



TOWARD A NARROW VIEW OF *IPSISSIMA VOX*

ROBERT N. WILKIN

Editor

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Since the late 1940s the Evangelical Theological Society (of which I have been a member since 1982) has been dedicated to two issues that are very dear to my heart—a defense of the inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture. For if the Bible is not dependable, then neither is its gospel message. Indeed, the veracity of all biblical teachings depends on the authority of Scripture.

At the 1999 annual ETS meeting in Boston Dr. Dan Wallace of Dallas Theological Seminary presented a provocative paper entitled: “An *Apologia* for a Broad View of *Ipsissima Vox*.” He suggested that the authors of the NT did not approach the reporting of history in the same way that current historians do. In order to interpret the NT correctly, we must be aware of this different approach. Practically speaking this brings into question the NT authors’ concern about historical accuracy in terms of the speaker, the location, the date, and the precise content of what was said.

(The expression *ipsissima vox* means “the very voice.” It is contrasted with the Latin expression *ipsissima verba*, “the very words.” The latter refers to direct quotes [*verbatim* is related to *verba*]. The specific meaning of *ipsissima vox* is the subject of this article.)

In the June 1999 issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Dr. Grant Osborne voiced similar concerns in an article entitled, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical.” A rejoinder by Dr. Robert Thomas and a surrejoinder by Osborne followed in the next issue.

I am in agreement with Wallace and Osborne on the following points: (1) Many of the words of Jesus recorded in Scripture are indirect discourse, not direct quotes, and (2) since Jesus spoke in Hebrew and Aramaic as well as Greek, some of His recorded words are translations.



I am, however, uncomfortable with a broad view of *ipsissima vox*. What the broad view terms inerrant, an unbiased observer would call errant. Accurately paraphrasing or translating what someone said is one thing. Inaccurately reporting what someone said is an error. *Changing* what someone said and reporting it as though that is what the person said is another matter altogether.

Misidentifying who said something and when and where he said it are errors.

A broad view of *ipsissima vox* renders the interpreter an agnostic on the life and ministry of Jesus. The interpreter cannot be sure what Jesus actually said or did. The broad-view interpreter considers the NT to be historically unreliable.

Yet, ETS members who hold to a broad view of *ipsissima vox* claim they believe in inspiration and inerrancy. However, this claim can only be valid if inspiration and inerrancy are stripped of their meaning.

If scholars aren't sure what Jesus said and did, then how can laypeople be sure? The New Testament can't be relied upon to convey truth. It is presenting error under the guise of a different form of historiography.

The day has come when members like Dr. Robert Thomas who hold a narrow view of inspiration and inerrancy are openly criticized in *JETS* for failing to acknowledge that the broad view upholds a high view of inspiration and inerrancy. Of course, Thomas can't acknowledge that because he does not believe it.

I. WE SHOULD NOT READ THE NEW TESTAMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF ANCIENT HISTORIOGRAPHY

Wallace made the point that *one* ancient historian, Thucydides, played loose and free with his reporting.

Even if we grant that this is so, and even if we grant that *all* ancient historians presented historical inaccuracies, this in no way suggests that the divine author, the Holy Spirit, followed such an approach. While God used human authors, He superintended the entire project so that each word was God-breathed. Inspiration leaves no room for misreporting by human authors.



II. THE NEW TESTAMENT AUTHORS WERE COMMITTED TO ABSOLUTE HISTORICAL ACCURACY

Like Moses, the four Gospel writers were committed to writing precisely what was said and done. The idea that the Gospel writers created sayings to convey their theology is antithetical to inerrancy and inspiration.

Paul said that all Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16). Peter said that prophecies of Scripture came about as the Holy Spirit moved holy men to write what He wished (2 Pet 1:21). If these verses are true, and they are, then there is no room for inaccuracies of any type anywhere in the Bible.

Wallace gave no evidence suggesting that the New Testament authors believed in a skewed view of historiography, other than suggesting that passages in the New Testament are not historically accurate and then concluding that they must be following Thucydides' approach. That is not proof. What we need is an admission by a New Testament author that he was writing something which didn't actually occur. That we do not have, because it did not happen. Even if a human author had thought to report an inaccuracy, the Holy Spirit would not have allowed it to be written.

III. THE BROAD APPROACH DESTROYS THE RELIABILITY OF THE ENTIRE NEW TESTAMENT

If the Gospels are not historically accurate, then the reasonable interpreter should question the authenticity of all of the words and acts of Jesus.

Consider how a broad view would impact one's understanding of the following verses:

John 19:30. Should we not have serious doubts about whether Jesus actually said, "It is finished"? Why would the Synoptics fail to mention Jesus' last words on the cross, especially when they are so fraught with meaning?



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Acts 20:35. Since this saying of Jesus is not found in any of the four Gospels, the broad view would lead us to consider this saying to be highly suspect in terms of authenticity. We would probably conclude that this was an interpretive paraphrase of something Jesus said. We might write a creative journal article giving likely examples of phrases in the Synoptics from which Paul created this saying.

All of the reported words of Jesus to Saul recorded in Acts. This should be a ripe field of study as well. After all, there is no confirmation of any of these sayings. Each saying could be examined in an effort to determine what Jesus actually said, and how Luke has altered the words.

What about the expression *the outer darkness* in Matthew? Since this expression is only found in Matthew, and since it isn't found even in parallel passages (e.g., Matt 25:30 versus Luke 19:26), shouldn't we conclude that Matthew added this expression for some reason?

John 6:21. If the words of Jesus are not necessarily historically accurate, then His actions may be historically inaccurate as well. Only in John do we learn that "immediately the boat was at the land where they were going." If this indeed occurred, and it sounds hard to believe (unless one believes in miracles), why didn't at least one of the other three Gospel writers include it? A broad view makes it likely that this is another example of inspired fiction.

Matthew 14:28-31. Only in Matthew do we learn of Peter himself walking on water. Shouldn't we question whether this actually occurred? If this incident were authentic, then wouldn't the other Gospel writers have reported it, as well as Peter himself in his preaching in Acts and in his epistles?

A broad view logically leads to a questioning of the literal raising of Lazarus from the dead. Is it not hard to explain why the Synoptic writers would not record this miracle if it actually occurred? After all, John indicates that the Jews were actually plotting to kill Lazarus because this was such a powerful sign. Surely this must be a creation of John to prepare the way for Jesus' resurrection. It is John's way of expressing his faith in Christ. In fact, we should probably wonder



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whether Lazarus really existed, for none of the other Gospel writers even mention him.

There is practically no limit to the number of passages whose authenticity might be suspect. Just think of the many potential journal articles that could be written to garner attention as cutting-edge NT scholarship. The possibilities are endless. We've only barely begun in this regard. As long as we say we don't deny inerrancy, very few things would be outside of consideration.

Osborne's article clearly puts those with a narrow view on notice that *they* are being divisive, reactionary, and closed-minded. *They* are the ones who are out of step. This would seem to be a demand for freedom to come to any conclusion as to historicity as long as one affirms his belief in inspiration and inerrancy.

IV. CONCLUSION

The idea that the New Testament contains historical inaccuracies and yet is God-breathed and without error is ludicrous. No one would accept this claim if it were evaluated logically. Liberal scholars must laugh at this deception. Many conservative scholars are not laughing, but see it for what it is, a denial of the authority of Scripture.

The Holy Spirit would never allow what Farnell calls "inspired deception" (*The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship*, p. 212). God would never confuse the reader as to speaker, location, audience, wording, etc. If God were capable of getting it right, then why didn't He? It is God's integrity that is at stake.

The broad view of *ipsissima vox* contradicts the ETS doctrinal position. However, many modern theologians view doctrinal statements as living breathing documents whose meaning changes depending on the majority position. Thus in their view it no longer matters what the framers of the ETS doctrinal statement meant.

I hope that ETS takes a stand on this issue one way or another. This issue directly impinges on the *raison d'être* of ETS. The two views are clearly not the same.

In reading Osborne's article in *JETS*, Thomas's rejoinder, and Osborne's surrejoinder, it is apparent that these men recognize that



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their theological positions are not only different; they are incompatible. Neither is going to find the other receptive to his view. Neither is going to welcome the other view being taught in his classroom, his church, or his school. I agree with them. These views are fundamentally incompatible.

Recently I visited with a college professor who is a graduate of a conservative Bible college and a liberal seminary. He was once a vibrant Evangelical. Now he doesn't believe in inspiration and inerrancy, the deity of Christ, life after death, etc. In discussing with him this issue of *ipsissima vox*, he stated that "Higher criticism is going to destroy evangelical seminaries." I responded, "I believe it already has."

