

TIME AND NARRATIVE: CLARITY AND CHRONOLOGY IN
READING THE GOSPELS

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Introduction: The Need for Clarity on Chronology

In a discussion of the Temple cleansing as reported in the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels, Allan Chapple makes a distinction that is vital for Gospels and historical Jesus studies:

The second step in our argument involves challenging the widely held view that John had theological reasons for moving this event to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Scholars generally see no problem here, on the grounds that the Gospel writers often arrange material thematically rather than chronologically. That this occurs in the Gospels is obvious enough—but is there any parallel for such a major departure from the actual order of events? It is one thing to recognize, for example, that Matthew has grouped together a series of miracle stories without any regard for their precise chronological setting (Matt 8:1–9:34). This is only a matter, first, of not recording specific dates and times for the events being reported, and second, of selecting representative incidents from the early stages of Jesus' ministry. All we get is a rough idea of when they happened—but a rough idea is all that we need. But to bring forward to the beginning of Jesus' ministry an event that occurred only at the end—and, what is more, an event that played a significant part in bringing his ministry to an end—is not at

all the same kind of thing. This does not give us just a rough idea of what happened; it gives us the wrong idea.¹

The distinction emphasized in this paper is what Chapple calls ‘giving a rough idea’ versus ‘giving a wrong idea’ about chronology.

In this article I will not argue for any one position concerning such matters as, for example, whether or not John moved the Temple cleansing or whether or not Matthew or Mark moved the cursing of the fig tree. Instead, I will lay out some careful distinctions among ways that an author could narrate chronology and will argue for the importance of being more consistent and explicit in maintaining these distinctions. If an author wishes to say that John did move the Temple cleansing, what exactly does that mean? Is the idea that John merely narrated the cleansing at an earlier point in his Gospel than the Synoptics do or that he changed the time of the event within the *world* of his narrative? If a scholar tells us that ancient people did not care much about chronological accuracy or that they did not expect chronological narration, what exactly does that mean? And is there evidence to support the generalization? The latter question depends upon the former, for one might have evidence to support an ancient tolerance for one narrative practice (giving a rough idea about chronology) but not for the other (giving the wrong idea about chronology).

I present a distinction between concepts that I dub achronological narration and dyschronological narration and argue that a failure to maintain this distinction explicitly has led to unclarity in scholarship, misunderstanding between modern scholars and misapplication of the work of ancient authors. Adverting explicitly to this distinction will be helpful in producing clarity, regardless of what position one takes on specific passages. I suggest that anyone writing on this topic should adopt this distinction and state explicitly which kind of narration is in view when discussing hypotheses about an author’s chronological practice.

Four Ways to Narrate Time

When I speak of chronology throughout, this category includes both time ordering and amount of time. While a majority of alleged chronological dis-

1. Allan Chapple, ‘Jesus’ Intervention in the Temple: Once or Twice?’, *JETS* 58 (2015), pp. 545-69 (551).

crepancies in the Gospels concern time ordering (which event happened first, second, etc.), some concern how much time a series of events took. Sometimes alleged discrepancies arise when (it is claimed) one document implies or states that a series of events took only a single day while another states that they were spread over a longer period of time. A well-known example is the rushed appearance of Lk. 24.44-52 as compared with the forty days mentioned in Acts 1.3.

While the discussion will focus most upon two ways to narrate about time, we must consider four ways to do so, as follows.

(1) The author intends to imply or state a chronology and gets it right. That chronology corresponds to the way that things literally happened historically.

(2) The author intends to imply or state a chronology and gets it wrong by accident. The chronology does not correspond to the way that things happened historically, but the author does not know this. The document contains an ordinary error.

(3) The author intends to imply or state a chronology, it does not correspond to historical reality, and the author knows that. The author intends to change the chronology in the apparently realistic *world* of the narrative. I will dub this dyschronological narration.

Note that this definition of dyschronological narration is compatible with but does not entail an authorial intention to deceive the audience. The audience may or may not take the chronology seriously and be confused. The definition by itself leaves open either possibility. It would be possible under this definition for the audience to take the story's chronology lightly (perhaps due to genre considerations) and hence not to be misled, though it is also possible that they take the work to be giving chronological information. All that this definition says is that the author intentionally changes the chronology in an invisible way in the story as narrated. Dyschronological narration could be attempted deception, but whether it is or not depends on other factors.

(4) The author does not intend either to imply or to state a chronology in the story concerning the event or series of events in question. If an interpreter thinks that chronology is intended, this is due to a misunderstanding. I will dub this achronological narration.

The first two of these do not require much explanation. In the case of biblical documents, the hypothesis of ordinary error would run afoul of some scholars' commitment to inerrancy. But these categories are meant to

be applicable to non-biblical literature as well, and not all scholars are committed to inerrancy even for biblical documents.

I stress the repeated phrase 'imply or state'. It is not the case that all in-explicit or not fully explicit chronology is ipso facto achronology. Suppose that real events happened at least approximately corresponding to those told in a given narrative. An author who deliberately narrates those events in a certain order with the intention of implying a chronology (in the story) that the author knows to be contrary to fact is narrating dyschronologically, even without explicit time indicators. Implied chronology can constitute dyschronology.

Epistemologically, it can of course be difficult to tell whether an author intends to imply a chronology. Explicitness admits of degrees. There may be details that intentionally point to a chronological order even if the author does not say, 'First ... second' or 'On this day ... on the next day'. Reasonable readers may differ about how clearly a document indicates chronology. The scholar who argues for achronological narration, on the grounds that a sentence does not contain a temporal indicator, may be accused of pettifogging, while the scholar who insists that the author is saying that events took place in just this one way may be accused of jumping to conclusions.

It is also important to maintain a distinction between epistemology and ontology. Whether or not an author is trying to make the events in the document have a certain order (or take a certain amount of time) lies in the author's intention. We try to discover that intention, in part, by looking for time indicators in the story. The absence of explicit temporal indicators can be a sign of achronological narration, but that does not mean that the absence of explicit indicators constitutes achronology.

Even if multiple authors are trying to indicate a chronology (implicitly or explicitly), and even if there is an initial appearance of discrepancy, it still does not follow that either author is narrating dyschronologically. We may reasonably decide that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, two different, intentionally chronological narratives can be reasonably harmonized. This would mean that both authors put a chronology into their stories and got it right (1). A common way of deciding this is to conclude that two events happened that were only generally similar. Or we may reasonably decide that one author or another made an ordinary mistake (2).

Suppose that we are strongly convinced on other grounds that the narratives cannot be both chronological and harmonized ([1] cannot be the case for both authors). Then, in general, the more confident we become that all

of the authors wish to imply or state a chronology ([4] is not the case for any author), the more we will be forced to choose ordinary error (2) or dyschronological narration (3).

The decision among these alternatives may take place in cycles. A scholar may start out convinced on other grounds that Jesus did not cleanse the Temple twice ([1] is not possible for the Temple cleansing in both John and the Synoptics). He then begins examining the other possibilities. Perhaps he is convinced, due to considerations of traditional authorship, that neither the Synoptic authors nor John could have made an ordinary mistake ([2] is not possible). He considers achronological narration but concludes that all of the Gospel authors are either strongly implying or explicitly stating the time of the cleansing ([4] is not the case, either in John or in the Synoptics). He therefore concludes that someone has narrated dyschronologically (3) and settles on John, basing this conclusion on the premise that John was especially likely to sacrifice historicity for theological symbolism.

A further movement may take place. Suppose that, upon re-examination, the scholar concludes that it is unlikely on independent grounds that any of the authors narrated dyschronologically ([3] is highly improbable). Perhaps, for example, he changes his mind about John's willingness to sacrifice historical accuracy for theological reasons. He might then revisit the question of whether there were two Temple cleansings.

I am not endorsing any of these specific conclusions but merely illustrating how having these distinctions in hand assists a rigorous consideration of evidence for and against various options.

Clarity and Unclarity in Commentary

Gospel scholars are aware of what I have called achronological narration. The attribution of achronology to an author, often under the heading of topical narration, is a staple of (especially) evangelical scholarship, and in its own way, it is a form of traditional harmonization. It does not take the form of doubling events, but the claim that an author has narrated without chronology allows the semantic content of multiple narratives to be literally true. Here, for example, is Craig Blomberg's explanation of the minor difference in order between Luke's and Matthew's versions of the temptations in the wilderness:

Matthew and Luke each present three distinct temptations the devil employed ... Matthew presents these in the order (1), (2), (3), while Luke has (1), (3), (2). Yet like so many places in the Gospels ... where the order of events varies, at least one of the divergent accounts does not make any claims to being in chronological order. Here Luke 4:5 and 9 begin the second and third temptations simply with the Greek conjunctions *kai* and *de* ('and' and 'but'), which imply no necessary temporal sequence ...²

Similarly, John Wenham expressly invokes the idea of achronological compression—narrating briefly and inexplicitly about time length without meaning to imply a short time period—when discussing the question of when events happened at the end of Luke 24:

Luke at this point leaps ahead and spans the whole fifty day period from Easter to Pentecost in ten verses He is not packing into one day or even into one day and one night all the events between resurrection and ascension ...³

D.A. Carson notes that the arrangement of some narrative portions in Matthew's Gospel is topical and explicitly contrasts this with chronological arrangement: 'Matthew's arrangement of the pericopes in chs. 8–9 is demonstrably topical, not chronological.'⁴

Blomberg goes so far as to suggest a strong epistemological principle when chronology is inexplicit:

[I]f one applies the principle of assuming a chronological connection between two portions of the Synoptics only when the text explicitly presents one, then the apparent contradictions of sequence vanish.⁵

2. Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament: Countering the Challenges to Evangelical Christian Beliefs* (Nashville: B. & H. Academic, 2016), pp. 62-63.

3. John Wenham, *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), p. 107.

4. D.A. Carson, 'Matthew', in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (eds.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew and Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, rev. edn, 2010), pp. 23-670 (233).

5. Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2nd edn, 2007), p. 169.

Blomberg is not saying that inexplicitness in chronology *constitutes* an absence of chronological intention, but he is proposing a methodological principle. One might argue that the principle as stated is too strong, especially since explicitness and implication can come in degrees. But Blomberg's point shows that achronological narration is not a new scholarly category.

These references to achronological narration in the scholarly literature help to pre-empt a potential objection to the distinction between achronology and dyschronology. Someone might claim that the distinction itself is anachronistic and overly analytical, a modern imposition that would not have been understood by the ancient mind (in a later section I will show that St. Augustine explicitly discusses achronological narration). If one acknowledges that topical narration (as opposed to chronological narration) is a legitimate interpretive category, there is no principled objection to the distinction between achronological and dyschronological narration.

We can see the same point by considering common scholarly claims that an author has changed the time of an event. In the very nature of the case, such changes are deliberate.⁶ This is all the more true when the theory in question is that the author did so for a symbolic or dramatic reason. Here, for example, is Jörg Frey's statement, fairly typical among mainstream scholars, about John's moving the Temple cleansing:

The first Passover in 2:13 is linked with the episode of the cleansing of the temple, and when the evangelist transfers this episode from its passion context to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he has to mention a reason for his appearance in Jerusalem, the Passover festival. Accordingly, a 'first' journey of Jesus is created by a literary operation without reference to any tradition of an additional festival journey. This journey also provides the setting of the encounter with Nicodemus ... with the concluding discourse and for the traditional information about Jesus' longer stay in the Judean territory The return journey, then, provides the framework for the encounter with the Samaritan woman and her village. John's aims when creating that journey are not focused on a more accurate representation of Jesus'

6. See, for example, Michael R. Licona's definitions of 'compression' and 'displacement' in Michael R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 19-20.

travels or time frame but rather on the programmatically and dramatically effective transposition of the conflict in the temple to the beginning of Jesus' ministry.⁷

Frey attributes a sophisticated thought process to John. If the author of the Fourth Gospel did what he hypothesizes, it follows that the achronological/dyschronological distinction is not anachronistic. For, if this theory is true, John knew that his chronology was incompatible with the Synoptic one and made the change deliberately for dramatic and programmatic reasons.

Separate scholarly discussion of achronology (under the heading of topical narration) and dyschronology (under the heading of theologically motivated 'moving' of events) shows that the distinction is tacitly present in the literature. But despite this fact, scholars are at times frustratingly ambiguous when it comes to claiming that an evangelist moved or shortened events. Generalizations about what was allowed or expected by *ancient readers* are often fuzzier still. In contrast to the clear passages just quoted, we can find a number of unclear discussions of chronology that would be greatly helped if the distinction in view here were used self-consciously.

For example, here is Darrell Bock's and Benjamin Simpson's comment on the anointing of Jesus in the week prior to his death:

The next event [the anointing] John places at six days before Passover and in Bethany, where Lazarus lived. This is probably the preceding Saturday ... The accounts in Matthew and Mark ... probably refer to the same event, even though in those two Gospels Jesus' head rather than feet is anointed, and the event is placed after Jesus enters Jerusalem ... The issue of timing may be nothing more than a different choice about where to place events tied to the end, especially given the fact that Matthew and Mark often work topically. It is quite possible that John's event matches Matthew and Mark and that the Synoptics' timing reflects Judas's act of betrayal growing out of this event.⁸

7. Jörg Frey, *Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel: Tradition and Narration* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), pp. 125-26.

8. Darrell L. Bock and Benjamin I. Simpson, *Jesus according to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2nd edn, 2017), p. 604.

This passage is ambiguous; it contains some indicators that seem to point to achronological narration and others that seem to point to dyschronological narration. Which are the authors hypothesizing? To begin with, they state that John places the event six days before Passover while the Synoptic authors place it after Jesus' Triumphal Entry. This appears to mean that the chronologies are incompatible. But the passage gives the rationale that 'Matthew and Mark often work topically' and speaks of 'where to place events tied to the end.' Is this placement supposed to be chronological or not? Topical narration can be contrasted with chronological narration, as in Carson, above. If Matthew and Mark are 'working topically,' does that mean that they do not intend to place the event (temporally) after the Triumphal Entry after all? After the statement that Matthew and Mark work topically, the authors state that they want to emphasize that Judas' act of betrayal grows out of this event. And indeed, one might get the impression from Mk 14.10 that Judas went immediately to the leaders and offered to betray Jesus after the anointing and the conversation there, in which he took part. The authors do not seem to mean that either Mark or John made a mere error. But on their theory, is this supposed to be topical narrative, chronological narrative, or both?

The balance of the evidence favors the conclusion that they think that an author (probably Mark) narrated dyschronologically, motivated to do so by topical considerations. But this interpretation of their meaning is somewhat conjectural.

Such ambiguity becomes more acute when we come to broad generalizations about the Gospel authors' alleged unconcern with chronology. For example, Bock and Simpson say, 'In some cases they [the evangelists] record events, especially teaching, that would have been typical of Jesus' teaching throughout his ministry. Thus, chronology often is not important to the Gospel writers.'⁹

To say that 'chronology often is not important' could simply mean that the Gospel authors sometimes order segments of events topically rather than chronologically. But given the excerpt above from the same work, the statement that chronology is often not important is probably intended to cover both achronological and dyschronological narration (the latter possibly motivated by topical interests), without distinguishing the two.

9. Bock and Simpson, *Jesus according to Scripture*, p. 114.

In a written debate between Bart Ehrman and Michael Licona, Licona mingles achronological and dyschronological compression:

Compression was a compositional device employed on a regular basis by historians in Jesus' day ... Earlier in this Detailed Response, I make mention of the conspiracy of Catiline. Once the conspiracy was made known to the consul Cicero and the Senate, actions were taken to crush it. In his *Life of Cicero* (19.1–22.2), Plutarch narrates the arraignment of the conspirators Lentulus and Cethegus as though occurring on one day (December 3), and their punishment determined and carried out on the next. However, in his *Life of Caesar* (7.3–5), Plutarch narrates the summons of Lentulus and Cethegus before the Senate, the discussion of their punishment, and their executions all being carried out as though on the same day. In reality, their arraignment took place on December 3 and their punishment was determined and carried out on December 5, with a different discussion occurring on December 4. Plutarch compresses the story some in *Cicero* and even more in *Caesar* ...

Compressing stories was not a practice unique to ancient authors. Anyone who is married today knows there's a difference between the guy and girl versions of a story. Generally speaking, girls like details—and lots of them! ... Guys generally like to get to the bottom line quickly and often have little patience for details that may not be relevant. They typically feel free to adapt the details a little in order to abbreviate a story or make a point clearer ... [W]e guys aren't trying to distort the story and deceive our friend. It's usually the case that our friend would prefer to be spared from having to hear all of the details and instead just get what's relevant to them. Does that render 'unreliable' those of us who adapt some details of a story slightly in order to abbreviate and highlight certain points? In my opinion, it does not.¹⁰

While Licona's language is colloquial, his blurring of the distinction between achronological and dyschronological compression is important for scholarly reasons. The description of what Licona believes Plutarch has

10. Michael Licona, 'Licona Responds to Ehrman on New Testament Reliability'. See online: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210421022051/thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/licona-detailed-response/>.

done indicates that he has dyschronological compression in mind, inter alia. His definition of ‘compression’ in *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?* makes this clear as well:

Compression: When an author knowingly portrays events over a shorter period of time than the actual time it took for those events to occur, the author has compressed the story.¹¹

So does his discussion elsewhere of Luke 24. In contrast to Wenham, Licona states that Luke places all of the events after Jesus’ resurrection on Easter Sunday, though Luke knows that they actually took forty days.¹² This is dyschronological compression.

But in the written debate with Ehrman, statements like ‘guys ... like to get to the bottom line quickly and ... have little patience for details that may not be relevant’ and words like ‘abbreviate’ and ‘highlight certain points’ give a strong impression of achronology. This conflates merely leaving out details with deliberately changing the amount of time taken by a series of events. Perhaps Licona believes that men do habitually engage in both achronological and dyschronological compression in the course of conversation. But that is a more controversial assertion than the claim that anyone (male or female) likes to leave out irrelevant details and get to the point. We would be likely to have frequent, unnecessary misunderstandings if speakers habitually altered chronology, and it is hard to believe that most people expect such deliberate alterations in informal conversation.

Craig Keener’s discussion of the cursing of the fig tree mixes implications of dyschronology with comments that sound like references to achronology and citations of ancient authors who could easily be alluding to achronology. Keener first describes an apparent chronological discrepancy between Mk 11.12-25 and Mt. 21.12-13, 18-25 using a chart of differences. In Mark, he says:

1. Jesus curses the fruitless fig tree (11.14).
2. Jesus challenges the temple (11.15-17).
3. The next day, the disciples find the fig tree withered (11.20).

Under the Matthew reference, he says:

11. Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, p. 20.
12. Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, pp. 177, 180.

2. Jesus challenges the temple (21.12-13).
1. Jesus curses the fruitless fig tree (21.19).
3. The fig tree withers at once (21.19).¹³

There is at least an apparent discrepancy between the passages in Matthew and Mark. Keener's discussion seems to indicate both that (in his view) the discrepancy is irresolvable and that one author or the other has engaged in dyschronological narration.

He begins his analysis with a dismissal of any attempt at harmonization:

Did Jesus curse *two* fig trees over the course of two days, though each Evangelist mentions only one, with one withering at once and the other withering later but the disciples needing precisely the same lesson on faith, in very similar words, each time?

Is it not more respectful to the text as it stands to allow the writers their different adaptations? Mark frames the evaluation of the temple with the fate of a fruitless tree, pointing to the temple's impending demise (cf. 13:2). By contrast, Matthew, who fairly consistently prefers order, prefers to keep the event of the fig tree together in his narrative, just as he sometimes distinguishes judgments that may be blended together in his sources ...¹⁴

The only harmonization Keener considers is doubling the cursing; he never clearly considers achronology as a possibility. This is not to say that achronology is the best option. It is merely to say that Keener does not mention it, though it is a highly relevant possibility, and he does not provide evidence that a double cursing has ever been seriously suggested by a scholar.

The insistence that the fig tree withers later in Mark than in Matthew makes it clear that Keener considers the two accounts irreconcilable. Nor does he contemplate the possibility of mere error. His reference to different 'adaptations' appears to mean that one of the two authors has deliberately changed the events' chronology—dyschronological narration. But which author? He may be implying that Matthew is the one giving the true chronology by saying that Matthew 'prefers order' and that Mark is 'framing' the evaluation of the Temple.

13. Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), p. 141.

14. Keener, *Christobiography*, p. 141.

The discussion becomes even more ambiguous when Keener proceeds to generalizations about ancient readers:

Ancient readers did not expect precise chronologies in ordinary biographies, so they would not demand them from the Gospels ... The earliest traditions were oral, and oral performance can vary the sequence of events.

Modern readers sometimes hold the Evangelist to standards that not only deviate from ancient expectations but that modern readers do not follow in ordinary life. One professor puts it to his undergraduates this way: 'When you go home for vacation and your parents ask what did you do this semester, nobody gets out their date book and says, I did this on September 1' and the like. Someone who demands that anecdotes be recalled chronologically might appear 'anal retentive'.¹⁵

This passage deserves analysis. In an elided portion of this passage, Keener brings in Papias and Augustine. I will defer further discussion of this use of ancient authors to a later section. Keener's conflation here between achronology and dyschronology is notable. Despite the implication of dyschronology in the cursing of the fig tree, his generalizations are readily understood as references merely to achronology. He says that readers did not expect 'precise' chronologies. But there is a difference worth retaining (as Chapple points out) between not giving a precise chronology and giving a chronology that is contrary to fact. We can well imagine that ancient readers, like many modern readers, might not demand a high level of precision in chronology, but they may have expected authors to refrain from deliberately altering chronology. To assert that they expected authors to alter chronology requires stronger evidence.

Even a significant appearance of chronological discrepancy (as in the fig tree incident) is not ipso facto evidence that audiences expected authors to change chronology. We often encounter both apparent and real contradictions in ordinary life and in historical documents. These can arise from misunderstanding (on the part of readers) or error (on the part of authors), even when neither source has deliberately changed anything. Presumably ancient audiences would have been capable of noticing the same ubiquitous causes of both apparent and real discrepancy. Again, this point applies to both bib-

15. Keener, *Christobiography*, pp. 141-42.

lical and non-biblical accounts, regardless of one's stance on biblical inerrancy.

Ambiguity also affects Keener's mention of oral performance. The phrase 'vary the sequence of events' is perfectly ambiguous as between achronology and dyschronology. Keener further imagines a college student who gets out a date book in an informal context to give unnecessarily precise answers. Keener winds up with a statement that it would be 'anal retentive' to require that anecdotes 'be recalled chronologically.' This alludes to the fact that people often tell anecdotes in an informal, rambling fashion, jumping backward and forward in time. But that would not need to include any adaptation in which one deliberately alters the sequence of events. In fact, the very informality of such an oral account would seem to be artless and hence unlikely to include deliberate changes for symbolic reasons such as Keener alleges (elsewhere) for the Temple cleansing and here for the cursing of the fig tree.¹⁶ Misunderstandings might arise from a meandering oral account, but those would be accidental, not the result of the speaker's literary artifice.

Thus far, the examples of unclarity in discussing chronology have been evangelical scholars (Frey, a non-evangelical scholar quoted above, is quite clear when he alleges that John has changed chronology). But mainstream scholarship is not immune to unclarity on this point. In Raymond Brown's commentary on the Fourth Gospel, it becomes clear that he thinks that John and/or the editor of the Gospel displaced dyschronologically, but his explanations of why such changes were acceptable to the evangelist(s) contain the same type of ambiguity that we have already seen.

In Brown's comments on the Temple cleansing, he states fairly clearly:

That we cannot harmonize John and the Synoptics by positing two cleansings of the temple precincts seems obvious ... Let us look at the arguments that favor John's dating and those that favor the Synoptic dating ... Why does the cleansing appear at the beginning of John's account? We suggest that the editing of the Gospel led to the transposition of the scene from the original sequence which related it to the last days before Jesus' arrest. We shall see that the story of Lazarus, which is probably a late addition to John's sequence, has become in John the chief motive for Jesus' arrest, displacing all the other factors

16. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), I, pp. 518-19.

that contributed to the tragedy. If the insertion of the Lazarus narrative caused a displacement of the cleansing scene, what more natural than to join it to an anti-Temple statement that was found in the beginning of the Johannine narrative? The fact that Jesus' first journey to Jerusalem occurred at Passover may have been another factor prompting the new localization of a scene that had originally been associated with the last Passover of Jesus' life. The new sequence even had a theological attractiveness ...¹⁷

The theory is that an editor has dyschronologically displaced the cleansing, since the raising of Lazarus took its place. According to Brown, we must choose between the Synoptic and Johannine chronologies at this point; the Gospels are not achronological, and their chronologies are incompatible.

But when he discusses chronology in the Fourth Gospel more generally and justifies the evangelist's (or editor's) activities, he is less clear:

Properly evaluated, the Synoptic tradition and the Johannine tradition are not contradictory; at times they illuminate each other through comparison ... However, the fact that neither tradition shows a scientific interest in chronology betrays itself when we seek to combine them into a consecutive picture ...¹⁸

To say that the Gospels are not contradictory is quite confusing, given Brown's other views; in a straightforward sense, he does regard them as sometimes contradictory. Moreover, to say that they do not show 'a scientific interest in chronology' could, again, merely refer to achronological narration, especially in a context that says that they do not contradict each other. But he continues: '[I]n evaluating the Johannine picture of Jesus, we cannot neglect the inevitable modifications made in the various stages of Johannine composition.'¹⁹ This seems to imply dyschronology. So the passage contains indications of both, without making the distinction.

Similarly, when discussing the chronological setting of Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, he says:

17. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 117–18.

18. Brown, *Gospel according to John*, p. 1.

19. Brown, *Gospel according to John*, p. 1.

John obviously intends Nicodemus to illustrate a partial faith in Jesus on the basis of signs ... Such an illustration comes logically after examples of more satisfactory faith (the disciples at Cana) and of complete lack of faith ('the Jews' at the Temple). Thus, the sequence is at least logical. To seek perfect chronological sequence in John is a vain endeavor, for the evangelist himself has warned us that such was not his interest (xx 30) ...²⁰

His point about Jn 20.30 and the evangelist's 'interest' appears to be that the evangelist says that he could not include all of the things that Jesus did (Brown emphasizes the incompleteness elsewhere) and that his purpose was to produce faith.²¹ But the statement that John lacks 'perfect chronological sequence' and that the sequence of events from Chapter 2 to Chapter 3 is logical is ambiguous. Merely to write an incomplete account that sometimes arranges events logically is not the same thing as knowingly placing a scene at an apparently historical point in one's story where it did not occur. Nor does Jn 20.30 even address the question of whether the evangelist sought to give his incomplete account in chronological order.

Brown appears to be quite open to the dyschronological possibility, given his remarks about the activities of the redactor in displacing the Temple cleansing. When discussing various theories about the actual and/or narrative setting of the conversation with Nicodemus, he says that, 'Such exercises of ingenuity are always interesting, but in the end one is discouraged by the lack of proof.'²² He seems to be saying that dyschronological placement may have occurred, along with elaboration upon what he calls a 'nucleus of traditional material,'²³ but that it is impossible to be sure exactly what the narrator has done chronologically.

Explaining dyschronological narration by saying that the evangelists are not interested in giving precise, scientific or complete chronological accounts is not helpful. Once the possibilities of achronological narration and ordinary error are recognized explicitly, we can see that incompleteness and inexactness, which are often unavoidable even in wholly historical works, do not necessitate dyschronology and should not lead us to expect it. By the same token, the invocation of those categories does not satisfy a reasonable

20. Brown, *Gospel according to John*, p. 135.

21. Brown, *Gospel according to John*, pp. xlix-l, 213, 315.

22. Brown, *Gospel according to John*, p. 135.

23. Brown, *Gospel according to John*, p. 136.

burden of proof for concluding that an author has engaged in dyschronology, which is a fairly complex hypothesis. We should not merely note a suggested discrepancy in chronology, or note that the authors may not be giving a complete and precise chronological account and conclude from those facts alone that an author must have made a deliberate, non-historical change in chronology. That simply does not follow.

A Modern Misunderstanding

It is useful to see how the failure to distinguish explicitly between achronological and dyschronological narration can create misunderstandings among contemporary scholars. Regarding the anointing of Jesus in Passion Week, Licona advocates dyschronological narration. He is quite explicit that either John or Mark has changed the day on which Jesus' feet were anointed, stating that Mark 'locates ... the anointing two days prior to Passover,' but that John 'says it occurred six days before Passover.'²⁴ He continues to say:

Either Mark or John appear to have changed the day, using synthetic chronological placement in order to bind the anointing explicitly to a different context than where it actually occurred ... The event is presented as historical, but the stated chronology is artificial.²⁵

Licona also says, '[E]ither Mark (followed by Matthew) or John [has] displaced the event,' and he seems inclined to think that it is John who has done so, partly because he thinks that John 'probably' dyschronologically moved the Temple cleansing.²⁶

Licona does not discuss the possibility that either author achronologically moved the anointing, possibly because he considers it improbable. But this omission leads to a fascinating apparent misunderstanding of Craig Blomberg. For Blomberg *does* think that achronology is plausible in the case of the anointing. Blomberg suggests that Mark is narrating achronologically at this point for thematic reasons, simply telling about the anointing closer to Jesus' death. Mark's reason for doing so, on Blomberg's view, is that Jesus says that the anointing is for his burial:

24. Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, p. 191.

25. Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, p. 191.

26. Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, p. 150.

As we draw close to John's account of Christ's death and resurrection, parallels with the Synoptics increase. 'Six days before the Passover' ([John 12] v. 1) brings us to the Saturday night before 'Palm Sunday'. John 12:1-8 parallels the anointing of Jesus by an unnamed woman in Mark 14:3-9 ... apparently in the context of the last night of Jesus' life. The latter account is almost certainly referring to the same event as John does here ... When one looks at the Markan passage, however, several indications suggest that Mark has thematically relocated (and Matthew has simply copied him) what John narrates in its correct chronological sequence. Mark 14:1-2 begins by observing that the Passover was still two days away, as the authorities continued to plot how to arrest Jesus. Verses 10-11 flow naturally from verse 2 as the continuation of that plot. Not until verse 12 do we come to the Last Supper account itself. Mark 14:3, on the other hand, is linked with verse 2 merely by a *kai* (and) and goes on to describe an incident that takes place at some unspecified time while Jesus 'was in Bethany'. Once we observe that both Mark and John have Jesus interpreting the anointing as preparation for his burial, one can understand why Mark would insert the story immediately preceding a description of other foreshadowings of his death, including his last meal with the Twelve ...²⁷

Blomberg could be more explicit here, and that would be helpful, but a careful reading shows that he is saying that Mark narrated achronologically. The phrase 'thematically relocated,' though potentially confusing if taken out of context, goes together well with the express reference to Mark's non-chronological *kai* between vv. 2 and 3 and the mention of an 'unspecified time' when Jesus was in Bethany. Another phrase that might cause confusion is Blomberg's statement that the anointing in Mark is 'apparently in the context of the last night of Jesus' life,' but his continued discussion allows one to see that (in his view) a closer look at Mark reveals that he was not trying to indicate chronology. This is clearer still when one considers Blomberg's principle quoted above (from a different work cited above) that we should assume 'a chronological connection between two portions of the Synoptics only when the text explicitly presents one.'²⁸ Mark (in Blom-

27. Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 175.

28. Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of Gospels*, p. 169.

berg's view) does not explicitly present a chronological connection here, and Blomberg therefore concludes that we should not assume one, which allows us to resolve the apparent discrepancy by way of achronology.

Again, I am not arguing that Blomberg's theory is probable but that achronological narration does appear to *be* his theory. Yet Licona seems to take him to be advocating dyschronology. Immediately after suggesting that Mark may have displaced the event to bring it closer to Jesus' burial, Licona has a footnote, which says, 'Preferring John's chronology over Mark's is Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, 175, Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 932, and Witherington (note 63 above).'²⁹

Note 63 immediately follows a statement that Mark and John are reporting the same event. In that note, Licona says,

Blomberg (*Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, 175) opines that Mark and John are 'almost certainly referring to the same event' and that 'Mark has thematically relocated (and Matthew has simply copied him) what John narrates in its correct chronological sequence' in order to foreshadow Jesus' death more closely to the event itself. Witherington likewise thinks 'Mark may have placed this story here for theological reasons ... [and] the Johannine placement of the story in Bethany prior to the triumphal entry seems historically more probable' ...³⁰

Ben Witherington's discussion, which I will not take the space to quote further, exemplifies to some extent the ambiguity I have been describing throughout. The quotation that Licona gives is typical of the context in Witherington. It is plausible that Witherington means to suggest dyschronological narration, since he compares the placements in terms of historical probability.³¹

Joel Marcus, cited by Licona as agreeing with both Witherington and Blomberg, clearly is alleging that Mark dyschronologically moved the anointing. Marcus says, 'Mark's "after two days" may owe more to a desire to create a "holy week" and an OT allusion than to historical memory; at a

29. Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, p. 247 n. 69.

30. Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, p. 246 n. 63.

31. Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 365-66.

comparable point in his narrative, John has “six days before the Passover” (John 12:1), which is more plausible ...³²

The association of Blomberg’s view with those of Witherington and Marcus increases the probability that Licona has misinterpreted Blomberg on this point. A reader who carefully followed Licona’s discussion, including footnotes, would almost certainly get the impression that Blomberg thinks that Mark dyschronologically displaced the anointing.

It is possible to discern each scholar’s own view of the alleged discrepancy: Licona thinks that one evangelist or the other has dyschronologically displaced the anointing, and he does not discuss the possibility of achronological narration. It is fairly clear that he would reject that conclusion. Blomberg thinks that Mark has achronologically displaced, and he does not discuss the possibility of dyschronological narration. It is fairly clear that he would reject that conclusion. Yet Licona seems to understand Blomberg as endorsing dyschronological narration by Mark. I suggest that this misunderstanding is a result of the fact that contemporary Gospels scholars do not habitually state their own views and analyze and interpret each other’s statements in light of the distinction promoted in this paper.

Overreading and Misapplying Ancient Authors

The live possibility that contemporary scholars will misunderstand one another and that lay audiences will misunderstand scholars is reason enough for introducing greater clarity in discussions of chronology. At least as urgent is the need to avoid misunderstanding and misapplying ancient authors. Much of the scholarship under consideration here presents itself as helping us to understand ancient authors and audiences as they understood themselves, avoiding anachronism. But if an ancient author such as Papias or Augustine is endorsing achronology at most and we take him to be endorsing dyschronology, we have failed to understand that author as he understood himself. The distinction between achronology and dyschronology is important for accurate historical interpretation of ancient sources.

As quoted above, immediately after apparently endorsing dyschronological narration concerning the fig tree, Craig Keener generalizes about the

32. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 27A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 932.

expectations of ancient audiences. In doing so, he brings in both Papias and Augustine:

Ancient readers did not expect precise chronologies in ordinary biographies, so they would not demand them from the Gospels. Augustine suggested the Evangelists wrote their Gospels as God recalled the accounts to their memory. Much earlier, just a generation after the final first-century Gospel, Papias claimed that Mark wrote what he heard from Jesus' disciple Peter, but that Peter did not narrate it (hence Mark did not write it) in order. Technically, Papias may refer simply to rhetorically proper biographical order, but the random character probably also suggests that Peter did not recount events in chronological sequence.³³

Why does Keener think that this ambiguous generalization about ancient readers is supported by Papias? Here is the well-known passage to which he refers:

The Elder used to say: Mark, in his capacity as Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately as many things as he recalled from memory—though not in an ordered form—of the things either said or done by the Lord. For he [Mark] neither heard the Lord nor accompanied him, but later, as I said, [he heard and accompanied] Peter, who used to give his teachings in the form of *chreiai*, but had no intention of providing an ordered arrangement of the *logia* of the Lord. Consequently Mark did nothing wrong when he wrote down some individual items just as he ... related them from memory. For he made it his one concern not to omit anything he had heard or to falsify anything.³⁴

Much has been written on the proper interpretation of this passage.³⁵ Does *taxis* (order), as Papias uses it in this passage, refer to chronological order, to rhetorical order, or to both? Is Papias saying that Mark did not

33. Keener, *Christobiography*, pp. 141-42.

34. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 2017), p. 203.

35. F.H. Colson, 'Τάξις in Papias (The Gospels and the Rhetorical Schools)', *JTS* 14 (1912), pp. 62-69; Arthur Wright, 'Τάξις in Papias', *JTS* 14 (1913), pp. 298-300; Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 48-50, 154 n. 67; Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 217-21.

write his Gospel in chronological order? Suppose that we grant for the sake of the argument that he is. Richard Bauckham agrees with Keener that ‘order’ here refers, *inter alia*, to chronology, which is to say that (according to Papias), Mark’s Gospel lacks a chronological ordering that it might otherwise have. Bauckham suggests that Papias is saying that it lacks this ordering because Mark was not an eyewitness of Jesus’ ministry and because Peter did not relate anecdotes in chronological order.³⁶ But even if one accepts that ‘order’ here refers to chronology, it does not follow that Papias (in excusing Mark’s lack of *taxis*) is excusing or endorsing dyschronology as opposed to achronology.

Martin Hengel goes so far as to suggest that Papias thought that Mark’s chronology was sometimes erroneous, due to his doing the best he could while writing down the memories of Peter. In Hengel’s view, Papias disapproves of Mark’s Gospel for that reason, preferring John’s chronology.³⁷ But even on Hengel’s theory (which I consider to be an overinterpretation), Papias is accusing Mark of mere error (category [2] discussed earlier), not attributing dyschronological narration to him, much less endorsing it.

One could even argue that Papias’s insistence that Mark made it his concern not to falsify anything has evidential force against dyschronological narration, a point that Hengel seems tacitly to acknowledge when he says that for Papias to have said anything less would have been a ‘*direct dismissal of Mark*’.³⁸ Perhaps advocates of dyschronological theories would insist that deliberately changing the order of events should not be called ‘falsifying’, but they need to make an independent case demonstrating that this was how the evangelists, their audiences, and Papias thought of the matter. Papias certainly does not say that knowingly changing chronology would not be falsifying.

This quotation from Papias is, at a minimum, not helpful to the strong conclusion that the evangelists and their audiences accepted dyschronological narration. Yet Keener emphasizes the time at which Papias lived and wrote as though his temporal proximity to the Gospels supports what Keener has just suggested about the fig tree incident—namely, that Matthew and/or Mark adapted the chronology of the fig tree and the Temple cleansing.

36. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 217-21.

37. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, pp. 49, 154 n. 67.

38. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, p. 49. Italics in original.

If this use of Papias is a case of overreading, the use of Augustine is even more problematic. Both in the passage just quoted and in his commentary on John, Keener uses an Augustine citation about narrating as God brought things to mind to support a generalization about ancient biography:

In contrast to modern historical biography, ancient biographers also did not need to follow a chronological sequence; most felt free to rearrange their material topically ... Matthew ... follows the more common topical format (compare his five topical discourse sections). Nor did early Christians expect the Gospels to reflect chronological sequence; Augustine suggested the evangelists wrote their Gospels as God recalled the accounts to their memory ...³⁹

What Keener says here could easily be read as referring only to achronological narration. Note the repeated use of ‘topical’ and the contrast between topical and chronological ordering. Nor do the footnotes with which these sentences are peppered support dyschronological narration. One footnote, for example, cites *4 Macc.* 12.7, in which the narrator mentions a mother’s exhortation to her son as it comes up in the story but expressly defers an account of what she said. This hardly seems promising as support for ancient audiences’ and authors’ acceptance of chronological change (it is not even an instance of achronology).⁴⁰

Yet later in the commentary, when he discusses the Temple cleansing, Keener refers to this earlier discussion of topical order as if it supports his dyschronological view of that incident: ‘[M]ore likely John adapts the more familiar chronology of the passion tradition to make an important point. (As noted in the introduction, ch. 1, ancient readers did not expect ancient biographies to adhere to chronological sequence).’⁴¹ John supposedly changed the chronology from that in the Synoptics to make a theological point, but this was acceptable because, supposedly, ancient readers expected dyschronological narration to occur at times. Keener uses Augustine even more immediately to support dyschronology in the discussion of the fig tree in *Christobiography*.

It is thus quite surprising to turn to the context of the Augustine citation:

39. Keener, *Gospel of John*, pp. 12-13.

40. Keener, *Gospel of John*, p. 12 n. 100.

41. Keener, *Gospel of John*, p. 518.

Matthew proceeds in the following terms: And when Jesus had come into Peter's house, He saw his wife's mother laid, and sick of a fever. And He touched her hand, and the fever left her: and she arose, and ministered unto them. Matthew has not indicated the date of this incident; that is to say, he has specified neither before what event nor after what occurrence it took place. For we are certainly under no necessity of supposing that, because it is recorded after a certain event, it must also have happened in actual matter of fact after that event ... For of what consequence is it in what place any of them may give his account; or what difference does it make whether he inserts the matter in its proper order, or brings in at a particular point what was previously omitted, or mentions at an earlier stage what really happened at a later, provided only that he contradicts neither himself nor a second writer in the narrative of the same facts or of others? ... [I]t is reasonable enough to suppose that each of the evangelists believed it to have been his duty to relate what he had to relate in that order in which it had pleased God to suggest to his recollection the matters he was engaged in recording. At least this might hold good in the case of those incidents with regard to which the question of order, whether it were this or that, detracted nothing from evangelical authority and truth ... For this reason, therefore, when the order of times is not apparent, we ought not to feel it a matter of any consequence what order any of them may have adopted in relating the events. But wherever the order is apparent, if the evangelist then presents anything which seems to be inconsistent with his own statements, or with those of another, we must certainly take the passage into consideration, and endeavour to clear up the difficulty.⁴²

Augustine could scarcely be clearer. He says that it does not matter if the evangelists have narrated events in differing order, because they have probably often narrated achronologically. He uses this suggestion to answer a claim of discrepancy about order (between Jesus' healing Peter's mother and healing a leper). He hammers the point home: When the order of times is *not* apparent, we should not be concerned if events are told in a different order in different Gospels. But when the evangelist presents anything that appears to create a discrepancy, either between his own statements or with

42. Augustine, *Cons.* 2.21.51-52. See online: <http://newadvent.org/fathers/1602221.htm>.

another biblical author's, we must try to clear up the difficulty, which is to say, we must harmonize.

That Augustine would reject dyschronological narration is undeniable, based on this passage. That he was well aware of the concept of achronological narration is equally evident. The citation of this passage in support of the idea that ancient readers accepted dyschronology arises from a failure on the part of a modern scholar to maintain the distinction between achronology and dyschronology.

Conclusion: Clarity First

No one benefits from persistent vagueness and misunderstanding, either among modern scholars or in interpreting ancient documents. It would be better to avoid unqualified statements that authors are unconcerned about chronology or that ancient audiences did not expect precise chronology. Some claims under that heading postulate achronology, for example, that Luke merely narrated the temptations in the wilderness in a different order from Matthew or that Luke merely narrated in a rushed and incomplete fashion in Luke 24. Others propose dyschronology, for example, that John moved the Temple cleansing to the beginning of Jesus' ministry to make a theological point or that Luke placed all the events after Jesus' resurrection onto a single day. Even when speaking or writing in an informal context, scholars should try to avoid the misunderstanding that will almost certainly arise from conflating these categories.

It might seem that such a distinction will appeal narrowly to evangelical biblical scholars, who are more likely than non-evangelicals to argue that the evangelists recorded literally true information. The explicit category of achronological narration is useful in that respect, which may be why we find many references to topical narration in evangelical scholarship. But we should not be too quick to think that these issues are relevant only to those with theological worries about biblical errors. The question of whether Plutarch (for example) was trying to imply chronology and/or trying to change chronology is relevant to classicists' conclusions about his historical reliability. Anyone doing historiography has an interest in the accuracy of generalizations about ancient audience expectations.

One effect of clearly separating achronology and dyschronology might be that we question the claim that ancient authors and audiences accepted

dyschronology. The examples in this paper suggest that previous arguments to that effect have incorrectly used evidence for the practice of achronological narration as though it supports dyschronological narration while simultaneously neglecting the category of ordinary error. If the existing arguments prove to be insufficient, those who wish to generalize about ancient acceptance of dyschronology should present other evidence, if they can, as scholarship continues to move forward through rigorous analysis.