Oral Tradition* (Gospel Evidence Series 1) I discussed the three crown texts regarding the origins of the gospels. A completely new expression—unknown in theology—was introduced regarding the origins of the gospels: Documentation. This word is a direct result of the crown texts and therefore I will repeat these briefly in the introduction below. Furthermore, they are indispensable to the current subject, the presentation of the spoken word in the gospels and for interpretation in general. The moment has come to look more specifically at the content of the gospels. Each biblical example will show how urgent and well-fitting the documentation theory is for gospel reading.

As we learn from Luke's prologue, Luke, as well as the other gospel writers, copied only authentic records for their books. We have seen that the records originated from the events they describe, and therefore it is possible to look at the gospels in a new way. Of course, it will also be necessary to show how the principle of documentation differs from the theory of the oral tradition, which is still the conventional approach and has been fundamental in theology since the middle ages. Why was and is the theory of the oral tradition such a robust and nearly indestructible weed? But first, the three crown texts—also mentioned as crown texts or crown jewels—that unanimously show that documentation was the true base of the gospels.

Luke about Documentation

“¹Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, ²just as delivered to us the eyewitnesses from the beginning also (being) ministers of the (spoken) word.” (Luke 1:1-2 RSV, elaborated in v. 2: the active form is given as in the Greek original.)

Consider the following statements:

- a. ‘The things which have been accomplished among us,’ are the deeds of Jesus, the Jesus events. If you want to control, see Acts 1:1–2.
- b. The word ‘us’ in the former expression refers *to the bystanders* of the events in the first place.
- c. This ‘us’ is repeated in v. 2. To them the eyewitnesses delivered, *to the bystanders!*
- d. Also being servants of the spoken word, the eyewitnesses delivered (v. 2). This excludes oral tradition, as it was not possible to deliver orally during the Jesus events. This includes note taking, as the eyewitnesses could only deliver in writing during the spoken word of the Jesus events.
- e. The service to the spoken word included the writing of the actual words of Jesus.

It is clear, the servants (ministers) of the spoken word (v. 2) were not the preaching apostles after Jesus' departure, as is usually assumed. They were the professionals, who wrote their reports of what Jesus said and did, for bystanders, spectators. Many made use of the reports to create narratives on their wax tablets about what they had experienced with Jesus. So yes, they had something to tell and read at home. Consequently, Luke is speaking about the servants of the

spoken word of Jesus. Afterwards, the records of the professionals became the sources for the gospel writers.

John about Documentation

“¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—² the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—³ That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.” (1 John 1:3–4)

The present times (testify and proclaim v. 2; proclaim, are writing, vv. 3 and 4) refer to parallel activities that started in the past, when Jesus was among them. In v. 2, it is about oral tradition: preaching the gospel orally. In vv. 3 and 4, it is about a written tradition. And these present times of testifying, proclaiming and writing continued at the time of John's First Letter. *That is the consequence of the present times of these forms.*

In conclusion, John is saying that they were always making known to others what they had experienced with Jesus, *orally* (v. 2) as well as *in writing* (vv. 3 and 4). They did so from the beginning until the here and now, the writing of his letter. The practical meaning is: reports from the beginning to the end of Jesus' ministry were broadcast in writing by the apostles among the Christian communities after Pentecost. This could only happen through the use of books with the collected reports from Jesus' ministry.

Hebrews about Documentation

“³ How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation; which beginning to be spoken by the Lord, was established for us by those who were hearing, ⁴ while God also bore witness, by signs and wonders, and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will.” (Hebrews 2:3–4 RSV, elaborated in v. 3b: word-for-word translation.)

The hearers did not confirm, did not preach but *established* (recorded) the spoken word of Jesus. God gave his confirmation to the ministry of Jesus (the Lord) by wonders and miracles (v. 4). Hearers could only establish the actual words of Jesus *for us, in favor of us* (v. 3). They could not confirm the words of Jesus in any way. *Establish* is the second meaning for the Greek word *bebaio-oo* (confirm) in 'Liddell, Scott, Jones' the famous Greek-English Lexicon of classical Greek.

It is not too much to speak of the *Resurrection of the Gospels*, if we begin to look at these books from the viewpoint of documentation.

1. Presentation of the Spoken Word

The writers of Jesus worked as professionals, meaning, systematically. Because they worked under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can be certain that they worked accurately and

effectively concerning the recording of the spoken word and the narrative parts of their reports. In this section, the purpose is to recognize the rules underlying the reporting of the direct speech portions. Thereafter, we will do the same for the narrative sections.

Rules for the Presentation of the Spoken Word

There are only a few parallel occurrences in the gospels where the same expressions are repeated verbatim. These examples are sufficient to draw conclusions and to formulate rules for the direct speech portions. Firstly, we will present the rules, and then give examples.

Rule 1. Simple (single) introduction. If direct speech is preceded by an introduction with a single spoken verb, the direct speech has been presented completely. For instance: he said, he answered, he cried, etc. After any of these forms, the complete direct speech follows.

Rule 2. Twofold introduction. If direct speech is preceded by an introduction with two spoken verbs, the direct speech has been presented in part. For instance: he answered and said; he answered them, saying. After this type of introduction, not all of what was said has been extracted, only the important part of it. Unfortunately, in most translations of the New Testament, dual expressions of speaking have been exchanged for simple ones. If necessary for discussion, the missing forms of the Greek will be presented in square brackets [] in the text of the Revised Standard Version. If a word given in the RSV is lacking in the Greek text, it will be indicated with curly brackets { }, if necessary for discussion.

Rule 3. Plural introduction. If an introduction has the subject in plural, several statements were made, but only one of them has been presented in the direct speech. For instance: they answered him, they cried out saying.

Example of Peter's Confession

For the first two rules, let's take as an example the story of Peter's Confession, in which Jesus asks his disciples for their opinion of him (Matthew 16:15–16, Mark 8:29, Luke 9:20).

First rule. When we read the question of Jesus, we see that in all three cases, it is exactly the same question: "But who do you say that I am?" It is remarkable that in each gospel a simple introduction precedes Jesus' question: said (Matthew), asked (Mark), and said (Luke). Three times, the question is presented in its entirety (rule 1).

Second rule. The problems arise when we look at the three replies of Peter. They are all different. Matthew: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Mark: You are the Christ. And Luke: The Christ of God. To understand this, it is necessary to apply rule 2. The introductions are two-fold in each instance: answered and said (Matthew), answered and said (Mark), answering, said (Luke). In other words, Peter's answers have been presented, in part, three times. The meaning of the expression "answered and said" or "answering, said" is that while he was answering, the presented direct speech was *among* the things he said. The three answers are part of the same reaction. Peter must have said something such as, "The Christ of God (Luke). You are the Christ (Mark). You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God! (Matthew)" Luke's reply had been first, as there is no verb form in it. It was the first direct reaction on the question of Jesus. In the second answer (of Mark) we see that Peter makes it more personal: You are ... the

Christ. And in the final sentence he makes it all complete with his definition of the Christ “the Son of the Living God!” Peter’s answer gives a perfect example of rule 2, in each case an introduction with two saying verbs precedes the direct speech. Putting the three replies after each other, we discover a figure of speech, an enumeration with increasing force.

The threefold repetition of Peter’s answer is not strange or unusual. It was not daily custom among the disciples at that time to talk about Jesus as the Messiah. When Jesus sent them out to preach the kingdom (Matthew 10), he instructed them to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, not to proclaim him as the Messiah. Later on, we read in John’s gospel that it was dangerous for people to confess Jesus as the Messiah, because they could be punished by being banished from the synagogue (John 9:22; 12:42). That might be the reason Jesus took his disciples to the district of Caesarea Philippi, as it was forbidden by the Pharisees to call him Messiah on Jewish land. In Caesarea Philippi, they did not transgress the law by that confession. It is understandable that Peter did not give a short and formal reaction of one single phrase. On the contrary, he expressed a deep-rooted conviction with the emotions that go with it, and that is the cause for the repetitions in his answer.

Of course, we also have to deal with the question: why did the rapid writers of Jesus not provide the complete reaction in their reports? There were several good reasons for this. Firstly, their accounts had to be short as they worked on wax tablets and not with ink and paper (papyrus). Moreover, it seemed to be customary in reports, to present only the necessary without repetition. Reports without redundancies resulted in the fixation of the hearer’s attention. Last, but not least, this working method made it possible for the professionals to create different reports for different groups: dedicated disciples, educated people and the common people. This explains the great similarities between the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Luke and Mark, respectively, and also their variations. A model of declaration to which the theory of the oral tradition has no reply. Of course, it is always possible that more had been said by Peter in his response. However, there is no reason for concern, as the replies that were delivered will always be sufficient—at least together—to receive an honest impression of what was said. This model of documentation implies distribution of the spoken word and observation into the reports, yet also that the *same rapid writers* were responsible for the content of the different reports.

Example of the Third Rule

For the third rule, let’s take as an example how Jesus asked his disciples what the public opinion of him was. It happened shortly before Peter’s Confession. “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” (Matthew 16:13), “Who do men say that I am?” (Mark 8:27) and “Who do the people say that I am? (Luke 9:18)” Three times it is regarding the same issue, but the question is repeated in different terms. Evidently, Jesus asked this at least three times in his teaching. In each case, a comparable reply was given with varied wording:

Matthew: And *they said*, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Mark: And *they told* him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets.”

Luke: And *they answered* [*answering said*], “John the Baptist; but others say, Elijah; and others, that one of the old prophets has arisen.”

In each instance only one actual reaction has been presented (rule 3). Perhaps Jesus had chosen a good place for his question and when he began asking, the last disciples eventually arrived.

The three replies show a remarkable consensus in opinion. Mark 8:28 has a variant with a twofold introduction (spoke to him saying) in the Alexandrian tradition. Luke has a dual introduction. This means that the answer has been presented in part (rule 2).

It is quite natural that reactions differ in life, and it would be incongruous if they were exactly the same. In matters of biblical exegesis, however, exegetes have difficulties with these variances, and there is the concern that the gospels are not in agreement (in some way contradictory). A common explanation is that the oral tradition caused these differences to creep into the text. From the documentation point of view, we see on the contrary, a completely standard situation; with many reactions to a topic under debate. That was the way of higher education at that time. A teacher, by putting forth a question, opened a discussion. The purpose was to consider a matter from all angles, and the disciples were supposed to come back with remarks and new questions, as starting points for the master to reveal his knowledge (diatribè style).

Rule 3 is also applicable when someone speaks in the name of a group or reads a message from a document representing all. In Matthew 22:16–17, we read, “And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; ... Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’” Undoubtedly, this message was spoken by one person as part of a group that was listening. The speaker probably read the message from a slip of paper or a wax tablet, as the vernacular suggests (they sent ... saying; that is, they sent ... to say, etc.). In Luke 7:6, we read, “the centurion sent friends to him, saying to him, ‘Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.’” It is clear from the first person (I am not worthy) that the friends possessed a letter containing the words of the centurion. Thus of course, only one of the centurion’s friends read the message.

So far, we may say that the rules for interpretation of discourse show a refined system for reporting the spoken word. This system, in turn, provides the tools for exegesis to understand the many nuances concerning the spoken word in the gospels and Acts.

2. Signal Words in Narratives

A second set of rules deals with the course of events: succession and interruption of events or actions. To discover the rules of the course of events, there is much more material for comparison than for the rules of the spoken language in the discourse. The synoptic gospels have many narratives, and the use of specific conjunctions at the beginning of a sentence tells us much about the course of an event.

Rule 4. Succession of events (actions).

Primarily, if there is no signal word, there is often direct succession of events or actions (asyndetic connection). Example Matthew 14:29. “He said, ‘Come!’” This was the direct answer of Jesus unto Peter’s question to also come onto the water.

A second method to emphasize succession is the use of the Greek word *de* in the second position of a sentence. This signal word suggests a certain contrast to what is told in the previous sentence and it often looks conspicuously like the asyndetic connection as discussed above. Example Matthew 14:28. “{And} Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.’” The word And (*Kai*) in curly brackets is not in the Greek text, but instead the word *de* in second position which means that Peter’s question came as a direct reaction (contrast) on the reassurance of Jesus that it was he who came across the water. (Often the Greek *de* is translated with *And*, as is done here.)

A third method pointing to succession is if a sentence starts with *Immediately* (*And immediately, But immediately*). In the Gospel of Mark, this construction is often used. Example Mark 6:50, “For they all saw him, and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; have no fear.’”

A fourth method of succession is a principal sentence starting with *Then*. The Gospel of Matthew very often uses this construction, in 23:1–2 we read “Then said Jesus to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat.’” The moment that Jesus this said was just after his replies to the Pharisees he had brought to silence from their heavy encounters with him in the temple. Now he could teach the crowd that was waiting for him.

Rule 5. Interruption of time between events (actions). There is one significant way of referring to an interruption in the course of events: when a sentence or a clause starts with *And/and* (Greek: *Kai*). Example Matthew 14:32, “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘O man of little faith, why did you doubt?’ And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.” The interruption of v. 32 is that Jesus and Peter returned to the boat before they climbed into the vessel.

The Gospel of John often has the word *then* (Greek: *oun*) in second or third position in the sentence to create interruption. Example John 6:21 “But he said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’ {Then} They then were glad to take him into the boat.” The RSV translation has wrongly *Then* at the beginning of the sentence instead in second position. It is clear that John is able in this way to remain silent about Peter’s walk on water and his call for help. With the signal word *oun* (then) it is possible to relate to something that has previously been mentioned in the course of events and naturally creates an interruption of events.

There are some other Greek words that refer indirectly to time but we do not discuss them all at this time. The most important signal words at the beginning of a sentence concerning succession and interruption of events have been exposed here. Especially the word *And/and*. It is the most commonly used word in the gospels to point to non-sequence between events or actions.

3. The Centurion of Capernaum and Documentation

A good example to understand the rules for the spoken word and narratives is to be found in the story of the Centurion of Capernaum whose slave was seriously ill. To show it in full, two

narratives have been presented below, the Luke and the Matthew account. When the writers of Jesus had collected their notes and decided how to compose their reports, they simplified it for themselves. They divided the information on their wax tablets into roughly two accounts. The first of Luke gives two conversations: elders who came to Jesus asking for healing and later friends of the centurion who asked Jesus not to come to the house of the centurion, but to give the healing command to stop the illness, where he was. Let's look at it.

Part I, Luke 7:2–9, 10

² Now a centurion had a slave who was dear to him, who was sick and at the point of death. ³ When he heard of Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴ {And} when they came to Jesus, they besought him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue.” ⁶ {And} Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For I am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” ⁹ When Jesus heard this, he marveled at him and turned and said to the multitude that had followed him, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”

Comment. We have here a series of *de*-sentences from v. 2–4, 6a, 6b, 9: succession of actions only interrupted by the parts of direct speech. The second group sent out by the officer has the message for Jesus to stay outside his house. Obviously, the officer remembered the Jewish perception that a Roman house was an impure place, with all types of symbols and idols, which is forbidden for a Jew to enter. Now the story ends with (Luke 7:10).

¹⁰ And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave well.

Comment. It is clear that Luke, finishing with this sentence, makes it obvious that Jesus did what the centurion had asked via his friends. Having praised the centurion for the ears of his friends the healing could not fail to occur. He gave the healing command. However, it is not presented in Luke's account. The most interesting point that Luke gives at the end of his narrative, is a closing sentence with a signal word of interruption *And* (*Kai*) that something had happened in the meantime. We would think, yes, that they had returned to the house of the centurion and found the slave well. However, more happened there, and that is what we read in Matthew.

Part II, Matthew 8:5–13

⁵ As he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, beseeching him ⁶ and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress.” ⁷ And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” ⁸ {But} And the centurion answered him [answering him said], “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be

healed.⁹ For I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go’, and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”¹⁰ When Jesus heard him, he marveled, and said to those who followed him; “Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,¹² while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.”¹³ And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; be it done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.

Comment. Apparently, the centurion had followed his friends (the second group of messengers) to see the outcome. When Jesus had heard their message—undoubtedly a letter: I-style, Luke 7:6 “I am not worthy,” etc.—and had praised the centurion, he could not remain hidden and came to the fore. Then the conversation between Jesus and the centurion occurred. He repeated what he had written shortly before, that Jesus could speak the healing command at the spot where they were, which happened (v. 13).

At the beginning of Matthew’s narrative we see several ‘and’ sentences: v. 7 probably an interruption because the direct speech of v. 6 was in part (double introduction, beseeching and saying); 8 probably again a short interruption as the centurion’s spoken word was also in part (double introduction: answering and said); v. 10 is a de-sentence, no interruption; v. 13 again an And-sentence, a short interruption, probably meant that Jesus turned to the centurion after he had spoken to his followers (disciples) and gave the healing command.

Deductions

The two reports of the story of the Centurion of Capernaum as delivered by Matthew and Luke, represent the correct use of the rules for the presentation of direct speech. This is even more convincing in combination with the rules for succession and interruption. Each account is a complete narrative of a part of the entire event. The stories together show a realistic and convincing coherence.

Matthew’s account is a teaching report about Jesus as the Messiah: his word of power is central. That is indeed the hermeneutics of the Gospel of Matthew, which becomes clear in the first sentence of the book “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” This makes clear that it was Matthew’s goal to present Jesus as the promised Messiah of Israel. The teaching aspect is especially in Jesus’ vision on the Kingdom of Heaven which is also open for outsiders, non-Jews. They will come from east and west. He spoke about these things to his followers, that is to his disciples who had to learn.

Luke’s description is an authentic public report, with many interesting features for people that followed Jesus on a greater distance: Jewish leaders with good connections to a Roman officer. They were willing to do something for him and his critically ill servant. Formerly, the officer had helped to build their synagogue. The second group sent out by the officer had the message for Jesus to stay outside his house. And Jesus praised the centurion for that. This was especially fascinating for the public.

Undoubtedly, the reporters had made two narratives for several reasons: (1) the repeated words of the centurion had to be distributed, because a replication of them in one narrative would be too much for the hearers, (2) the people needed short reports, because their wax tablets could not contain long ones, and (3) there were indeed different groups that followed Jesus.

It is clear that the gospel writers did no attempt to combine the reports later—they published them in their gospels as they received them. Many copied the reports “just as they were delivered” to them by the eyewitnesses (Luke 1:2, see Introduction), and so did the gospel writers as Luke said in his prologue (v. 3): “It seemed good to me *also* (as the many) ... to write.”

Lastly, comparing other gospel stories, we re-discover the same patterns we have seen in the story of the Centurion of Capernaum. The so-called dissimilarities between the gospels that should be proof for the oral tradition with all its changed phrases, names, places and forms, we on the contrary encounter the greatest order of an astonishing and convincing power of expression according to the described rules of documentation.

4. Request of James and John, and Documentation

While Jesus prepared himself for his Passion in Jerusalem, he was confronted with the career ambitions of his disciples James and John. There are two accounts of the event and necessarily they belong together as in Matthew it is said that the mother together with her sons (James and John) came to Jesus to ask him a favor.

Part I, Matthew 20:20

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him, with her sons.

Comment. Career is also important for the family. When James and John came to speak with Jesus about their personal future desires, their mother was there to ensure that everything went as desired. The question was, who would sit at the immediate right and the immediate left of Jesus in his kingdom?

Part II, Mark 10:35–38

—³⁵ And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him, and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” ³⁶ {And} he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” ³⁷ {And} they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” ³⁹ {And} they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” ⁴¹ And when the ten heard it, they became displeased at James and John.

Comment. In Mark’s record, the attendance of the mother is not mentioned, as she has no speaking role (speaker reduction), while in Matthew, the mother is dominantly attendant. The

conversation with Jesus about their careers began when James and John stepped forward and asked their opening question: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Yes, everyone who is praying to God in this way will soon discover that this is not the right way to communicate with God. A benevolent Jesus asked in return what they wanted him to do. The final point is that Jesus is not the one to give positions to his disciples, this is the decree of God, the Father. Mark has several sentences starting with *And* in the Revised Standard Version, but in the Greek, there is only one real ‘and’ sentence (v. 41), “And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.” So, there is an interruption between v. 40 and v. 41. There, according to Matthew, the mother began to speak. Let’s look further.

Part III, Matthew 20:20–22

... and kneeling before him she asked him for something. ²¹ {And} he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Command that these two sons of mine may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” ²³ He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” ²⁴ And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. ²² But Jesus answered [answering said], “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” ²³ [And] He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” ²⁴ And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.

Comment. The mother knelt before Jesus, but the opening question is not reported and additionally, Jesus had told her to say what she truly wanted. Her behavior is remarkable. She had already heard the reply to her sons, and now she was trying to persuade Jesus to her direction. Kneeling is an expression of faith and obedience, not a tool for pressure. Jesus’ answer to her and to her sons (to them, 23) was a repetition of what he had said earlier, that this was a matter for the Father only.

The other disciples blamed James and John for their selfishness, implicitly also blaming the mother. The attitude of the other disciples sufficiently indicates that they also had aspirations to the high places in the kingdom. Strangely enough, Jesus was without reproach; he did not blame the two, the mother, or the others. He used the opportunity to teach them a principle of the kingdom: He who wants to climb has to descend.

Conclusion

The rapid writers of Jesus who had to distribute the materials to various reports, followed approximately the same method as in the reporting of the cure of the centurion’s servant. After collecting their material, they made a sober division into two parts. First, they prepared a teaching record, and chose Jesus’ final answer to the mother, for the outcome. It is not without reason that no public record is available in Luke’s gospel. The subject was unquestionably not an issue for

the public but for the inner circle of the twelve. Therefore, only a teaching record (Matthew) and a remnant record (Mark) have been delivered.

5. Time for Reflection

John wrote in his first letter (1:3–4): “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.” John was speaking about the writing of the gospels, that which we have seen and heard. They proclaimed that by word of mouth and also in writing as he says in v. 4. It is a great heritage to have the actual words of Jesus.

The writing work of the apostles was part of the joy in Christ for all who came in fellowship with God, the Father and the Son, together with the apostles. This joy was certainly the driving force behind John’s work as an apostle, especially the work of writing. And writing is also our subject; about Jesus’ words, sayings, teachings. Those are the only relics of him we possess. Hearing them, they come to life again. John was already deeply convinced of this truth and therefore he wrote this strong statement about joy.

Here is the place to reflect on the former two sections about the Centurion of Capernaum and the Request of James and John. It is not necessary to give many more examples of documentation and the underlying rules of reporting. It is undoubtedly possible to say more about these gospel stories, but we have only given an exposition on how to interpret the gospel narratives from the view of documentation. We did so because it has not been done in theology in the past, and that calls for reflection.

In the past, many honest theologians have preached and written about the gospels, but not from the perspective of documentation. How did they deal with the spoken word of Jesus? Mostly they have quoted Jesus’ words, despite many inconveniences they found in their texts concerning words, phrases, expressions and differences between the gospels in general. They often wanted to keep the gospel message prominent despite their questions.

In a different way, there is the example of Luther. He was deeply affected by the message that God justified by grace. This discovery dominated his life and work. However, in the twentieth century, the leaders of the Lutheran church distanced themselves from his opinions in his later years, about the Jews. These opinions were not in accordance with the Christian rule “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It was too painful for these church leaders, after World War II, to remain silent. They had not intended to diminish Luther’s values for the foundation of the Lutheran church, but they acknowledged that there was a serious misunderstanding in Luther’s final writings.

6. Conservative Theology versus Documentation

The reformer Calvin has written much regarding biblical explanation. Reading his work, we meet a man who was touched by the Holy Spirit. Through preaching and Christian living, the Holy Spirit does his work to honor God and to bless everyone who wanted to listen. That was his vision. As great as this man was, he also left painful obstacles for those who read his works in

later times. In his Gospel Harmony he commented on the gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke together. He used expressions such as “the Holy Spirit moved the pen of the gospel writer”, or “the matter of the subject is that the Holy Spirit wants to make clear that.” He was aware that not he, but only the Holy Spirit could give his divine blessings to the people. And yet, this great man also had his flaws.

Flaws of Calvin

Regarding our first example, Calvin wrote in his Harmony that the centurion himself did not have a conversation with Jesus as described in Matthew. He supposed that Matthew, trying to shorten Luke’s version, had introduced the centurion speaking to Jesus and not his messengers. It was no problem for Calvin, the substance was the same. The words of Jesus to the officer that gentiles would come from east and west to enter into the Kingdom probably had to be delivered by the friends of the centurion. Calvin seemingly had no sensitivity for a living context that the centurion could have followed his friends to see the outcome, which ultimately brought him to Jesus. The only thing that mattered to Calvin was the truth of Jesus’ words and the minor remark of Matthew “A centurion came forward to him” disappeared in that immense truth. However, it never escaped the gospel of Matthew that the centurion indeed spoke with Jesus.

Regarding the second example, Calvin made a similar shift. He stated that only the mother had spoken to Jesus about the career desires of her sons, and not James and John, who were merely bystanders of the event. Additionally, he made further similar changes. The Sermon of the Mount (Matthew 5–7) was, according to Calvin, a compilation by Matthew of the sayings of Jesus, definitely not spoken, as we have the oration. The comparable Sermon of the Field (Luke 6:17–49) did not even occur, according to Calvin, and it would be a smaller compilation by Luke of the Sermon of the Mount. He was quite open about his shifts. He could speak about the gospel writers in that they differed in following the exact chronological order as they were not concerned about it (his comments on the temple cleansings). The three orations about the End of the World, he sees them as one on the Mount of Olives. However, Luke’s version is in the temple, while Mark’s version is on the Mount of Olives for only four disciples and yet Matthew’s version has all his disciples present. The two accounts of Matthew and Mark regarding the interrogation of Jesus by Caiaphas, have developed into one. This is a pity, as the context is that for judges it was a necessity to verify a confession with a second one. For this reason, Caiaphas interrogated Jesus, a second time under oath, whether he was the Messiah (Matthew 62:63), with slight differences in the direct speech. After the confirmation of Jesus, for the second time the high priest tore his clothes further. More examples could be given, but that is outside our current scope. It is clear that a lot of reasonable and fascinating details begin to disappear in the traditional type of gospel explanation and that is ultimately a serious loss.

The question is of course: Why in the world did Calvin do this? Wasn’t he the man who stood for the truth of the Word of God? Certainly, his freedom concerning the gospels originated from the view that the apostles had become the witnesses of Jesus. Witnesses in court do not need to speak literal repetitions of what they have heard. And yet, their testimonies are often decisive as ‘true testimonies’ for judges. This was already so in the time of Calvin. It is remarkable that

the stream of conservative Christians still follow this concept of truth with respect to the gospels. Some quotes may suffice:

Conservative Theologians and “Inaccuracies by The Oral Tradition”

A. Kuyper, “When in the four Gospels Jesus, on the same occasion, is made to say words that are different in form of expression, it is impossible that He should have used these four forms at once. The Holy Spirit, however, merely intends to make an impression on the Church which corresponds to what Jesus said.” In: *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 550.

John Murray, “Everyone should recognize that in accordance with accepted forms of speech and custom a statement can be perfectly authentic and yet not pedantically precise.” In: *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960) 30.

N. B. Stonehouse, “It is obvious therefore that the evangelists are not concerned, at least not at all times, to report the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus.” [*actual words* of Jesus; pres. author] in: *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963) 108.

R. T. France, “We can never, therefore, assume that we have the *ipsissima verba Jesu* [*actual words of Jesus*; pres. author]. His sayings have been translated, and in many cases paraphrased to bring out the interpretation of the evangelist and/or some earlier transmitter of the tradition. But this fact does not place upon us the burden of proof when we claim that a saying is the authentic teaching of Jesus. ... The burden of proof, we believe, rests on the sceptic.” The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus, in: *History, Criticism & Faith* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976) 129–130.

P. J. Williams, “Do We Have Jesus’s Actual Words?” is the title of chapter 5 of his book *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018) 110. We would expect a firm “Yes, We Have.” But no, the answer is: “We find many converging reasons to believe that we have content that originated from Jesus.” And: “The view that some, much, most, or even all of Jesus’s teaching was done in Aramaic and is only recorded in a translated form in the Greek Gospels is not on its own a sufficient reason to doubt that we have a reliable record of what Jesus said.”

The suggestion is given that we no longer even possess the original words of Jesus due to a translation from Aramaic into Greek. It is rather surprising to see how easily conservative and evangelical theologians can desert the robust creed that the gospels are the true Word of God. This old creed implies that we can rely on the actual text of the gospels in every aspect in the autographs (which we possess in at least 99,9% of the text; Byzantine text form). If we have to accept a supposed translation of the gospels from Aramaic to Greek, we have to admit that the original words of Jesus *are lost*. If this is what theology offers us, then something appears to be wrong.

Roman Catholics and The Oral Tradition

It is not improper to put the theory of the oral tradition prior to the gospels in a wider perspective. It was certainly a heritage of the Roman Catholic Church since the middle ages. This doctrine has been brought forward in a new structure in the document *Instruction on the Historical Truth of*

the Gospels, approved by Pope Paulus VI in 1964. The Instruction distinguishes “three stages of tradition by which the teaching and the life of Jesus have come down to us.” The stages are: 1. Our Lord’s teaching by word of mouth, 2. the preaching of the Apostles, 3. the work of the sacred authors of the gospels.

Some quotes: “*The Apostles*, bearing testimony to Jesus proclaimed first and foremost the death and resurrection of the Lord, faithfully recounting His life and words and, as regards the manner of their preaching, taking into account the circumstances of their hearers.” And: “*The sacred authors*, for the benefit of the churches, took this earliest body of instruction [preaching of the apostles; pres. author], which had been handed on orally at first and then in writing— for many soon set their hands to “drawing up a narrative” of matters concerning the Lord Jesus—and set it down in the four Gospels.” [Underlining; pres. author]

It is clear that the *Instruction* favors the theory of an apostolic preaching, being an oral tradition prior to the gospels. Furthermore, we are inclined to see the gospels as an apostolic heritage, the preaching of the apostles, instead of what they actually are: The Testament of Jesus himself. The question is: Does a Christian believe what Jesus said or what the apostles said? More than 600 times we read “Jesus said” or “Jesus answered and said.” Is that meaningless? And the words: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away!” We all know who said this. In my view, theology, with the best of intentions, is seriously missing the point with the so-called oral tradition prior to the gospels. It seems that the spoken word of Jesus is deemed to be the lost sheep in Christian theology, instead of what it really is: the Banner of Truth.

7. The Benefit of Documentation

The treatment of gospel texts in conservative theology has undoubtedly led to the custom of modern interpreters permitting themselves much freedom in exploring the idea of the oral tradition as a model for the differences between the gospels. Conservative theologians do not have a substantial defense as they all accept the oral aspect in the deliverance of the apostolic traditions. Consequently, the deep-rooted theological ideology of the so-called oral tradition prior to the gospels, will not be set aside any time soon.

Sadly enough, the reformers, Luther and Calvin, also had no better point of view. The mistranslations of the crown texts of documentation forced them into their opinions. They missed the perspective of documentation prior to the gospels.

However, we still have the three crown texts which speak for documentation: Luke 1:1–4, 1 John 1:1–4 and Hebrews 2:3–4. They are as diamonds that cannot be crushed and will never lose their brilliance. Therefore, John wrote: “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you (from the source). . . . And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.” (1 John 1:3–4) Writing was part of the Gospel from the beginning as there was always a complete joy in it, full joy. The crown jewels make clear that from the outset, there was a vibrant writing culture in Jesus’ ministry, and the meaning is that:

- The direct speeches in the gospels are trustworthy.

- We can always proudly state, “We possess the actual words of Jesus.”
- We can quote Jesus without any form of shame.
- Documentation is in the testimonies of the gospel writers themselves.
- Documentation is simple, realistic and convincing.
- Documentation does not allow commentators to draw a line between *true* and *untrue* within or between the gospels.
- Documentation speaks in favor of the accuracy of the gospels in all aspects.

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The third e-book of the Gospel Evidence Series will be “*Rapid Writers of Jesus*” about the history of stenography in the Roman empire, about Jesus’ professional writers, different types of reports and the nature of the four gospels.

ATTACHMENTS

About the Author

My name is Ben van Noort. I am a graduate (MA) from Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Since 1975 I worked as a high school teacher in Christian Religion. I had an active part in preparing a series of textbooks for Christian education as editor and co-author. And I wrote many articles concerning biblical issues.

How I Came to the Subject of Documentation

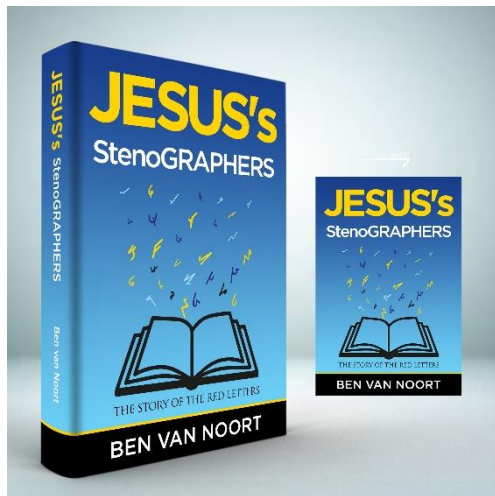
When I started as a high school teacher for Christian religion to adolescents, I was forced to reconsider the old and central problem in theology; “What about the words of Jesus?” My senior pupils leaned back, saying, “Sir, it was all written long after the events, wasn’t it? So how do we know it is true?” Another remarked: “Yes Sir, it’s fiction, just as we have learned with Dutch Language and Literature.” There I stood, empty-handed after five years of academic theological studies. Of course I knew the dilemma, but it was so clear presented by my pupils that I could only feel respect for them. This experience brought me again to the books to seek for the answers.

I started with the first verses of the Gospel of Luke (1:1–4), which contain the basic ideas about the oldest Christian transmission. I don’t know how often I have turned the words of this Bible passage over in my mind. To make it easier, I learned the Greek text by heart so that I could meditate on it every moment of the day. Slowly, an entirely new reality started to unfold. This text spoke of writers, who promptly followed Jesus.

For the work with my high school students, my discoveries gradually made an impact. They did not lean back anymore, this was real. This evidence-based approach brought the urgent contact between practical and spiritual reality. Gradually much research had to be done. This necessitated taking a deep breath to understand all the grammatical aspects of the three crown texts and for the mass of new explanations that were required for the gospels as books. The crown texts are Luke 1:1–4, 1 John 1:1–4 and Hebrews 2:3–4. They form foundation of the *documentation theory* about the origins of the gospels.

Many have written about the Gospels. Many have defended the historical truth of these books but, sadly enough, without the essential evidence that Jesus's words do still exist. For that reason the documentation theory is presented here, which makes clear that the biblical words of Jesus can be accepted in faith and without intellectual reservations, thanks to the persistent efforts of his rapid writers.

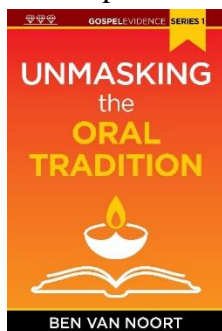
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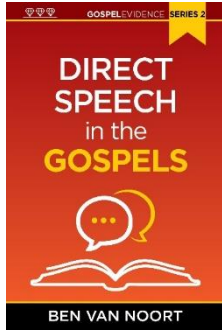
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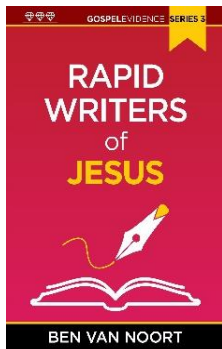
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