THE EXEGETICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SYNOPTIC DIFFERENCES FROM THE STANDPOINT OF DISCOURSE GRAMMAR

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There is an inherent tendency towards atomization in many Synoptic approaches. It begins with students learning to color-code individual words to indicate their relationship to another gospel. At the more advanced levels, the atomization manifests itself in compiling lists of dispreferred words or preferred changes made to source material by the redactor. Again, the method tends to be word-focused, identifying and classifying the changes.

Noting changes of individual words is a necessary component of Synoptic studies, but it is not without consequences. The preoccupation with sources and hypothesized redactions can be a distraction from answering the important exegetical question, "So what?" Claiming that the change is based on stylistic preferences sidesteps the question. One can claim that Mark's use of the historical present (HP) was dispreferred by Matthew and especially Luke, or that Mark used καί where Matthew and Luke used δέ. But rarely will you find a discussion regarding the exegetical consequences of the change. Most are content to attribute it to stylistics without regard for the exegetical consequences.

So why is this problematic? These kinds of changes have been regarded as irrelevant by some since they do not impinge on the propositional content of the text. For example, Streeter classifies the following kinds of changes by Matthew and Luke to Mark as "irrelevant agreements":[1]

- changes from the historical present (HP) to an aorist or imperfect tense-form;
- substitution of δέ for καί;
- insertion of full noun phrases where Mark uses an independent pronoun;[2]
- introduction of ἰδού, which Mark never uses in narrative.

Although these changes may not impact the propositional content of the gospel, they do affect the exegesis.

Robert Funk observed that conjunctions belonged to a class which he termed "function words," words that are "nearly lexically empty, that is, they have little or no dictionary meaning of their own. However, they are grammatically significant in

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[1] See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *To Advance the Gospel: NT Studies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 12.

[2] Use of a full noun phrase where a pronoun would suffice (i.e. overencoding of active participants) will not be discussed in this paper; see Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of NT Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of NT Greek* (2d ed.; Dallas: SIL International, 2000) 135–47.

indicating the structure of sentences and parts of sentences. … One may guess at the meaning of lexically full words, or leave them blank when reading (cf. §003), but one must know the grammatical 'meaning' of function words to be able to proceed at all."[3]

Although Streeter considered such changes irrelevant for source criticism, these devices play a vital role in structuring the discourse and directing the reader's attention to what the writer considers significant.[4] Better understanding how these devices contribute to the discourse will help us better understand the consequences of the redactional changes. What has been missing is an exegetical framework designed to synthesize the disparate Synoptic observations into a holistic, unified analysis.

Advances in discourse grammar provide a way forward, particularly for those interested in assessing the exegetical implications of redactional changes. The three accounts of Jesus' mother and brothers coming to see him, recorded in Matt 12:46–50, Mark 3:31–35, and Luke 8:19–21, exemplify the kinds of Synoptic differences noted above. The exegetical significance of these differences will be analyzed to demonstrate the contribution of discourse-informed exegesis. Features like the historical present (HP) and connectives like δέ operate above the level of the sentence in combination with other devices, which may explain the difficulty in describing them.

I will begin by discussing how each Gospel writer links this pericope to the preceding context. Attention will then turn to the organization of the pericope into discrete steps that lead up to the final pronouncement. Finally, consideration will be given to the highlighting devices used to direct the reader's attention to salient details, particularly the final pronouncement itself.

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[3] Robert W. Funk, *A Beginning-Intermediate Grammar of Hellenistic Greek* (2d ed.; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1973) 175.

[4] Farmer criticized Streeter's analysis of these changes independently of one another and of the text, stating,

> This procedure tends to atomize the phenomena. And if one restricts the discussion of these phenomena to one group at a time, as Streeter did, there is a danger that the total concatenation of agreements in a given Synoptic passage will never be impressed upon the mind of the reader of such a discussion. For example, if a particular passage exhibits a web of minor but closely related agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark, there is the prospect that these different agreements will be divided into two or more of Streeter's different categories, thus dissipating the full impact which these same agreements would make on the mind of the reader if he were to have them all brought to his attention at the same time, and discussed together in the concrete wholeness of the particular context which they have in the passage concerned.

Although Farmer's complaint focuses on source-critical considerations, the same criticism could be leveled regarding the exegetical significance of these features. William Reuben Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1976) 119.

I. INTRODUCING THE SCENE

In any story, there is a need to introduce the participants, to "bring them on stage." Where at least one participant is already on stage, new ones may be introduced by anchoring them to the active one in some way (e.g. Jesus' mother), or by introducing them in a comment about the active participant (e.g. he saw two men approaching.) Another common strategy uses a verb of being or a verb of motion to predicate their existence, called a thetic construction. In English, we typically use what is called a dummy subject in such constructions (e.g. there was a _____). This is especially common in contexts where there are no active participants on stage.

In all versions of this pericope, Jesus' mother and brothers are introduced using thetic constructions. Both Mark and Luke use verbs of motion, while Matthew uses "standing" in combination with the attention-getter ἰδού and fronting the subject to place it in marked focus (i.e. emphasis).[5] The need for thetic constructions is a natural consequence of Jesus not seeing them arrive or some similar construction that immediately introduces them. Matthew's use of emphasis plus attention-getter adds prominence to their arrival. He also uses tail-head linkage, a technique whereby an action from the preceding context (the tail) is repeated as an attendant circumstance (the head) of the present clause. It cohesively links the two pericopes together, fostering a sense of simultaneity.

While all three evangelists treat the introduction of Jesus' family members as brand new, Mark's reference to οἱ παρ᾽ αὐτοῦ in 3:21 is rendered in most modern translations as "his family"; the exceptions are NKJV and NASB rendering it as "his own people" and the KJV as "his friends." Edwards states that οἱ παρ᾽ αὐτοῦ "simply means 'the ones around Jesus' and appears to be a calculated ambiguity."[6] However, this underspecification has not deterred interpreters from correlating this reference in 3:21 to the arrival of Jesus' family in 3:31. Scholars typically treat 3:22–30 as an intercalation, a "Markan sandwich."[7] On this view, the confrontation about Beelzebub interrupts the story of those around Jesus coming to take him.[8] Claiming an intercalation necessitates an interrupted pericope; nonetheless Mark introduces the participants as though a brand new situation is commencing, without any explicit linkage to the preceding context.[9] Nor are there any lexical or other

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[5] Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek NT: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010) 189–92.

[6] James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 118.

[7] William Telford, "Mark," in *Synoptic Gospels* (ed. John K. Riches, William Telford, and Christopher M. Tuckett; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 207.

[8] Edwards comments regarding this specific passage, "One of Mark's signature literary techniques is the sandwiching of one story in the middle of another story. In so doing, Mark not only signifies a relationship between the two stories, but by their combination succeeds in making an entirely new point. The present unit is an example of this A¹-B-A² 'sandwich' technique. … In both A-parts the companions of Jesus try to control Jesus, perhaps even to suppress him—in v. 21 by 'taking charge of him' (Gk. *kratein*); and in vv. 31–32 when Jesus' mother and brothers stand outside 'calling' (Gk. *kalein*) and 'looking for' (Gk. *zētein*) him." Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark* 117.

[9] There is a variant reading in the Majority Text for reading οὖν in place of καί. Levinsohn claims that οὖν in narrative typically marks the resumption of a previous theme. This reading would support

obvious semantic links to indicate a resumption. Mark treats 3:31–35 as unrelated to what precedes.

II. ORGANIZING THE TEXT

As we read texts, cues from the writer influence how we organize and store what we read. This process of organizing the text into smaller bits for easier processing is referred to as chunking.[10] Conventions like punctuation can join propositions into clauses and sentences. These units can then be joined into bigger chunks such as paragraphs, scenes, or whole stories. In English, we rely heavily upon adverbs such as *then*, *so*, *next*, and *after that* to signal new chunks.

Adverbial expressions can transform a simple list of activities into a discourse organized around a specific theme. For example, the day I flew to my last academic conference, I woke up, I showered, I caught a ride to the airport, I flew to the host city, I caught a ride to the hotel, and I had dinner. This sounds more like a bulleted list than a real story, since there are no adverbial expressions organizing them. I could use adverbs to organize the story into three chunks based on changes in location (e.g. at home, en route, and in the host city). Alternatively, I could use temporal expressions to reorganize the text around points in time.

There are natural transitions in a discourse, such as changes in time, place participants, or kinds of action. But there is significant discretion regarding how events are chunked and organized. In English, we often use *then* in what can seem like a meaningless way, where there has been no significant temporal change. Although it is not semantically required, this use of *then* accomplishes the important discourse function of signaling a new chunk. Chunking is both hierarchical and recursive. The new chunk may simply be a small part of a larger chunk (e.g. "Then I changed planes") or the beginning of a larger chunk that consists of a number of smaller ones (e.g. "The next day I began my trip home").

Koine Greek also has its own conventions for marking new chunks in the discourse. The most common is the little particle δέ. Many have noted the propensity of Matthew and Luke to change Mark's καί to δέ, but without commenting on the motivation for it.[11] Davies and Allison are typical in claiming that the changes make for "better Greek."[12] Hawkins is a notable exception, citing Winer's description of δέ as marking what follows as "new, different, and distinct."[13] Linguistic research has largely upheld Winer's claim, demonstrating that δέ serves as a development marker. The one caveat missing from Winer added by Levinsohn is that δέ

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resumption in the absence of any other explicit cohesive ties to back to 3:20–21. For a discussion of the use of οὖν to mark the resumption of a preceding theme see Levinsohn, *Discourse Features* 85–86, 126–27.

[10] Runge, *Discourse Grammar* 28–29.

[11] See Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins, Treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Authorship, & Dates* (New York: Macmillan, 1930) 179–81.

[12] W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew* (ICC; New York: T&T Clark, 2004) 1.74.

[13] Sir John Caesar Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae: Contributions to the Study of the Synoptic Problem* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909) 148; See Georg B. Winer, *A Treatise on the Grammar of NT Greek Regarded as a Sure Basis for NT Exegesis* (3d ed.; trans. William F. Moulton; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1882) 552.

represents "a new step or development in the author's story or argument."[14] Thus the seemingly meaningless words like *then*, *so*, *next*, and δέ—especially where they occur in contexts of relative continuity—accomplish the important discourse function of chunking the text.

Applying this notion of development marking to the story of Jesus' mother and brothers, we find that both Matthew and Luke use δέ to break their stories into discrete chunks or developments. Matthew's account features δέ twice: in 12:47 where word is sent to Jesus, and at 12:48 where Jesus responds to the situation. There is no connective used at the beginning of the pericope in verse 46; the genitive absolute and attention-getter signal the transition. Luke's account begins with δέ in 8:19; there are no other transitional markers here besides the introduction of new participants. There are two more instances of δέ in 8:20 and 21, corresponding to those found in Matthew. In contrast, Mark's account uses καί at these points rather than δέ.

This raises a question about Mark's chunking of the text: does he neglect the marking of new developments, or is he instead using some other grammatical means of doing so? This is where Streeter's observation about the disuse of the historical present by Matthew and Luke is relevant. Luz states,

> Perhaps Matthew reveals himself as teacher in the use of the historical present. It appears uniformly throughout Mark. Its use in Matthew is reduced, but not uniformly. It is usually replaced by a form in the past, often aorist. With "say" (λέγω), however, the historical present is usually left standing; sometimes it is even newly created by the evangelist. Since Matthew emphasizes the dialogue in his story by tightening the narrative, it may be that the historical present with λέγω is also a means of directing the readers' attention to what is most important in the stories, namely Jesus' words.[15]

His final observation about "directing the reader's attention to what is most important" is the typical function associated with the HP.[16] But there is another claim associated with its use, referred to as signaling a change of scene,[17] or alternatively as opening or closing a paragraph.[18]

Notice the overlap in the description of this use of the HP with the description of δέ as a development marker. Notice also the co-occurrence of the HP in Mark with the use of δέ in Matthew and Luke. There is a strong tendency in NT studies to seek a one-size-fits-all description of features such as the HP, but lan-

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[14] Levinsohn, *Discourse Features* 72; Robert A. Dooley and Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Analyzing Discourse: A Manual of Basic Concepts* (Dallas: SIL International, 2001) 93; Runge, *Discourse Grammar* 27–32.

[15] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; trans. James E. Crouch; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 25.

[16] A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek NT in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1923) 866–67.

[17] John A. Battle, "The Present Indicative in NT Exegesis" (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1975) 128; online: http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/new_testament_greek/Text/Battle-PresentTense/Battle-PresentTense.pdf.

[18] J. H. Moulton and W. F. Howard, *Accidence and Word-Formation*, vol. 2 of *A Grammar of NT Greek* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963) 456–57.

guage is too messy for such approaches to work. Instead, pragmatic factors differentiate the uses. Prototypical use of a present tense-form (i.e. non-past reference and imperfective aspect) does not stand out; it accomplishes the expected semantic function. One most often finds Matthew and Luke using aorist tense-forms in parallel to Mark's HP, as in this pericope. Since the aorist is prototypically associated with past reference and perfective aspect, use of the present where an aorist is expected represents a double mismatch. It is this mismatch of tense and aspect that results in the "historical" usage, attracting the reader's attention.

Mark regularly uses the HP to signal the next development in the discourse, chunking the text in ways comparable to the use of δέ by Matthew and Luke. This explains the coincidence of καί-δέ substitutions with changes of the HP to an aorist tense-form. The atomization of such changes into separate lists has obscured the co-occurrence of these changes and their exegetical significance. What we observe here is an example of Synoptic consistency from a *functional* point of view. All three writers break their accounts into chunks at the same points; however, Mark uses a different discourse device compared to Matthew and Luke. Mark also uses the HP in the traditionally understood manner: to attract extra attention to a speech or event that follows (see 3:34). Such usage would be identified by either the repeated use of the HP in close succession, or use in a context of high continuity where chunking of the text is deemed inappropriate.

III. HIGHLIGHTING WITHIN THE ACCOUNT

The use of ἰδού as an attention-getter is common in Matthew and Mark and features several times in this pericope. In Matt 12:46 it precedes the introduction of the new participants, confirming that the clause is indeed thetic. The parallel in Mark 3:31 features an HP, which is at least signaling a new development. The usage might also be construed as highlighting in addition to marking a development.

Parallel use of attention-getters is found twice more in Matthew and Mark. In the speech informing Jesus that his family has arrived, the use in Matt 12:47 // Mark 3:32 has the same thetic-marking function as in Matt 12:46. It casts the event as new or unexpected. The other parallel use is in Jesus' pronouncement (Matt 12:49b // Mark 3:34b), though Mark uses ἰδέ rather than ἰδού. Though the words are different, the attention-getting function is similar. It casts Jesus' statement as though he is presenting something brand new, making this another thetic introduction.

The buildup to the pronouncement is highlighted in several ways. First, all three gospels use a redundant quotative frame, that is, an extra verb of speaking that is not semantically required.[19] The most commonly occurring redundant quotative frame uses ἀποκρίνομαι in a context where no question is being answered, and where another verb of speaking is present. All three writers encode the redundant verb as a participle, backgrounding the action with respect to the main verb of

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[19] Runge, *Discourse Grammar* 145–52.

speaking.[20] The extra verb slows the flow of the discourse, attracting extra attention to the speech it introduces. Once again we find triple agreement on highlighting the pronouncement speech.

The pronouncement itself is highlighted using two different devices. In Matthew and Mark, rhetorical questions serve to delay the introduction of the climactic statement. The questions could have been omitted in favor of a simple statement. Mark's single question with a compound subject is rendered as two rhetorical questions in Matthew's version. Asking the rhetorical question gives the reader (and the original audience) time to think about the proposition before the answer is provided.[21]

The second device used in Matthew and Mark to further delay disclosing the answer is the narrative interruption in Matt 12:48b and Mark 3:33b. This description of Jesus gesturing or looking about interrupts what otherwise would have been a single speech.[22] Burkett claims that Mark uses special "circular language" not found in the Gospel parallels.[23] Although Burkett's criteria are rather arbitrary, his list evinces an important pattern. Most all of the supposed special "circular verbs" occur in contexts like Mark 3:34, where they form a narrative interruption just before the climax of the story.[24] Burkett disregards Matthew's comparable delay (stretching out his hand in 12:49) because it doesn't use the specific lemma Burkett has selected.[25] Regardless of the validity of Burkett's point regarding Mark's special circular language, we must not overlook the agreement between Matthew and Mark to further highlight the climax of the episode by interrupting the speech.

There is one final point to be made about the choice by Matthew and Mark to use a narrative intrusion. If you interrupt the speech, its resumption needs to be reintroduced using a quotative frame. Matthew's resumption simply features an aorist verb of speaking, whereas Mark's features another HP verb. Based on the high continuity of the context, Mark's HP is best understood as highlighting the speech that follows. It still has the effect of chunking the text. However, chunking it where it is not needed for processing slows the flow of the text like a linguistic speed bump.

It is now time to consider the pronouncement itself. All three Gospels convey the same basic content, but differ in how they highlight it. As noted, Matthew and

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[20] Ibid. 243–50.

[21] Ibid. 64–66.

[22] Ibid. 151–52.

[23] Delbert Burkett, *Rethinking the Gospel Sources: From Proto-Mark to Mark* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004) 24.

[24] The verbs are either participles of attendant circumstance (i.e. backgrounded with respect to the main verb that follows), or imperfect indicative verbs (i.e. typically offline material). In either case, the circular action would not advance the flow of the discourse, but rather be supplying offline information.

[25] Burkett states, "To these thirteen Markan instances of 'circular' terms, Matthew has no equivalents whatsoever and Luke has only two (Mark 3:5 // Luke 6:10; Mark 6:36 // Luke 9:12), even though both evangelists share with Mark almost all of the passages in which these terms occur. On the theory of Markan priority, we would have to say that Matthew omitted all thirteen instances of circular terminology while Luke omitted eleven of the thirteen. Did then Matthew and Luke share some aversion to circles?" Ibid. 25.

Mark use rhetorical questions and a narrative interruption to draw extra attention to the answer that follows. Luke, on the other hand, omits this and moves right on to the pronouncement. Matthew and Mark both use a left dislocation construction, traditionally called a *casus pendens* or hanging nominative. A left dislocation introduces an entity outside the main clause, followed by another reference to it within the main clause, generally using a pronoun. In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus has pointed to those around him and declared they are his mother and brothers. But he has not addressed how this declaration is to be reconciled with those waiting outside to see him.

The left-dislocation is used here to introduce a complex entity: the one doing the will of Jesus' Father. Matthew adds a thematic detail, characterizing him as "the one in heaven" just as he recharacterizes the Father in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matt 5:15, 45, 48, versus 6:1, 4, 6). The dislocated information sets the stage for Jesus' climactic statement where he ties all the bits of information together. You see, there is a relationship between those doing his Father's will and those who are his mother and brothers. Understanding this relationship is the key to understanding how Jesus could declare those sitting around him to be his family.

The connection is finally made in the main clause following the left dislocation. Something is true about the ones doing the will of his Father. The main clause in Matthew and Mark begins with a pronoun, fronted for emphasis. The pronoun reiterates the dislocated information (αὐτός in Matthew and οὗτος in Mark), correlating obedience with true family connection to Jesus. "Whoever does the will of my father, *this one* is my brother and sister and mother." We already know that his family exists; what is needed is the correlation with obedience. This is the version highlighting the pronouncement using a left-dislocation.

Luke uses a different strategy to accomplish the same basic task. Whereas the left dislocation introduced information before the main clause in order for it to be emphasized within the main clause, a right dislocation can add a similar prominence to information by delaying its disclosure until after the main clause.[26] Luke's right dislocation is much more elegant than the combination of a rhetorical question, narrative interruption, and a left-dislocation, making Luke's account much shorter. Luke's right dislocation uses a pronoun in the main clause to refer to some as-yet-unknown entity. The identity is not disclosed until the right-dislocation is read. In English, we would most naturally punctuate the end of the main clause using a colon: "My mother and brother are these: the ones hearing and doing the word of God." There is a change from "God's will" in Matthew and Mark to "God's word" in Luke; nonetheless there is agreement regarding obedience being the essential ingredient.

There is one final factor to consider: the use of γάρ in Matt 12:50 and Mark 3:35. In these versions, a declaration is made that those sitting around Jesus are his mother and brothers. Levinsohn states, "The presence of γάρ constrains the material that it introduces to be interpreted as *strengthening* some aspect of the previous

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[26] Runge, *Discourse Grammar* 327–28.

assertion, rather than as distinctive information."[27] Material introduced by γάρ does not advance the flow of the discourse, but provides offline material that strengthens the preceding proposition. Claiming the information is offline does not mean it is unimportant; how many popular memory verses are there which begin with γάρ? Mainline and offline describe the advancement of the discourse. Mainline propositions move it closer to its goal, whereas offline information fills out important detail, but without advancing the discourse.

So what are the implications of using γάρ in the pronouncement? There is enough evidence for omitting γάρ in Mark 3:35 that γάρ is bracketed in the NA[28] critical text; there are no variants listed for γάρ in Matthew. The inclusion of γάρ would indicate that the declaration about those around Jesus being his true mother and brothers is the last mainline assertion. The strengthening material introduced by γάρ provides the rationale for this assertion, but does not advance the discourse. In other words, Jesus' declaration is the last mainline assertion, not the statement about those obeying his Father being his true mother and brothers.

Luke's departure from Matthew and Mark also removes certain constraints. Most rhetorical questions demand an answer, one simple enough to be understood. Matthew and Mark provide this in the declaration, yet they still need to correlate obedience to the Father as the defining criteria for membership in Jesus' family. This necessitates another statement following the declaration. Luke's choice not to use a rhetorical question simplifies things by removing the need for an answer. This, in turn, allows him to accomplish in *one* clause what took *three* for Matthew and Mark. Using only one clause makes it virtually impossible to use γάρ; there is nothing to prioritize as mainline or offline as in the other accounts. Thus Luke places the climactic pronouncement on the mainline, whereas for Matthew and Luke it is the declaration about those around him. Thus, although all three convey the same propositional content, the differences between the accounts seem motivated by differing objectives among the writers.

IV. CONCLUSION

The differences we find in the Synoptic traditions indeed merit analysis, but this paper has demonstrated that not all of them are created equal. Some do result in contrasting details within the accounts. But it remains to be seen how many of these traditional Synoptic differences are better explained as differences in authorial register (e.g. Luke dispreferring the HP compared to Matthew or Mark) than as exegetically significant contradictions. We need to move away from atomized lists considered in isolation and move toward a more linguistically-informed reconsideration of the data. Only then will we have a sound methodology for evaluating

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[27] Levinsohn, *Discourse Features* 91 (italics his); see also Jakob K. Heckert, *Discourse Function of Conjoiners in the Pastoral Epistles* (Dallas: SIL International, 1996) 31, 36; Stephanie L. Black, *Sentence Conjunction in the Gospel of Matthew: καί, δέ, τότε, γάρ, and Asyndeton in Narrative Discourse* (JSNTSup 216; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 280.

claims about stylistic variation, and for identifying differences that are exegetically significant for those preaching these texts.