Robert Geis

*Exegesis and the Synoptics*


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In his preface Robert Geis notes that this volume is an “amplification and intended solidification” of important points that he discussed in his previous volume, *Divinity of a Birth* (University of America Press, 2011). There he argued that a Hebrew original to the Gospel of Matthew supports a dating of the prophecies announced in that gospel to a period closer to the time of Jesus. Part of this argument is that contradictions, disagreements, and the like that appear in the Synoptic Gospels can be resolved by the existence of a Hebrew original. Most of these contradictions result from a Greek text that has been redacted from the Hebrew. Thus, Hebraisms and Semitic subtexts to Matthew, John, and Luke, argue for an earlier dating than the Greek texts we currently have. Moreover, Geis admits in this preface to an additional underlying assumption regarding early Christians, that proto-communities would not have committed themselves to death for a gospel(s) rife with discrepancies. For this reason, *Exegesis and Synoptics* is intended to provide a “more complete” argument for an early Hebrew gospel, which was then redacted into Greek.

In the first chapter, “Discrepancy and Contradictions,” Geis argues the hypothetical notion that the original gospels existed without discrepancy. While noting some of the discrepancies preserved in the gospels, he rhetorically posits, “If there are contradictions, disagreements, discrepancies in the Gospels, how does one see them as the work of the
Divine? How can one hold they are inspired? If they disagree, how can they be said to be truthful?” (1). Some of these arguments are circular, presuming that the so-called inspired texts that were preserved in the canon were thought to be inspired because they were already inspired. Their contents show a character that only “divinity could bestow” (2). The lion’s share of the chapter explores patristic evidence regarding the existence of a corpus that was already accepted as inspired or divine. To this end, Geis argues that Papias’s use of the word bibllos (Greek for “book”) indicates the existence of collections of works that one might refer to as gospels. This, it is offered by Geis, suggests that the compiling of the gospel narratives did not push far into the second century CE and date to a period closer to Jesus’s life and ministry (4). Geis presumes that the gospel authors knew one another other and openly accepts the patristic tradition that Matthew and John of the gospels were in fact Jesus’s disciples, though the gospels themselves make no such claim (5). As is accepted in Christian tradition, the eponymous John of the Gospel is also thought to be the same individual who authored 1–3 John and Revelation (9). In dealing with John, the author moves quickly through apparent discrepancies, arguing that they are not actual contradictions (6–7). For instance, he briefly refers to the date of Passover between the Synoptics and the John. He concludes, “it is by no means clear, then, that the early Church set John aside for reasons of discrepancies with other Gospel accounts (the Synoptics) in circulation” (11). It is then rhetorically asked how the original “gospels” could have discrepancies or contradictions if Justin Martyr refers to them as “memoirs,” a term that was used to describe contemporary literature like that of Socrates or Pythagoras.

Chapter 2, “Evangelion,” deals with the idea of a “gospel.” Geis suggests that the gospel (or euangelion) of “Christ’s ministry” was already compiled into a bibllos, not as a codex but rather a distinct collection. He opines that if this bibllos was originally in Hebrew, it might answer for the discrepancy phenomenon found in the gospels. The thought is that the transcriptions from the Hebrew language might provide an answer for many of the discrepancies. Chrysostom’s statement that Mark originally wrote in Hebrew is then referenced. Indeed, no Hebrew version of any gospel has ever been discovered. In terms of a gospel canon, Geis suggests that it is apostolic validation that allowed these proto-communities to approve the inspired words contained in the four gospels. Such an argument is utilized to suggest why the thinking of early Gnosticism, as contained, for example, in the Gospel of James, “failed canonization” (16). Unfortunately, this line of thinking does not allow for the plurality of thought and literature evident in these proto-communities. Unfortunately, a discussion in regard to the influence of other Second Temple works on the New Testament, which may indicate their status in proto-communities (e.g., Jude’s use of Enoch), is never raised.
Geis then surveys patristic evidence for the four gospels that were later affirmed by the church on four occasions (18–19). Matthew’s Hebrew gospel comes to the fore again, since Geis contended in a previous volume that Matthew originally wrote in his native language. Curiously, he notes that Matthew’s profession as a tax collector indicates that he would not have haphazardly put together the words of his lord. His role as a tax collector indicates that Matthew would have written down all while he was with Jesus. Part of the problem with such reasoning is that the earliest texts that bear any ascription come from the second/third century CE. Prior to that, it appears that the gospel manuscripts lack this. Furthermore—and perhaps more important—none of the gospels ever explicitly refers to its author. In fact, the earliest nonmanuscript evidence for the name of our gospels comes from the patristic literature examined by Geis. While such an early tradition (second/third century CE) may argue for the authenticity of the gospel attributions, the reader should at least be aware of all extant evidence. Geis concludes this chapter by noting that “the euangelion, then, is the truth of what Genesis prophesied, a literary document that could only have been about Christ.”

Chapter 3, “Applying Origen’s Exegetical Method,” discusses Origen’s exegetical method, noting that the church father set out to authenticate the gospels by seeking to harmonize some of the discordant texts (27). Geis describes Origen’s treatment of several New Testament passages by arguing that what initially appeared to be a discrepancy was, in fact, not one at all (28). This was partially achieved in that Origen’s work dealt with the message of a particular text, not the details. Origen, it is said, contends that there is a difference between falsehood and inaccuracy (28–29). Geis then attempts to tackle the postresurrection accounts. He admits to one discrepancy—the number of the angels in the accounts—only to dismiss as really a matter of authorial style (33). That is to say, one gospel may have added a detail that another, for whatever reason, chose to omit. Geis again refers to the proto-communities and the unlikely event that the members of said communities would have chosen death through persecution for texts that preserved actual discrepancies (34). He then tries to show that the differences between the Synoptics and John have been overblown. He combs through several Johannine texts that agree with the Synoptics (37–43) and an occasion where John’s Gospel differs (43–46). Indeed, he notes that the differences in John should be regarded as evangelistic style and not discrepancies that might question its historicity. Employing some of Origen’s tools, Geis argues that many of the gospel texts whose historicity was questioned during the Enlightenment because of apparent “conflicts” are in fact not conflicting, since, while the details in the text differ, the message of the text remains the same. Geis implicitly reworks how one might define an actual discrepancy but does not define his terms clearly. In not doing so, his argument is weakened.
In “Hebraisms: Earlier Gospel Datings” (ch. 4) Geis refers to two prior books in which he argued that the gospels were written prior to 70 CE. The work of Claude Tresomant, and later Father Jean Carmignac, which showed that the “original” Greek text is not the same as the “original” text, gives Geis an avenue to discuss the so-called Hebrew gospel of Matthew (49). He notes that, since the authors of the gospels were all of Jewish origin—save Luke—the Greek is a subsequent transcription of a Hebrew original. To support his argument, Geis points first to the numerous transliterated Semitic words preserved in the gospels (50). It is suggested that Jewish history indicates a move toward Hebrew, such as in the push against Hellenism and move toward the Jewish-specific traditions in the Maccabean period—though no specific examples are noted. Furthermore, when the Greek of the New Testament is read, it is clear that the Greek is not always natural Greek. If that is the case, it is contended, and if Matthew, who was a tax collector and eyewitness of Jesus’s ministry, was the first gospel writer, then we are not far from a Hebrew subtext (51), and there is some argument to be made regarding the original language of some of Paul’s letters (53). Of course, Geis’s argument for a Hebrew Matthew is based on a tradition that has no explicit evidence in the gospel texts, namely, that Matthew, the tax collector of the gospels, was one in the same as the author of the gospel. Geis offers a number of examples that argue that the Greek of the New Testament is not “good” Greek and that Hebrew is a likely substratum (54–56), while again referencing several attestations within patristic literature to a Hebrew gospel of Matthew. The author then cites the works of David Flusser but does not seriously engage his ideas on the Hebrew subtext of the Greek gospels (56–57). Geis rightly notes, however, that the appearance of Aramaisms in the gospels, especially in Mark, should not settle the question as to the gospels’ original language (58–60). Several examples of Hebraisms in the Greek of the New Testament are given (62), but it is not readily shown that the structure of such examples are Hebrew-only and not Aramaisms or LXX-isms (i.e., the mimicking of the LXX’s Greek). Geis also argues that the Greek poetry of the New Testament shows that it was not originally Greek, in particular, the Magnificat in comparison with Hannah’s prayer (63). He argues further that the Hebrew/Aramaic of the Dead Sea Scrolls helps to offer insights to the Semitic background of New Testament Greek. Some examples where the variant pointing of a Hebrew word can lead to a mistaken Greek translation are given. Indeed, such does not deal with all gospel discrepancies, and a full monograph on this topic is needed prior to accepting Geis’s conclusions. The author, however, misses an opportunity to argue for a Hebrew subtext by not seriously engaging arguments for both the Hebrew and Aramaic substrata of the gospels as in the well-known works of Flusser, Sparks, Fitzmyer, and Casey or by considering the linguistic landscape of first-century Judea. This may have solidified some of Geis’s more theoretical arguments.
Chapter 5, “Towards an NT Canon,” delves into the work of Porphyry—which exists only in fragments—and his virulent attack against Christianity (71). Porphyry’s work created an environment leading to “the breakdown of any possibility of dry objectivity in exegesis” (71). For Geis, Eusebius’s response to Porphyry in his *Ecclesiastical History* indicates that there was a fixed desire to legitimate the writings that had been handed down (74). The church, however, needed to determine what was “canonical” and inspired, which, according to Tertullian, could only be done by those who were already steeped in the apostolic tradition. The argument, Geis admits, is circular—that which is canon is apostolic tradition, and apostolic tradition is that which is canon—thus, spirit (must) confirms what is canonical (74–75). The (admitted) circularity of Geis’s argument diminishes his overall assertion.

Geis then argues that the second coming, while not apostolic, was a communal belief that was dealt with in the texts of the New Testament. Therefore, the early believers thought it necessary to write down a Jesus narrative (84). Geis rhetorically questions whether this narrative would have been written in a foreign (Greek) language or the language sacred to the synagogue, Hebrew (85). Still, Geis’s overall argument, which again fails to address the linguistic situation in the first century CE, loses considerable force by just stating that Hebrew was sacred in the synagogue. But why would the gospels have been written in the synagogue’s sacred language if that language was not the native tongue of the people? Geis’s understanding of 2 Pet 3:15–16 is that it bears evidence of the canonization of what the apostle Paul had written (85). Thus, by the time of apostles there was a canonization process achieved by the very writings of the apostles. Thus, the canonization of the New Testament was essentially done in the New Testament period and was confirmed by Augustine and later councils (85). Geis’s argument does not, however, take into account the full use of the Greek plural *graphas* (writings) in both Christian and non-Christian literature. More of an examination of *graphas* would be needed to suggest that what Peter intended was a sacred/canonical group of writings. The one added problem, which is noted by Geis, is the ordering of the Pauline and Catholic epistles, which differed in the patristics. Geis concludes succinctly in this regard, “the ordering of the texts, though changed, does not alter the truths to which the Church on earth has come to know from Holy Writ,” and so the Spirit keeps the “truth of salvation” vibrant and fresh.

In “Augustine and Harmonization” (ch. 6) Geis’s a priori assumption is that “truth cannot contradict itself, and Scripture, as inspired, is God’s truth to man, it follows Scripture must throughout be harmonious with itself on matters it addresses and events it mentions. It must be internally at one with itself. It must be self-consistent” (89). While Geis deals partly with Augustine and his view on gospel discrepancies, the above marks his grounding assumption. First, however, he notes that Synoptic exegetes (i.e., during the Enlightenment period) have not considered that variants in the parallel stories may be the
result of evangelistic styles. That is, what was important to one author, was simply not so to the other (89). For Geis, documents at odds with each other cannot be part of the apostolic tradition. So when faced with discrepancies, Augustine himself, who dealt with the genealogies of Matt and Luke showed that they were varied in details but not in meaning. In that sense, the divine truth and inspiration are not at odds, the details are, and as such the truth remains the same (92). Geis notes that Augustine’s ideas suggest that the spirit is key to inspiration (94). He also refers to Augustine’s treatment of gospel parallels such as the cleansing of the temple, in which it is argued that there is little to no conflict among these parallel accounts. Geis then notes Augustine’s take on another methodological principle, which he calls “chronology in non-specific timing”: “if it is not known exactly when an event occurred, and the evangelists are clearly in contradiction as to the time, we are not to ascribe a contradiction to the record” (94). In many ways Geis, utilizing Augustine, is suggesting that Enlightenment exegetes were mistaken to put a filter of exegesis over the gospels that the writers themselves did not intend. In other words, he asks whether the inspired author should be subject to the uninspired exegete (95). Indeed, this line of argument logically subjugates the reader to Geis’s argument. To suggest otherwise, and ask unique questions of the gospel text that may have not been intended by the original author would subjugate the inspired text to the uninspired reader. Of course, Geis does not define how one then ascertains what the gospel author originally intended, apart from patristic exegesis.

Chapter 7, “Breakdown of Harmonization,” deals primarily with the Synoptic Problem. Geis rightly questions Markan priority and the Two-Source Hypothesis, since neither theory successfully answers all of the intricacies or discrepancies present among the Synoptics. He argues rather for Matthean priority, which is intended to complement, or solidify, the work in his previous volume (97–98). Part of his argument surveys the discussion of William Farmer and John C. Hawkins (103–4). Geis again bases part of his argument on what appears to be an a priori assumption—at least without the full argument in his previous volume—that Matthew wrote before Luke. This is partly based on Geis’s thought that Matthew as a tax collector knew shorthand, and it is unlikely that someone who was present during Jesus’s actual ministry would not have written down the events (104; see critique above). Geis continues to survey other arguments, especially the Farrer (Farrer-Goulder-Goodacre) theory, which is thought to be in “current fashion” and eliminates the need for the saying source Q. Geis then returns to referencing the Hebrew Matthew (105) and combing through a number of texts where Mark appears to be following Matthew. Interestingly, Luke’s Gospel is never discussed, and Geis concludes that Markan priority is largely without claim (108–10). Unfortunately, the rather brief treatment of the Synoptic Problem does more harm than help. The argument by which Markan priority is dismissed can be used also for Matthean priority, the position of the
author. Indeed, it appears, as Geis might agree, that every overarching Synoptic solution has its own problems.

In the final chapter, “Exegesis and Skepticism,” Geis briefly mentions the theory of the “Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research” and the work of Robert Lindsey, especially in regard to the argument that Luke appears to be based on the Greek translation of an originally Hebrew document (111). Geis disagrees, since a Hebrew Matthew can function as the base text for Luke. Thus for Geis the ordering of the gospels as preserved in the patristics (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) is key (112). From there, however, Geis deviates to the philosophy of the Enlightenment period—Descartes, Hume, even Spinoza—which he accuses of questioning the gospel’s historicity based on perceived conflicts and discrepancies (116–17). Geis argues that, when examined closely, these questions of perceived conflicts and disputes were largely unnecessary (116–17). The pendulum swing from the church’s dominance over Holy Writ to Luther’s statement regarding each individual’s ability to garner the truth of the Scriptures is suggested as a partial cause for this new line of inquiry. Geis suggests that the invention of Gutenberg’s press allowed different variations of the Greek text of the New Testament to be published, which ultimately led to new understandings of particular texts, understandings that, according to Geis, lacked backing (116–17). Finally, education was no longer solely within the realm of the church, but philosophers now took to the classics and entered academic positions. As a result, they were able to write on Scripture from any possible angle and thus question elements of matters of historicity (118–19). Geis ends by summarizing the three major points of his argument: (1) the Gospels are of Hebraic origin and were translated into Greek once it was realized that the second coming would not occur in the first century; (2) one could argue that similar Synoptic passages, if the patristic evidence is to be followed, were taken from the Hebrew Matthew by later redactors; (3) gospels being originally authored in Hebrew helps explain Synoptic parallels and perhaps gives us access to what the original writer meant and thus closer to “this Man Who rose from the dead” (118–19).

In *Exegesis and the Synoptics*, Geis intended to provide a “more complete” argument for an early Hebrew gospel that was then redacted into Greek. Indeed, he makes a noble attempt to deal with a difficult theory. On the way he raises some important and thought-provoking questions, yet some of the arguments seem so distinctly associated with his previous work, *Divinity of a Birth*, that it makes it somewhat difficult for this study to stand alone. Geis moves quickly through discussions of canonization and the Synoptic Problem. The absence of the Gospel of Luke, which has been shown to preserve several (nonseptuagintal) Hebraisms, to have a higher frequency of Semitic expressions, and at times to utilize independent sources, within the Synoptic problem discussion weakens Geis’s overall assertion regarding an early Hebrew gospel. The frequent references to
patristic evidence for a Hebrew Matthew is not nearly enough to win the day. That said, research into the Semitic subtext of the gospels should remain an important and vibrant area of inquiry, especially since it has been shown from the early twentieth century that some of these texts must originate from Hebrew and not simply Aramaic. Furthermore, Geis’s survey of solutions to the problems of the discrepancies preserved in the gospels, while rightly noting that many of them are not in fact discrepancies, does not sufficiently deal with differences in gospel parallels, especially those that actually contradict in meaning. Much of the concrete textual evidence (e.g., manuscripts) that exists is ignored, and any comparison with contemporary Second Temple texts limits the argument regarding the dating of the gospels—or gospel (to this Geis is not altogether clear)—to a period closer to Jesus’s life and ministry. Rather, the discussion regarding the gospels is relegated to patristic evidence. While patristic evidence is key to the development of the New Testament canon and Christianity, one should be careful utilizing it without hesitation. Indeed, a Hebrew Matthew is spoken of among the early church fathers, but to date there is no textual evidence to the existence of this gospel. While Geis again raises some important questions that New Testament scholars should give more thought to, his suggestions and solutions need a fuller treatment, and more weight needs to be given to the literature that was written around the time to which he dates this so-called early gospel, as well the linguistic environment of the first century and the language of the New Testament manuscripts that we currently have.