

BRANDON MASSEY

The Birth and Death  
of the PreMarkan  
Passion Narrative

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

608

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Brandon Massey

The Birth and Death  
of the PreMarkan Passion  
Narrative

A History of Form Criticism's  
Most Assured Result

Mohr Siebeck

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## Introduction

“More often than not the patterns we spy in history are, like Providence, less than evident. They are then phantasms conjured by our seemingly innate desire to bring order out of chaos, in our case the chaos that is the discipline of New Testament Studies.”<sup>1</sup>

Within the last two hundred years, NT scholars have sought to go behind the Gospels and identify the earliest traditions about the death of Jesus. In the mid-twentieth century, the quest for the preMarkan passion narrative was considered one of the hallmarks of critical NT scholarship. In his survey of research into the preMarkan passion narrative, Marion Soards observed, “Few topics, if any, have produced a more fundamental difference of opinion among biblical scholars.”<sup>2</sup> This book will examine the quest to discover and reconstruct the text of the earliest passion narrative within Gospel scholarship (what I refer to as the preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis), the factors that led to its emergence in early twentieth-century biblical scholarship, how the reconstructed source was utilized in search for historical and theological traditions, and the methodological and theological assumptions behind the hypothesis. In addition, this book will ask why attempts to reconstruct the preMarkan passion narrative, once a hallmark of critical scholarship, are no longer at the center of NT scholarship.<sup>3</sup> The following chapters will demonstrate that the preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis arose from a form-critical conception of Jesus tradition and flourished

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<sup>1</sup> Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Marion L. Soards, “The Question of a Pre-Markan Passion Narrative,” *BiBh* 11 (1980): 144–69, here 144. The article was updated and reprinted in M. L. Soards, “The Question of a PreMarkan Passion Narrative,” in Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:1492–1524, here 1492. Subsequent references are to the appendix in *Death of the Messiah*.

<sup>3</sup> Although there are several German phrases used in the scholarly literature to refer to the narrative source that recounts the final days of Jesus (*Passionsgeschichte*, *Passionsbericht*, *Leidensgeschichte*, or *Passionserzählung*), English-speaking scholarship has adopted the phrase “preMarkan passion narrative.” Throughout, I will use “preMarkan passion narrative” but note when the German terminology is significant. Where available, I quote from English translations of German scholarship. If English translations are not available, I have translated and noted as such.

in disciplinary developments that were built upon a form-critical foundation, such as the post-Bultmannian quest for the historical Jesus and the redactional-critical method. The notion of a preMarkan passion narrative is a wholly form-critical concept and the demise of the form-critical conception of Jesus tradition in NT scholarship calls for a re-examination of the quest for the preMarkan passion narrative and asks whether the hypothesis survives the demise of the form-critical method. It is my aim to give the terminology and conceptual framework of the preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis a proper burial.

The form-critical method of Gospel studies that dominated scholarship for nearly one hundred years arose in Germany and was initiated by three scholars: Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolf Bultmann.<sup>4</sup> The term form criticism (*Formgeschichte*) was coined by Dibelius did not describe a history of forms (*Formengeschichte*), but “a history based on form, a form-derived history.”<sup>5</sup> Bultmann described the process of the application of the form-critical method to the Synoptic Gospels:

This involved discovering what the original units of the synoptics were, both sayings and stories, to try to establish what their historical setting was, whether they belonged to a primary or secondary tradition or whether were the product of editorial activity.<sup>6</sup>

The form critics sought to establish the laws of oral tradition that governed the Jesus tradition before the composition of the Synoptic Gospels. Although there were significant differences in the approaches and results of these three scholars, several assumptions and conclusions were crucial for their form-critical approaches. The origins of form criticism will be examined in detail in the second chapter, but, in short, four key assumptions shaped form-critical scholarship: 1) the Gospels were neither literary compositions nor biography, but folk literature; 2) prior to the composition of the Gospels, Jesus traditions circulated as individual units disconnected from any framework for the life of Jesus; 3) these traditions arose from the life settings of the earliest Christian communities; and 4) the evangelists were not authors but collectors and compilers of individual Jesus traditions. There was, however, an exception to the assumption that the pre-literary

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<sup>4</sup> Two other scholars deserve mention in the first generation of form-critical scholarship on the Gospels: Martin Albertz and Georg Bertram. Their works, however, did not have the influence as Bultmann, Schmidt, and Dibelius. Bertram’s work on the passion narrative will be discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>5</sup> Martin J. Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism in Its Context*, JSOTSup 274 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 287, italics original. Martin Albertz’s early form-critical work retained the term *Formengeschichte*. Martin Albertz, *Die synoptischen Streitgespräche: Ein Beitrag zur Formgeschichte des Urchristentums* (Berlin: Trowitzsch, 1921); idem, “Zur Formgeschichte der Auferstehungsberichte,” *ZNW* 21.1 (1922): 259–69.

<sup>6</sup> Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 2–3.

Jesus tradition circulated as individual units apart from any narrative framework – the preMarkan passion narrative.

When form-critical scholars turned their gaze to Mark 14–16, they detected a coherent narrative seemingly different from the previous thirteen chapters. The narrative unity of Mark 14–16 led these scholars to posit an origin and development unique from the rest of the Jesus tradition. The passion narrative did not progress from unconnected individual units into a loosely connected and artificial framework as did the remainder of the Jesus tradition. Instead, the passion narrative originated as a narrative unit and theories of its development began with the assumption of a coherent narrative that developed into the Markan passion narrative. Ralph Martin referred to the conclusion that the passion narrative was written and preserved as a coherent narrative before the composition of the Gospels as “the most assured result of form criticism.”<sup>7</sup> As subsequent chapters demonstrate, this “assured result” was continually repeated by scholars over the last century of Markan scholarship with few scholars dissenting from the accepted position.

Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood described the ways that biblical scholarship created insoluble questions:

Formative biblical criticism reinvented the Bible as a potentially limitless compendium of conundrums and obscurities awaiting solution – the kind of solution that only the professional biblical critic was qualified to propose. Fortunately for the biblical scholar (who, after all, needs job security as much as any professional), most of these problems, and most especially the larger ones, are precisely the sort that do not admit of final solution.<sup>8</sup>

The history of NT scholarship in the twentieth century reveals the reconstruction of a preMarkan passion narrative to be one such insoluble problem. Since the rise of form criticism in the late 1910s, there have been over fifty attempts to reconstruct the contents and development of the preMarkan passion narrative with little agreement on which verses or words were part of this early narrative source and which were creations of the evangelist.<sup>9</sup> The following sections will

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<sup>7</sup> Ralph Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 140.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2011), 80. Moore and Sherwood ask, “Is there any article title more reassuringly familiar to the consumer of biblical-scholarly journals than the one that begins ‘Once Again: The problem of...?’” The quest for the preMarkan passion narrative contains several “familiar” titles. E.g. Martin Dibelius, “Das historische Problem der Leidensgeschichte,” *ZNW* 30 (1931): 193–201; Gerhard Schneider, “Das Problem einer vorkanonischen Passionserzählung,” *BZ* 16 (1972): 222–44; Josef Ernst, “Die Passionserzählung des Markus und die Aporien der Forschung,” *TGl* 70.2 (1980): 160–80; Soards, “The Question of a PreMarcan Passion Narrative.”

<sup>9</sup> Soards, “The Question of a PreMarcan Passion Narrative,” 1493–1517, included 35 scholars in his survey. He did not include scholars whose work did not fit easily into the table he created (1493, n. 3). Although the quest for the preMarkan passion narrative has slowed, recent attempts include Robert Stein, Adele Yarbro Collins, and Joel Marcus.

provide an overview of the method of intellectual history I will use to understand the rise, dominance, and decline of the form-critical method and the preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis in the twentieth century.

This book seeks to answer several interrelated questions: What factors led to the rise of the preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis? Why was it among the most crucial tasks for critical biblical scholars in the mid-twentieth century? What social and economic factors influenced the form-critical conception of Jesus tradition? Is the form-critical preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis still viable after the death of form criticism? In order to answer these questions, the history of the preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis will be traced from its origins in the history of religions school in the late 1800s and early 1900s to the critiques of the hypothesis in scholarship in the late 2010s and early 2020s.

The writings of George Steinmetz on sociology in the United States provides a helpful model for tracing the history of a discipline.<sup>10</sup> Steinmetz's approach helpfully distinguished between internal and external influences on a field of study. Internal influences include a discipline's subfields, university systems, and the relation between the researcher and his or her object of study.<sup>11</sup> For historical Jesus research, this included things such as form criticism or redaction criticism or the differences between German, British, and American university systems. External influences are all other sociocultural factors that impact a discipline, such as industrial capitalism, neoliberalism, or other macrosocial factors.<sup>12</sup> Steinmetz labelled this approach "social-epochal" as it seeks to "shed light on the sources of the more widespread and implicit ideas shared by all of the actors in a settled scientific field."<sup>13</sup> I will focus on the internal influences within NT scholarship to trace the ways in which the preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis arose and ascended to prominence through changes in approaches and methods of Gospel scholarship. My central claim is that the preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis developed from a form-critical conception of Jesus tradition. Methodological innovations in Gospel and historical Jesus research that relied and built upon this conception retained the hypothesis. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, new approaches to the pre-literary Jesus tradition exposed many of the shortcomings of form criticism. In light of these

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Although reconstructions are rare in current scholarship, the existence of a preMarkan passion narrative remains an assumption in scholarly discourse.

<sup>10</sup> George Steinmetz, "Scientific Authority and the Transition to Post-Fordism: The Plausibility of Positivism in U.S. Sociology since 1945," in *The Politics of Method the Human Sciences: Positivism and its Epistemological Other*, ed. George Steinmetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 275–322; George Steinmetz and Ou-Byung Chae, "Sociology in an Era of Fragmentation: From the Sociology of Knowledge to the Philosophy of Science, and Back Again," *The Sociological Quarterly* 43.1 (2002): 111–37.

<sup>11</sup> Steinmetz, "Scientific Authority," 288.

<sup>12</sup> Steinmetz, "Scientific Authority," 288.

<sup>13</sup> Steinmetz, "Scientific Authority," 291.

developments, it is time to question whether the preMarkan passion narrative, form criticism's most assured result, can stand as a hypothesis outside of a form-critical conception of Jesus tradition.

The structure of the first three chapters differs from the final two chapters. In these early chapters, I trace the development of the conception of the form-critical conception of Jesus tradition in both Germany and Britain by focusing on individual scholars and schools. These scholars – Johannes Weiss, Julius Wellhausen, Hermann Gunkel, Wilhelm Bousset, Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, Vincent Taylor, R. H. Lightfoot, C. H. Dodd, and Dennis Nineham – all played a significant role in the establishment of the preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis as an “assured result” of scholarship. Their conceptions of Jesus tradition and reconstructions of the preMarkan passion narrative will be examined in depth.

An explosion of preMarkan passion narratives began in the early 1950s and lasted into the 1980s and the sheer amount of reconstructions prohibits the same treatment as the earlier scholars. Instead, later chapters trace developments in the field of historical criticism and historical Jesus scholarship. They also examine the ways in which the preMarkan passion narrative remained an “assured result” of critical scholarship as approaches to its reconstruction and development changed over time. Through all chapters, I trace the building blocks of the preMarkan passion narrative – the transmission of oral Jesus tradition as individual units, the supposed uniqueness of Mark 14–16, the independence of John and the Synoptics – and conclude that the preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis is not only no longer the “assured result” it was once considered, but is a concept that NT scholars must abandon.





## Chapter 1

# The Prehistory of the PreMarkan Passion Narrative: From *Urmarkus* to Jesus Tradition in the History of Religions School

Sitz im Leben – small units – oral tradition – genre criticism – history of religion; these are the heirlooms that have been productively used in form criticism.<sup>1</sup>

The 1776 publication of Johann Jakob Griesbach's gospel synopsis marked a major turning point in the study of the relationship and sources for the composition of the Gospels.<sup>2</sup> While there had been earlier synopses, Griesbach's breakthrough was the presentation of Gospel passages in parallel in canonical sequences instead of attempting to harmonize a life of Jesus from the Gospels. This new tool allowed for a literary investigation of the relationship between the synoptic Gospels, the direction of borrowing between them, and the possibility of identifying shared sources.<sup>3</sup> Griesbach used his synopsis to demonstrate his own solution to the Synoptic problem and later synopses likewise were created as supplements to important works on the Synoptic problem.<sup>4</sup> By the mid-

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Josef Klauck, "Hundert Jahre Formgeschichte: Ein Tribut an die Begründer," *BZ* 64 (2020): 49–84, here 57, my translation.

<sup>2</sup> J. J. Griesbach, *Synopsis Evangeliorum Matthaei, Marci et Lucae* (Halle: Curtius, 1776). For a history of the Gospel synopsis from Griesbach to the 1970s, Heinrich Greeven, "The Gospel Synopsis from 1776 to the Present Day," trans. Robert Althann, in *J. J. Griesbach: Synoptic and Text Critical Studies, 1776–1976*, eds. Bernard Orchard and Thomas R. W. Longstaff, SNTSMS 34 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 22–49.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of his synopsis, Griesbach included the text of John's passion narrative (John 12:1–8; 18:1–21).

<sup>4</sup> A. Huck, *Synopse der drei ersten Evangelien* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1892), was designed to illustrate Holtzmann's theory. On the question of objectivity or neutrality and the construction of a Gospel synopsis, Bernard Orchard, "Are All Gospel Synopses Biased?," *TZ* 34 (1978): 157–61; idem, "The 'Neutrality' of Vertical-Column Synopses," *ETL* 62 (1986): 155–56; James Keith Elliot, "Printed Editions of Greek Synopses and their Influence on the Synoptic Problem," in *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck*, eds. F. Van Segbroeck et al., BETL 100 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 337–57; David L. Dungan, "Theory of Synopsis Construction," *Bib* 61 (1980): 141–54; John S.

nineteenth century, biblical scholars debated all aspects of the Synoptic problem, including the priority of Mark, the existence of a sayings source, Mark's use of Matthew and Luke, the minor agreements of Matthew and Luke, and what sources may lie behind the Synoptic Gospels.

This chapter will examine these source-critical works and observe that as they laid the foundation for Markan priority and searched for sources behind the Gospel, there were no suggestions of a preMarkan passion narrative – the impetus for a preMarkan passion narrative must come from elsewhere. The second section of this chapter argues that the hypothesis arises from a particular conception of Jesus tradition. The preMarkan passion narrative is not a source-critical hypothesis, but a form-critical hypothesis. The second half of this chapter traces the conception of Jesus tradition in the history of religions school, whose works were instrumental in the development of the form-critical method. The inklings of a preMarkan passion narrative hypothesis may be seen in some history of religions works, but the hypothesis did not come to full bloom until the form critics synthesized the work of the history of religions school in their new approach to the Gospels.

### 1.1 Source Criticism, Markan Priority, and the PreMarkan Passion Narrative

In the early nineteenth century, the two contending solutions to the Synoptic problem were the Griesbach hypothesis and Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) theory of oral tradition which was later written in an *Urgospel* that was the source of the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>5</sup> The Griesbach hypothesis was adopted by F. C. Baur (1792–1860), David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874), and the Tübingen School as they applied their radical criticism to the Gospels that questioned the historical reliability of the Gospel traditions. While William Farmer (1921–2000), Bo Reicke (1914–1987), and Hans-Herbert Stoldt (1901–unknown) all argued that Markan priority was adopted for political or theological reasons in response to its use by the Tübingen school, subsequent scholarship on the period has shown these ideas to be overstated and the rise of the two-document hypothesis and Markan priority arose from an investigation of the texts of the Gospels.<sup>6</sup>

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Kloppenborg, "Synopses and the Synoptic Problem," in *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem*, eds. Paul Foster et al., BETL 239 (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 51–85.

<sup>5</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Erlöser der Menschen: Nach unseren drei ersten Evangelien* (Riga: Hartknoch, 1796).

<sup>6</sup> William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (Dillsboro: Western North Carolina Press, 1976), 28–29, 37, 57, 73; Bo Reicke, "From Strauss to Holtzmann and Meijboom: Synoptic Theories Advanced During the Consolidation of Germany, 1830–70," *NovT* 29.1 (1987): 1–21; Hans-Herbert Stoldt, *History and Critique of the Marcan*

This investigation of the text and literary relationship of the Synoptic Gospels resulted in an abundance of possible sources for the Gospels. However, among the *Urgospels*, oral Gospels, logia sources, Petrine traditions, and other sources, there was no preMarkan passion source.

### 1.1.1 Christian Gottlob Wilke (1786–1854)

Wilke's 1838 work, *Der Urevangelist*, was influential in swaying the consensus of scholars toward Markan priority.<sup>7</sup> The solution to the Synoptic problem Wilke presented relied on a thorough analysis of the texts of the Gospels. Wilke printed and displayed the material common to all three Synoptic Gospels, material common to Matthew and Luke, and material unique to each Gospel. Wilke argued, against the oral *Urgospel* of J. C. L. Giesler (1792–1854) and the Aramaic *Urgospel* of J. G. Eichhorn (1752–1827), that Mark was the *Urevangelist* and the source used by both Matthew and Luke.<sup>8</sup> The passion narrative was, of course, included within this version of the Gospel and no preMarkan passion narrative was hypothesized.

### 1.1.2 Christian Hermann Weisse (1801–1866)

If Wilke may be credited for helping to establish Markan priority, Weisse may be credited with helping to establish the two-document hypothesis. John Kloppenborg observed that if Weisse's solution had been adopted "the discussion of the Synoptic Problem and Q might have more rapidly reached the consensus that was achieved only a century later with the publication of B. H. Streeter's *The Four Gospels* (1924)."<sup>9</sup> Weisse accepted the Papias tradition that Mark preserved

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*Hypothesis*, trans. and ed. Donald L. Niewyk (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1980), 1–23. Christopher M. Tuckett, "The Griesbach Hypothesis in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century," *JSNT* 2.3 (1979): 29–60; Henning Graf Reventlow, "Conditions and Presuppositions of Biblical Criticism in Germany in the Period of the Second Empire and Before: The Case of Heinrich Julius Holtzmann," in *Biblical Studies and the Shifting of Paradigms, 1850–1914*, eds. Henning Graf Reventlow and William Farmer, JSOTSS 192 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1995), 272–90.

<sup>7</sup> Christian Gottlob Wilke, *Der Urevangelist, oder exegetisch kritische Untersuchung über das Verwandtschaftsverhältnis der drei ersten Evangelien* (Dresden and Leipzig: G. Fleischer, 1838).

<sup>8</sup> Wilke, *Urevangelist*, 680–85. J. C. L. Giesler, *Historisch-kritischer Versuch über die Entstehung und die frühesten Schicksale der schriftlichen Evangelien* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann, 1818), was influenced by Johann Herder's work. J. G. Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 5 vols. (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1820–27), proposed a complex solution to the Synoptic problem, involving an Aramaic *Urgospel* with four revisions of this document before it reached the evangelists. Eichhorn's work was influenced by Lessing.

<sup>9</sup> John S. Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 298.

the reminiscences of Peter and the Semitisms present in the second Gospel were evidence of its early composition.<sup>10</sup> The Gospel of Mark and the *logia* document were the two sources for Matthew and Luke. In a later work, Weisse amended his solution to the Synoptic problem and added *Urmarkus* into his proposal.<sup>11</sup> Like Wilke, Weisse did not propose a preMarkan passion source in addition to *Urmarkus*.

### 1.1.3 Heinrich-Julius Holtzmann (1832–1910)

Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) observed that Holtzmann's *Die synoptischen Evangelien* was so thorough a demonstration of Markan priority that it was no longer a hypothesis but an assured result of critical biblical scholarship.<sup>12</sup> Holtzmann departed from previous attempts to solve the Synoptic problem by beginning with the internal evidence of the Gospels rather than the patristic testimony about their origins and relationship.<sup>13</sup> Holtzmann posited an early source, *Urmarkus* or Source A, which was an expanded version of the Gospel of Mark that was used by all three Synoptic Gospels.<sup>14</sup> In addition to Source A, Holtzmann identified a sayings source, which he labelled Source Λ, which Matthew and Luke used independently.<sup>15</sup> In his later writings, Holtzmann dropped *Urmarkus* from his solution to the Synoptic problem.<sup>16</sup> As Wilke and Weisse before him, Holtzmann did not propose a preMarkan passion source but incorporated the passion narrative into *Urmarkus*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Christian Hermann Weisse, *Die evangelische Geschichte kritisch und philosophisch bearbeitet*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1838).

<sup>11</sup> Christian Hermann Weisse, *Die Evangelienfrage in ihrem gegenwärtigen Stadium* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1856), 155–60. This expanded *Urmarkus* included Matt. 3:7–12/Luke 3:7–9, 17; Matt. 4:3–10/Luke 4:3–12; Matt. 5–7/Luke 6:20–49; Matt. 8:5–10/Luke 7:2–20; Matt. 11:2–19/Luke 7:18–35.

<sup>12</sup> Heinrich-Julius Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien: Ihr Ursprung und geschichtlicher Charakter* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1863); Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. William Montgomery (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1968), 202.

<sup>13</sup> Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien*, 248–53.

<sup>14</sup> Holtzmann's *Urmarkus* included extended sayings of John the Baptist compared to canonical Mark, a long version of the temptation story, the Lukan Sermon on the Plain, the story of the centurion's servant, a longer version of the Beelzebul story, the story of the woman caught in adultery from John, and Matthew's commissioning of the disciples.

<sup>15</sup> Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien*, 168.

<sup>16</sup> Heinrich-Julius Holtzmann, *Lehrbuch der historisch-kritischen Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Freiburg i. B.: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1886), 363–65.

<sup>17</sup> Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien*, 95–99.

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