

PRESUPPOSITIONS AND HARMONIZATION: LUKE 23:47 AS A TEST CASE

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How do presuppositions about meaning and history influence the ways in which we may deal with problems in harmonization?¹ And what can we do about it? We can examine the influence of presuppositions by considering a test case, namely the centurion’s statement in Luke 23:47 and the parallels in Matthew and Mark.

I. THE CHALLENGE

In Luke 23:47, the centurion says that Jesus was innocent: “Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’”

Matthew has something more elaborate: “When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’”(Matt 27:54).

Finally, Mark has the following: “And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God’” (Mark 15:39).

For a direct comparison, see the following table:

Matthew 27:54	Mark 15:39	Luke 23:47
When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”	And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God.”	Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!”

The most notable difference lies in what the centurion said about Jesus. In Luke, Jesus is innocent, while in Matthew and Mark, he is “the Son of God.” In addition, there is a difficulty in translation. In both Matthew and Mark, the Greek

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expression for “the Son of God” is *anarthrous*.² The ESV puts the phrase “the Son of God” in the text, but indicates in a footnote that the expression could also be rendered as “a son of God.”

So which English rendering is correct? Colwell’s Rule says that a preverbal predicate nominative may be anarthrous even when the predicate expression is intended to be definite. The article is omitted from the predicate partly to indicate that it is in fact the predicate. Consequently, it must be left to context to determine whether the expression “son of God” is intended to be definite (“the Son of God”) or indefinite (“a son of God”). Unfortunately, the context does not definitively decide. If we picture of Roman centurion as a typical pagan, with polytheistic beliefs, we may interpret his confession as little more than a confused statement that Jesus has something godlike about him. We might even try translating, “a son of a god.” But it is possible that the centurion, like Cornelius, had become a God-fearer, so that we at least come to translate, “a son of God.” Or maybe, though the centurion had not completely cast off his polytheistic background, he was reacting to the earlier mocking discussion of whether Jesus is “the Son of God” (Matt 27:40, 43). So his remark may be spoken with respect to a more Jewish context. Or perhaps the centurion, like the penitent thief of Luke 23:40–43, had already at this early point come to a deeper understanding of who Jesus was. Maybe he did mean to say “the Son of God” in its full significance.

Commentators often recognize that Matthew and Mark are inviting their readers to see the title “son of God” within the larger context of their Gospels.³ Mark begins his Gospel with the words, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). The expression for “Son” is anarthrous, but the meaning is definite. The full title is used at the climactic point in Jesus’ trial: “Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’” (Mark 14:61).

In Matthew 4, the title “son of God” occurs anarthrously, but with the meaning “the Son of God”: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread” (Matt 4:3). “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, ...” (Matt 4:6). The weighty significance of the term “Son” is confirmed in Matthew’s baptismal formula: “... baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ...” (Matt 28:19).

Matthew and Mark contain still other passages that indicate that Jesus is the unique, Messianic Son of God (Matt 2:15; 3:17; 16:16; etc.; Mark 1:11; 3:11; 9:7). In that light, the rendering “the Son of God” is surely right. It should be taken as an anticipation of Christian confession of Jesus as Messiah, and as a divine title as well. Note that in Matthew the Son shares with the Father in the name of God (Matt

² Interestingly, Matthew has θεοῦ υἱός, while Mark has the reverse order, υἱός θεοῦ.

³ E.g. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (WBC 33B; Dallas, TX: Word, 1995) 852; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 1084–85; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) 3:636; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 659–60.

28:19), and that the Son's knowledge of the Father is divine in character (Matt 11:27).

How then do we deal with the relation of what the centurion might have meant to what Matthew or Mark meant? And how do we explain the relation of the expression "the Son of God" to Luke's description, which looks very different: "Certainly this man was innocent!" (Luke 23:47)?

Finally, we should note that the statement in Luke has some challenges of its own. The underlying Greek has the word *dikaios*, which the ESV translates as "innocent" (so also NASB). KJV and NIV have "righteous." Does this term involve an allusion to the righteous servant of Isaiah 53?⁴

II. SHOULD WE HARMONIZE?

The Bible is a rich text, a God-inspired text. So interpreting it is delicate. A lot of presuppositions may have an influence. Our purpose is to explore how presuppositions come to bear on a particular text like Luke 23:47 and its parallels. I will express my opinions from time to time. But I mainly want to pay attention to the influences that go into forming different opinions.

One of the first and most obvious questions that arises is whether we ought to strive to do harmonization at all. I think that we have three divinely authored texts. This presupposition has its influence, typically in the direction of seeking harmonization. Merely human texts may make mistakes about what happened, but divinely authored texts do not.

But even here there are differences. Even if we have divinely authored texts, we must still decide whether the texts are intended by God to be historical narratives rather than some other genre. It is well known, for example, that Robert Gundry's commentary on Matthew argued that Matthew was a midrashic text that mixed in essentially fictional elements with other elements that were historical.⁵ Gundry claimed that this genre decision on Matthew's part was understood by his first readers, so that there was no deceit involved. I along with others believe that Gundry was wrong, but his hypothesis has to be weighed before we come to the decision that he was wrong. In the process of weighing, we will bring to bear information about first-century genres, and we will reckon with the textures of the Gospel of Matthew itself. But we will also bring along other expectations. For example, how far do we emphasize the alleged original audience of Matthew, and how far do we emphasize the fact that God—and perhaps Matthew as well—intended the Gospel eventually to travel beyond the initial audience? In what way do we understand the clarity of Scripture? In addition, we ask questions about the relation of Matthew's Gospel to the other three Gospels. Do all these four works belong to a single larger genre, namely the genre of "Gospel"? If so, do the com-

⁴ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 827.

⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

monalities in fact suggest much more common ground in the treatment of history than what Gundry alleged?

Consider also what happens if someone approaches the Gospel accounts without acknowledging divine authorship. Harmonization questions still have relevance in historical reconstruction, even when the history being studied is quite ordinary. One may picture one historian who cares deeply about reconstructing the events with utmost precision and who also has a high level of confidence in the historical reporting of the Gospel writers. Those presuppositions will influence him in the direction of harmonization. Another historian comes to the question with low confidence in the historical reliability of the Gospel writers. And he may also be more content in general terms to remain agnostic about what exactly happened.

III. DESIRES FOR HARMONIZATION?

Even if we believe that the Gospels are divinely authored, as I do, we may wonder whether harmonization is desirable. Why not let Luke 23:47 and its parallels just lie side by side? What are we after when we read the Gospels? Are we after a maximally detailed understanding of what really happened? We then seek to go behind the Gospels to the events that they describe. Harmonization takes place in the process of trying to reconstruct the events. For example, we postulate that the centurion said both that Jesus was the Son of God and that he was innocent, in two separate statements. Or someone may attempt a reconstruction where the centurion said only that Jesus was a son of God, but where Luke chose to express only an implication of what he literally said. Or someone may propose the opposite: that the centurion literally said that Jesus was righteous, and that this statement has been expanded into a Christological confession in Matthew and Mark.

Or we may have analytical interest focused not on the events but on apologetic issues. We may wish to assure ourselves or others—perhaps others who are skeptical—that the different Gospel accounts do not contradict one another.

Both the interest in historical reconstruction and the interest in apologetics involve difficulties. We may promise ourselves more than we can deliver. With the respect to the reconstruction of events, we may come to the texts with overoptimistic expectations. We may expect the texts, when taken together, to provide more details than they in fact provide. By using an anarthrous construction, neither Matthew nor Mark provide us with maximally clear information as to whether the centurion meant “a son of God” or “the Son of God.” We may expect that there will always be a single clear-cut way of fitting the differences between texts together into a single coherent total picture. Some cases may indeed have easy solutions, but other may not. Our case in Luke 23:47 has a clear solution if the centurion made two distinct statements, one after the other. But is such the only possibility? Or could Luke have chosen to express only one implication from what the centurion said?

Our assumptions about God make a difference here. Certainly the assumption that God is consistent and truthful makes a difference. But, by itself, this assumption does not necessarily imply that God will make it easy for us, either in

historical reconstruction or in apologetics. Is God most interested in solving the problems that we think we need solved? Or is he perhaps more interested in telling several distinct accounts, without providing all the information that might be needed for a clear-cut solution? Sometimes the lack of detail may lead to a situation where we can postulate several different possible harmonizations, no one of which is clearly the right one in contrast to the others.

Moreover, sometimes in apologetic contexts skeptics may harbor expectations about God that are less appropriate. For example, they may insist that God prove himself, or that the Bible prove itself to be self-consistent in every case, before they are willing to make any commitment. They try to remain firmly in charge of the standards and expectations that they bring to the text; and they may remain insensitive to their spiritual needs. The sick person is not always in a position to dictate terms to the physician, and neither is the sinner in an appropriate position to dictate terms to the only Savior.

I am in favor of attempting harmonization, because I think that the Bible itself indicates that real events in space and time are important. But I also think that we need to be aware of our limitations. We cannot dictate terms to God. In fact, God may be pleased at times to give us difficulties and trials for the benefit of our sanctification (Rom 5:3–5). The trials may be of various kinds, including intellectual trials when we do not see how to fit together two parts of the Bible that are apparently in tension. Such trials are not new. Abraham had to deal with the tension between God's command to sacrifice Isaac and the fact that Isaac was the offspring through whom God's promises would be fulfilled. The psalmists had to deal with the tension between righteous suffering and God's promises toward the righteous.

IV. LIABILITIES FROM HARMONIZATION

Scholars can also worry about what might be left out when harmonization becomes a principal goal. In the Gospels we have accounts that combine history, theology, and literary artistry. They show interest in what happened—history; they expound what happened in a way that highlights theological truths and theological themes; and they give us existentially engaging narratives with literary power. If harmonization becomes the only goal, it can lead to the neglect of the theology and the artistry. The sole concern becomes what happened, not the significance of what happened.

Our text Luke 23:47 can illustrate the difficulty. The wording in Matthew fits into a larger theological theme in Matthew, namely the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. Similarly, this is true for Mark. The focus on Jesus' innocence in Luke 23:47 fits in with a larger theme in Luke-Acts, namely that Jesus and his disciples were not opposing the legitimate functions of government. Jesus was not a seditionist, and a principal representative of the government, a Roman centurion, can assure us of that fact. If we translate the key word as "righteous" rather than "innocent," we may also contemplate whether Luke is intending to put the centurion's confession into relation to the theme of the Isaianic suffering servant, a theme that comes up later, in Acts 3:13–14.

What do we do with this difference in theological emphasis? If we assume that theological interpretation provides merely human meaning to the bare facts of history, theology and history may seem to be in tension with one another. If, on the other hand, we see the events of history as planned by God, they have theological meaning built into them. A theological interpretation may be fully in line with the reality of the events, though it will inevitably be in tension in the eyes of modern people who suppose that God is absent from the events.

Even if we grant that events can have built-in theological significance, can they have two or more distinct significances, in the way that appears to be the case with the three reports about the centurion? Do we allow theological diversity? Again, presuppositions have their influence. My own answer would be that God's plan for events includes many dimensions. It is in fact inexhaustible. So he may choose to highlight one dimension of that significance in Matthew, namely the character of Jesus as the divine and Messianic Son of God. He may highlight another dimension in Luke, namely the dimension of innocence, the theme of the positive relation of Christian discipleship to legitimate government, and possibly the theme of the suffering servant.

Now what about literary artistry? Literary artistry has many dimensions, and we can touch only on a few. Each Gospel gives us a narrative. We see events develop in relation to one another, and we are drawn in partly by the human interest in narrative and the sense of identification with characters. We are meant to identify with the centurion. We are challenged as to whether we ourselves think that Jesus was the Son of God, and that the events of the crucifixion display his Sonship. Do we agree that Jesus was innocent?

V. THE PRECEDING EVENTS

More questions await us in the wings. The contexts that precede the centurion's speech differ in the three Gospels. After the verse where Matthew reports Jesus' death (27:50), Matthew recounts three extraordinary events: "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (27:51). There was an earthquake that split rocks (27:51b). And many bodies of saints were raised (27:52). Matthew specifically links the centurion's reaction to "the earthquake and what took place" (27:54). Mark does not mention the earthquake (27:38). Instead, the centurion's reaction is linked to the fact that the centurion "saw that in this way he breathed his last" (Mark 15:39). The entire sequence of earlier events may be in view. Luke alone among the Gospels records Jesus' final statement, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). He alone records the repentance of the second thief (Luke 23:40-43). Luke links the centurion's statement to the fact that he "saw what had taken place" (Luke 23:47), an expression that invites us to include the entire series of events. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record that darkness came from the sixth to the ninth hour. All three record the tearing of the curtain of the temple. Matthew and Mark but not Luke record that Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). How do these preceding narratives color our understanding of the centurion's reaction?

When we look at the Gospels as narratives, and when we read one of the narratives in its own distinctiveness, we see the centurion reacting to the events in that particular narrative. The centurion's reaction is indeed colored by the rest of the narrative, because we understand it to be a reaction to the events in that narrative. Is that all right? Again, our presuppositions may influence whether we are comfortable. In the end, I want to say that the centurion, as a flesh-and-blood human being, reacted in a sense to everything that he saw take place, though some events may have stood out in his mind much more than others. He himself could say only to a limited degree how various smaller events had their influence. He took it all in, and his reaction was the reaction of a whole person to the whole series of events. I think, therefore, that it is legitimate for each Gospel to highlight only some of the key events. Each Gospel thereby indicates some of the influences that led to the centurion's reaction. But no Gospel tells us that these were the only events or the only influences.⁶ I presuppose here that omission of detail is not an error. Again, presuppositions matter.

Whether we see a tension between history, theology, and literary artistry also depends on presuppositions about the very nature of literary artistry. Does the phrase "literary artistry" suggest to us a level of human invention? Human beings tell stories. In telling the stories, they make creative decisions about the way that they tell—characterization, plot development, narrative pace, narrative focus, parenthetical additions, and so on. Does that human invention adorn the history and the theology with extra material that is in fact alien to the history or the theology or both? In a reductionistic approach to history, it is easy to presuppose that the artistry is an alien addition.

But there is another possibility. God is the original artist. The events of history, according to his plan, have both theological significance and intrinsic artistry. Human plots imitate the original divine plot for history. So emplotment in the Gospels is divine as well as human. The Holy Spirit as divine author writes the Gospel, and at the same time he empowers the human author with creativity to write a structured narrative. The divine and the human are not in fact in tension. In particular, the way in which we find the narrative challenging us to agree or disagree with the centurion's response is an aspect of what God intended from the beginning that the events themselves, and the life of the centurion, and the writing up the events in the Gospels, should produce in response.

VI. CITATIONS OF WORDING

We also need to consider the issue of citations of speech. Luke 23:47 and its parallel report what the centurion said. Because the English versions (apart from KJV) use quotation marks when reporting speeches, it is easy for a naïve modern reader to assume that the citations of this kind represent verbatim reports. But

⁶ In addition, no Gospel is pedantically explicit about just which events affected the centurion. Some commentators note that the centurion would not have seen the tearing of the temple curtain, and that Matthew was doubtless aware of this limitation in the centurion's knowledge (France, *Matthew* 1083).

there were no quotation marks in the original Greek. Moreover, a study of NT citations from the OT shows that they travel across a spectrum, from *verbatim* or near-*verbatim* quotations on the one end to highly interpretative renderings, including citations that combine material from more than one OT passage. If we assume that reports of speeches in the Gospels are all nearly *verbatim*, harmonization for Luke 23:47 and its parallels will move strongly in the direction of supposing that the centurion must have made two separate statements: “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39, nearly identical to Matt 27:54) and “Certainly this man was innocent” (Luke 23:47).

But is there an alternative? It depends on what we presuppose to be the nature of reports of speeches. Do we presuppose that a report can summarize, or can render interpretively one aspect of the intent or implications of a speech? How much flexibility do we allow? Is it permissible for a report to draw out the implications of what is said rather than provide something close to a *verbatim* account? I, for one, think so. If so, Luke could be giving us an implication of the centurion’s speech. If the centurion said that Jesus was the Son of God, he implied his innocence.

We can also raise questions about how to understand meaning. If Luke can draw out implications, can Matthew and Mark do so as well? If so, does it throw light on the meaning of the expression “Son of God”? Do we assume that the centurion self-consciously meant exactly what Matthew and Mark meant? Or are Matthew and Mark drawing out implications? And how are they doing so?

VII. SUPPOSITIONS ABOUT MEANINGS

One interpreter could claim that the centurion gave a confession that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, and that he himself expressed robust faith in Jesus. Another interpreter could claim that the centurion only said that Jesus was a son of God, and that Matthew and Mark accurately reported this less robust confession. A third interpreter could claim that Matthew and Mark misunderstood the centurion’s confession to be more robust than it was. Still another interpreter could claim that Matthew and Mark understood the centurion’s confession to be minimal, but put it into a context where they hoped their readers would understand the confession more maximally. This interpretation runs the danger of accusing Matthew and Mark of some subterfuge. But another interpreter could attempt to rescue them by claiming that they wanted to show to readers both the centurion’s confession and the more advanced Christian confession to which it proleptically pointed, once it was understood as a stage along the way to the kind of faith and understanding that we see in the Book of Acts and in the NT Letters.

How we deal with this multiplicity of interpretive options depends on a number of presuppositions. How do we understand progressive revelation? Can the centurion’s incipient confession lead to a more robust confession later in time, possibly by the centurion himself, but also by others who read the story of the crucifixion? Can we see a legitimate theological unity between the stages? And what is meaning? Can the centurion imply more than what he has consciously and explicit-

ly worked out? Can he, like the pagan poets of Acts 17:28, reveal in his words a deeper knowledge of God that he has in part suppressed in unbelief?

We also confront questions about how much detail the Gospels give us when they give us what the centurion said. They give us meanings. The meanings they give are stable, but are they perfectly precise? If, as I argue elsewhere, meanings include both stability and flexibility, how do we treat the meanings in Matt 27:54 and Mark 15:39? If we presuppose precision in meaning, we move toward a solution where the centurion must have meant exactly one of the alternatives: either a son of a god, or a son of God, or the Son of God. And if he meant the Son of God, it must be with the same exact force as what occurs elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew or the Gospel of Mark. But if we allow for a range within a stable meaning, we may come to say that Matthew and Mark give us information that still leaves possible variation within a fixed the range of meaning. The centurion saw Jesus as son of God, but he saw it within his life that was still in progress. Not everything may have dawned immediately. Or then again, by a vigorous work of the Holy Spirit a lot may have dawned on him, even in an instant. But we would still say that Matthew and Mark do not give us all the details as to how much has dawned, and how fast it dawned.

Analogous things could be said about Luke 23:47 as well. Luke tells us that the centurion concluded that Jesus was innocent. But was that all? If we find, when we read Luke's account of the crucifixion, that we are in awe about Jesus' reactions to the events, do we not also infer that the centurion may have been in awe (as indeed Matthew indicates with the words "they were filled with awe"; 27:54).

We also need to consider another small difference in Matthew's account. Matthew, in contrast to both Mark and Luke, includes others in the centurion's confession: "When the centurion *and those who were with him*, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, *they* were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God"" (Matt 27:54).

The centurion was a spokesman for others—perhaps the soldiers, who were "keeping watch" officially, but perhaps also the larger group of bystanders. A precisionistic approach to Matthew might insist that each soldier repeated what the centurion said. They all said, either in unison or one by one, "Truly this was the Son of God." Some interpreters may feel impatient with such a wooden solution. But here again we may watch our presuppositions. We ought not to suppose that the most likely or simplest explanation must always be the true one. It is possible that the centurion's statement set in motion verbal expressions of agreement. But if we presuppose allowance for more flexibility in the meaning of Matthew's expression, we can read it as indicating that the centurion spoke what was on the minds of others, not that the others literally spoke out. And what was on their minds? A robust, full confession, or only the first steps in the direction of a confession?⁷ The flexibility or the precision that we attribute to the meanings in Matthew influences what interpretive options we think are best.

⁷ Cf. David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 671.

VIII. INFLUENCE OF PRESUPPOSITIONS

Various assumptions and predispositions influence interpretation. When we observe such influence, should we conclude that meaning is merely subjective? I do not think so. Some assumptions and predispositions are better than others. The fact of multiple interpretations does not automatically confer equal value on each one. I believe, then, that the influences on how we interpret should encourage us to seek the Lord and to ask for purity of heart and wisdom in our assumptions and our approaches, rather than leading us to endorse a radical pluralism in meaning.

The influence of presuppositions has additional implications. If people are not aware of presuppositions, they still have them. An interpreter cannot move forward in evaluating the significance of the centurion's confession, and the variations between the Gospels, without a whole spectrum of presuppositions about history, about narrative, about whether Scripture is inerrant, about the meaning of inerrancy, about sparsity in reporting, about the purposes of authors, about human motivations and psychology (the centurion in particular), about the propriety of rendering a speaker's intentions rather than giving a *verbatim* report, and so on. Behind the more particular assumptions of an interpreter lie deeper and broader assumptions that touch on worldviews.

As we have seen, presuppositions influence questions of harmonization. But the principle is broader—presuppositions are indispensable in *all* interpretation and they have their influence.⁸

How can we expect to purify our presuppositions and move in the direction of sound ones? The Bible itself is the primary means. We improve our presuppositions by listening to the Bible's instruction about God and his purposes, and about history and humanity. Studying the Bible's instruction as a whole is a prime task of systematic theology. Systematic theology is of course subject to human corruption from sin, like any other discipline, but at its best it summarizes the teaching of the Bible. Systematic theology is therefore useful at the presuppositional level to inform how we interpret the Bible.

Biblical scholars have sometimes distanced themselves from systematic theology, as if paying attention to it necessarily corrupted the interpretation of biblical texts. Allegedly, theological commitments or doctrinal standards "bias" our interpretations. And we want to be "objective." Does that mean being religiously neutral? Does that mean having no presuppositions (an impossibility)?

It is true that we always run the danger of imposing meanings on texts rather than submitting ourselves to what they actually say. But this is a danger that besets biblical scholars as much as systematicians, though perhaps in different ways. The upshot is that, at its best, systematic theology does not endanger exegesis but con-

⁸ Rudolf Bultmann was right about the influence of presuppositions in his article, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (selected, translated, and introduced by Schubert M. Ogden; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961) 289–96. Unfortunately, his own presuppositions were not healthy.

tributes positively to it.⁹ Not only should we as biblical scholars refine and purify our presuppositions, but use the resources of systematic theology to do so.

If we refuse, the alternative is not presuppositionless exegesis but exegesis with hidden presuppositions, or exegesis with presuppositions imitating those of mainstream scholarship and not critically inspected. In other words, something else will fill the vacuum left by a scholar's suspicion of or distaste for systematic theology. And that something else is likely to undermine the kind of interpretation that is actually faithful to God—God who, in the end, is the primary author of the book we are devoting ourselves to interpreting.

IX. CONCLUSION

In sum, interpretation challenges the soul. In a case like Luke 23:47, how we seek harmonization, or whether we decide not to seek it at all, depends on presuppositions—not a single presupposition but a host of them. We have deliberately focused on the presuppositions, rather than merely on obtaining a final answer. And one of the lessons, surely, is not only that presuppositions have their influence, but that we struggle with questions about how best to go about harmonization, and that in the light of our struggles we cannot confidently claim to have a definitive answer to every question. For example, if our presuppositions predispose us to look for precision, we are likely to think that all the Synoptics give us precise wordings—even *verbatim* wordings—of things that the centurion said. The centurion would have said both “Truly this was the Son of God!” and “Certainly this man was innocent!” If, on the other hand, we allow that a Gospel might express the implications or intent of the centurion, without the exact words, and without expressing every aspect of intent, we may hypothesize that Luke has given us a partial summary of the implications of what was said in Matthew and Mark. But even here, we may or may not be quick to allow that the centurion may have said much more, and that all three Gospels might represent condensations. In addition to all this, our presuppositions have an influence on how we think the history in the Gospels goes together with the theological significance that the Gospels articulate. That is a big question, which a single article cannot fully answer.¹⁰

⁹ Moisés Silva makes a similar point in “The Case for Calvinistic Hermeneutics,” in Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (rev. and exp. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) 295–318 [p. 301]; repr. with minor changes in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007) 74–94 [p. 81].

¹⁰ Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), chap. 4.