

When Gospels Collide

Robert M. Price



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I dedicate this book to my wonderful wife Qarol,
without whom I would doubtless be living in a sleeping bag under the
escalator at the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

A Selection of Book Publications

By Robert M. Price

Beyond Born Again: Towards Evangelical Maturity (Hypatia Press, 1993)

Deconstructing Jesus (Prometheus Books, 1999)

The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man (Prometheus Books, 2004)

The Empty Tomb: Jesus beyond the Grave (Prometheus Books, 2005)

The Pre-Nicene New Testament (Signature Books, 2006)

Jesus Is Dead (American Atheist Press, 2007)

Blaming Jesus for Jehovah: Rethinking the Righteousness of Christianity
(Tellectual Press, 2015)

The Amazing Colossal Apostle: The Search for the Historical Paul
(Signature Books, 2012)

Jesus Christ Superstition (Pitchstone Publishing, 2019)

Judaizing Jesus: How New Testament Scholars Created the Ecumenical Golem (Pitchstone Publishing, 2021)

Advanced Endorsements

Dr. Robert Price is one of the most creative scholars in the field of Biblical Scholarship, and one of the most snubbed and misunderstood. One does not need to agree with his interpretations of ancient texts to appreciate the range of his interests and his imaginative evaluation of them and their relevance to the modern world. His should be a welcome alternative voice to the stodginess of contemporary biblical scholarship. I often have been amazed at the breadth of his reading in ancient literature and modern scholarship, his grasp of ancient mythology, and his courage to challenge the ignorant shiboleths of so many publications about the Bible. Dr. Price knows that we often disagree, but my engagement with his informed and thoughtful interpretations has enriched my scholarship. That no doubt will be the experience of many readers of this publication.

—Dennis R. MacDonald,
Emeritus Professor, Claremont School of Theology

With profound honesty and scholarly rigor, Price reveals how the contradiction and incoherence that suffuse the Christian Gospels conceal a treasury of insight for the mature reader. A powerful look at the creative diversity of earliest Christian traditions.

—Dr. Richard C. Miller,
Author of *Resurrection and Reception in Early Christianity*

The erudite and always entertaining Robert Price has produced another lively, informative book with a premise many may find challenging: that the contradictions between the gospels provide a veritable gold mine of valuable information about the uneven *early* evolution of *early* Christianity. A great read!

—Russell Gmirkin,
Author of *Berosus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus*

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Introduction

Why would readers of the Bible fear having to admit the presence of contradictions in their sacred text? And it *is* fear, as anyone can see from the lengths that fundamentalists will go to resolve them. Contradictions must be ironed out, “harmonized,” because they believe biblical contradictions are like Kryptonite to Superman. The superpowers of the Superbook would be drained by contradictions. The supernatural book would collapse and die from exposure to the poison radiating from those contradictions. In other words, the Bible could no longer be esteemed as the Word of God. It could no longer dictate your life and your beliefs,—which is just what you want it to do. Why? Because people have been taught to imagine God as a peevish theology professor who will send you down the chute into hell if you get too many answers wrong on that postmortem final exam. And to prepare for that examination, you need a textbook to give you the infallible answers. You dare not rely on guess work! How would you know how many persons are in the Godhead if that information were not forthcoming from a divine source? And if one passage disagrees with another, how would you know which one to believe? *If either?* Because the mere presence in Scripture of a notion could not any longer guarantee its truth. And then you’re up the creek!

The upshot is that this model just does not work. It does not fit the data, or what evangelical theologians call “the phenomena of Scripture.” As Clark H. Pinnock, himself an evangelical theologian, once said, “The fundamentalists don’t like the Bible they’ve got.”¹ In Thomas Kuhn’s classic book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he relates how researchers start shopping

¹ Comment during a lecture at New College in Berkeley, CA in 1978.

around for a new interpretive paradigm when too many “anomalous data” has accumulated, data that just does not fit the old one.² And there *is* an alternative paradigm if one finds oneself compelled to abandon biblical inerrancy. It has been around for a couple of centuries and seems to work very well: the historical-critical method. The trouble is that it only works if you stop insisting that the Bible is a divinely inspired book, infallible and inerrant. But does that not mean it is useless as a magical answer book? Darn right. But maybe the unworkability of the fundamentalist approach should tip people off that it is the *wrong* approach. And that, in turn, the God-concept upon which that approach is predicated is equally wrong.

If the Bible has shown itself not to be infallible as history or a trustworthy textbook of otherwise unverifiable doctrines, how *do* we approach it? We recognize it as *literary* in character, a book that does indeed embody various beliefs and ethics but, by the use of various genres, contains many non-factual teachings in either intent or effect. Therefore, it is not infallible. *Wise* is not good enough?

And if we make this major shift, contradictions can be seen in an entirely new light. We will find there is nothing to be afraid of anymore. But more than that, contradictions turn out to be good, not bad. They do not mar the Bible but actually decorate it! On the fundamentalist model, contradictions would have to be written off as stupid goofs made by stupid writers. Indeed, disillusioned ex-fundamentalists still look at it that way. They still hold to the literalist model except that they now view the Bible as no longer prophecy but as *false* prophecy. They are just as wrong as the theological apologists. The “contradictions” are mostly *redactions*, edits, updates, and reasoned modifications aimed at making new points. Such differences are keys to a far greater and deeper understanding of the Bible. Some may find that prospect disappointing: the Bible is no longer seen to be the supernatural answer book they wanted it to be and thought they needed it to be.

² Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), “Anomaly and the Emergence of Scientific Discoveries,” pp. 52–61.

But if you love the Bible for its own sake, as I do, you will have lost nothing and gained much.

In the present book, I will consider, one by one, pairs or sets of contradictions between Gospels, sometimes within a single Gospel. I will venture to explain the differences by indicating what the writer or redactor was driving at. Ironically, this approach might even be considered a kind of *harmonization*, in that it attempts to make sense of contradictions, though not by explaining them *away*. I am trying not to defend the text as the unerring Word of God but simply as the product of competent and creative writers.

*

It might prove helpful to do a little advance briefing about the four Gospels and their authors' agendas because this will give us insight into why they may have made some of their changes. Mark's Gospel seems to have been the first one, the first one surviving at any rate. In important ways, Mark is the simplest Gospel. There are places where, compared to the others, he seems theologically more "primitive." He is untroubled by the notion of Jesus lining up with the sinners for John the Baptist's ritual of repentance. The subsequent evangelists (Gospel writers) are increasingly uneasy about it. He does not mind Jesus being unable to heal people who did not believe in him. He has no nativity story to tell, nor any depiction of resurrection appearances. And yet Mark is anything but unvarnished reporting. As William Wrede showed, he has constructed his Gospel around the elaborate premise of the Messianic Secret, which colors his entire narrative like dye permeating cloth.³ He also maintains an extensive polemic against the twelve disciples, a fossil of forgotten early Christian factionalism.

Matthew used so much of Mark that his Gospel could justifiably be called a revised edition of Mark. But whereas Mark appears to lean toward Paulinism or even Marcionism in its

³ William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*. Trans. J.C.G. Greig (Edinburgh: James Clarke, 1905).

antipathy toward the twelve, Matthew venerates them as the figureheads of the Christian faith he knows. Rather than rejecting Mark as some heretical screed and consigning it to the flames, Matthew preferred to “correct” and rehabilitate the earlier Gospel. He improves the depiction of the disciples. He has Jesus (anachronistically) take an anti-Pauline position, vis-à-vis the Jewish Torah, to the point of depicting Jesus as a new Moses and his teaching as a new Pentateuch. Matthew appears to have been writing from the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic congregation in Antioch or perhaps Galilee. He regards his Christianity as the best kind of Judaism and in fact seems to be a Jewish scribe representing a movement competing with so-called Formative Judaism as headquartered at Yavneh (Jamnia) following the Jewish War against Rome.

Because of the diversity in his church(es), however, much like what we see in the Epistle to the Romans, the Gospel of Matthew appears to contain materials representing competing factions within the author’s own community. Not only so, but this Gospel is like a great tree with visible rings attesting its growth: we can discern at least two “Matthean” redactors. The first is the one who revised Mark, who improved the image of the twelve. The second is someone who took the twelve back down a peg, moving back somewhat toward Mark’s version, especially concerning Peter. It is admittedly complicated but not necessarily confusing.

Luke also saw Mark as too good to reject completely. So he, too, used most of it, though not quite as much of it as Matthew did. He joins Matthew in polishing the tarnished image of the twelve. But Luke is not a partisan of Torah-Christianity. Instead, he is writing from the standpoint of what is called “early Catholicism.” High on Luke’s agenda is the reconciliation of Jewish and Pauline Christianities. He either advocates such reconciliation or presupposes it. Perhaps even higher on Luke’s list is his suppression of the fervid apocalyptic enthusiasm of an earlier generation. As Hans Conzelmann demonstrated, Luke and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, pursue an intricate and systematic

program of realignment.⁴ For Luke, there is no longer any point in expecting the imminent end of the age. Promises of its early occurrence have been disappointed (more than once), and it is time to “get real.” Luke does not see history as about over but as ongoing. Luke’s Jesus does not announce the any-moment dawning of the End. Rather, he inaugurates a new and potentially lengthy epoch, the Church Age. The End will come someday, sure, but not any time soon. In the meantime, Christians must be about their Jesus-assigned duties. The Church (and it is, at this point, proper to start capitalizing it) has become the Institution of Salvation, her apostles (and, more importantly, their successors, the bishops) dispensing grace and the assurance of salvation.

John’s Gospel has a decidedly gnostic flavor. Though the author (I think) knew the other Gospels, he obviously did not feel inclined to reproduce their texts with any close accuracy because he has a rather different story to tell. Unlike the Jesus depicted in the other Gospels, the Johannine Jesus virtually ignores the keynote theme of the Synoptics (i.e., Mark, Matthew, and Luke), namely the kingdom of God. Instead, this Jesus promises “eternal life,” *here and now*. Nor is his focus the loving heavenly Father but rather Jesus’ own role as divine Revealer—whose principal revelation is that he *is* the Revealer. As Rudolf Bultmann points out, John seems to quite clearly eliminate any futuristic eschatology, the expectation of a future return of Jesus.⁵ John’s “second coming” is Jesus’ resurrection, which seems almost synonymous with the post-Jesus coming of the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, who will dwell within believers. This radical revision of Christian belief gets obscured by someone (the “Ecclesiastical Redactor”) who deemed all this heretical nonsense but dared not simply excise it from the widely-read text and who therefore resorted to adding new material that restored traditional conceptions.

⁴ Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*. Trans. G. Buswell (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R.W.N. Hoare, and J.K. Riches. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 261.

And this brings up one more type of complication in the interpretation of the Gospels. There are, as I have already anticipated, clear signs of such “ecclesiastical redaction” in all the Gospels, attempts by scribes and editors to align the Gospels with emerging second-century orthodoxy. We have seen that this process already began when, for example, Matthew made changes to Mark. It continued in the efforts of pre-canonical ecclesiastical redactors and even later as copyists tinkered with the texts.⁶

I know this is a lot to keep straight, but I believe the result will be not confusion but, rather, elucidation as we proceed. The individual cases to be examined here will illustrate these general assertions, and, reciprocally, these preliminaries should allow those subsequent studies to make sense more easily. I sure hope so!

Robert M. Price
Festivus 2020

⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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