

Essay Title:

How is Jesus' authority established through his words in the four Gospels?

By:

Owen Walters

Introduction

Authority is a central theme in the four canonical Gospels and a defining feature of Jesus' ministry. While Jesus is also portrayed as a healer and miracle worker, the Gospel writers consistently emphasise that his authority is most clearly recognised through his spoken words. From synagogue teaching to parables and extended speeches, Jesus' words are presented as authoritative and distinctive. This essay examines how Jesus' authority is established through his spoken words in the four canonical Gospels, arguing that speech itself functions as the primary vehicle of authority. In the Synoptic Gospels, this authority is expressed through teaching, reinterpretation of the Law, and pronouncements that enact forgiveness or judgment. By contrast, John's Gospel explicitly grounds authority in Jesus' divine identity, articulated through revelatory speech and the "I am" sayings. The essay concludes by considering the historical and theological implications of this portrayal for early Christian identity.

Authority and Teaching in the Synoptic Gospels

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' authority is established at the outset of his ministry through the manner of his teaching. In Mark 1:21–22, those who hear Jesus in the synagogue are astonished because he teaches "as one having authority, and not as the scribes," a reaction echoed in Luke 4:32. The emphasis lies not on content but on delivery and reception. Unlike scribes, whose authority derived from appeal to tradition, Jesus' speech is immediate and self-authenticating. As R. T. France notes, Mark presents Jesus' teaching as remarkable for the authority recognised immediately by his hearers rather than dependent on citation.¹ Adela Yarbro Collins similarly observes that Mark places Jesus' authoritative teaching at the beginning of the Gospel to

¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 100–101.

establish a pattern that shapes the narrative.² The Synoptics therefore present Jesus' spoken words as a primary means through which authority is recognised.

Matthew develops this portrayal by emphasising Jesus' authority in relation to the Law. The Sermon on the Mount presents Jesus engaging existing interpretations of the Law while asserting his own authority, particularly through the recurring contrast, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you" (Matt. 5:21–22; 5:27–28). This expression shows that Jesus speaks with authority to redefine how the Law is understood and lived. As E. P. Sanders notes, Matthew does not present Jesus as abolishing the Law but as fulfilling it, thereby reframing its demands.³ Jesus' authority lies in his ability to interpret God's will and to define how his followers should live.

The Synoptic Gospels further establish Jesus' authority through pronouncement stories in which speech itself performs an action. In Mark 2:5–12, Jesus declares the forgiveness of a paralysed man's sins, generating controversy because forgiveness is understood to involve divine prerogative. The authority of Jesus' words lies not in what they assert but in what they accomplish: forgiveness is enacted through speech. A similar dynamic appears in Sabbath pronouncements such as Mark 2:27–28. As France notes, in such pronouncement stories Jesus' authority is exercised through spoken declarations that assume divine prerogative.⁴ In this way, the Gospels portray Jesus' words as authoritative actions, preparing for the emphasis on performative speech developed through parables in the following section.

² Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 164–165.

³ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 261–262.

⁴ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, pp. 121–122.



Figure 1. Carl Bloch, *The Sermon on the Mount*, c. 1877. Public domain. Image via Wikimedia Commons.<

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermon_on_the_Mount#/media/File:Bloch-SermonOnTheMount.jpg > [accessed 1 January 2026].

Parables and Performative Speech

Jesus' authority is further established through his use of parables, which serve as interpretations of the nature of God's kingdom. In the Synoptic Gospels, parables are not presented as purely illustrative stories, but as authoritative speech that demands a response.⁵ As Joachim Jeremias argues in his foundational discussion of the nature of Jesus' parables:

“What we have to deal with is a conception which is essentially simple but involves far-reaching consequences. It is that the parables of Jesus are not—at any rate primarily—literary productions, nor is it their object to lay down general maxims. But each of them was uttered in an actual

⁵ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 21–22.

situation of the life of Jesus, at a particular and often unforeseen point... Every one of them calls for an answer on the spot.”⁶

In Luke 15, the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son present a distinctive image of divine mercy that challenges assumptions about sin and repentance. Introduced with authoritative formulas such as “Truly I tell you,” these parables signal that the interpretation offered is definitive rather than speculative. In this way, Jesus’ parables position him as the authoritative interpreter of God’s reign, shaping how listeners are to understand divine action in the world.

Scholars have differed over how parables should be understood. Jeremias emphasises that Jesus’ parables are rooted in his proclamation of the kingdom and function as a means of announcing God’s reign. By contrast, N. T. Wright stresses their indirect and provocative function, arguing that parables operate as narrative challenges that invite hearers to reassess their assumptions about God and Israel.⁷ Despite these differences, both approaches recognise that parables function as authoritative acts of interpretation rather than as simple moral stories. Their significance lies in the way they locate authority within Jesus’ speech itself.

Beyond parables, the Gospels frequently depict Jesus’ words as performative, producing immediate social and theological effects. Commands such as “Follow me” (Mark 1:17), pronouncements of forgiveness (Mark 2:5; Luke 7:48), and declarations of blessing (Matt. 25:34–41) do not merely describe events but create new realities within the Gospel narratives. Discipleship is formed, sins forgiven, and identities reshaped through speech. To describe this language as performative is to recognise that authority is exercised not through argument or explanation but through expression itself. As Craig Keener notes, Jesus was widely recognised as an authoritative teacher whose

⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 174–175.

sayings and parables evoked response and shaped communal identity within a first-century Jewish context.⁸

Scholars have debated whether this emphasis reflects literary strategy or historical reality within an oral culture. Studies of first-century oral societies highlight the authority carried by spoken words. As Richard Bauckham argues, a position examined critically by Jens Schröter, the Gospels present Jesus' words as central to eyewitness testimony and remembered authority rather than institutional position.⁹ Within the narratives, Jesus' performative words consistently provoke response, reinforcing the portrayal of authority and preparing for the intensified Johannine portrayal that follows.

Jesus' Words and Authority in John

John's Gospel presents Jesus' spoken words as authoritative in continuity with the Synoptics, but it develops this authority in a distinctive way by explicitly grounding it in divine identity. This emphasis appears particularly in the "I am" sayings, particularly in John 8:58 ("Before Abraham was, I am"), where Jesus' speech functions as a direct claim to divine self-existence. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John foregrounds the revelatory force of Jesus' words as confirmation of who he is. Additional "I am" sayings (John 6:35; 10:11; 11:25) reinforce this pattern, presenting Jesus' words as acts of self-revelation. As Raymond E. Brown observes, these sayings function as revelatory speech through which Jesus' divine identity is made known.¹⁰ Andrew T. Lincoln similarly notes that in John's Gospel, Jesus' words consistently reveal who he is, grounding authority in identity rather than in teaching alone.¹¹ Authority in John is therefore established not through audience reception or interpretive skill, but through revelatory speech.

⁸ Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 186–189.

⁹ Jens Schröter, 'The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony? A Critical Examination of Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 31.2 (2008), 195–209 (pp. 196–198).

¹⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 533–538.

¹¹ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 32–37.

John further reinforces this authority by presenting Jesus' words as authorised by his divine mission. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus repeatedly describes himself as the one "sent" by the Father, framing his speech as divinely authorised communication rather than teaching grounded in rabbinic tradition. This is particularly evident in John 6, where Jesus' declaration, "I am the bread of life," is directly linked to his claim to have come down from heaven to do the Father's will (John 6:38). A similar dynamic appears in John 10, where Jesus' self-description as the good shepherd is framed by assertions of intimate knowledge of the Father and shared divine purpose. In these passages, authority is grounded not in recognition by audiences, as in the Synoptic Gospels, but in Jesus' divine origin and sending. As discussed in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, the sender–sent relationship functions as a Christological framework in which Jesus' words derive authority from divine origin and mission rather than institutional endorsement.¹² This portrayal is significant because it presents Jesus' words as decisive for belief: to accept his teaching is to accept the authority of the Father who sent him. In this way, John's Gospel intensifies the theme of authority through speech by locating it directly within Jesus' unique relationship with God.

Historical and Theological Implications

Historically, the Gospels present Jesus' authority as grounded in his spoken words, suggesting that early Christian communities formed around remembered teaching rather than institutional authority. In an oral culture, such speech shaped communal identity through shared memory. This understanding is supported by Richard Bauckham's eyewitness thesis, which emphasises that early Christian traditions were not anonymous but remained closely associated with identifiable witnesses whose remembered speech

¹² Udo Schnelle, 'The Person of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John', in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, ed. by Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 324–326.

functioned as a source of authority.¹³ As *Encyclopaedia Britannica* similarly observes, “Jesus may have seen the kingdom as especially evident in his own words and deeds,” helping to explain why authority became so closely associated with remembered speech in early Christian communities.¹⁴

Scholars of early Christian origins have increasingly emphasised the importance of oral transmission in preserving and shaping Jesus’ teaching. Anna Wierzbicka argues that Jesus’ words were deliberately framed in simple and universal human concepts, making them highly memorable and easily transmissible, and thus capable of shaping belief and practice through repeated recollection in oral contexts.¹⁵ Complementing this, Alan Kirk demonstrates that the Gospel traditions emerged within a predominantly oral culture in which memory, repetition, and performance played a decisive role in transmission, rather than reliance on fixed textual preservation.¹⁶ Although debates remain concerning the reliability of oral transmission, scholars widely agree that remembered speech played a central role in the formation of early Christian communities. The Gospels’ emphasis on Jesus’ authoritative words therefore reflects not only theological conviction but also historical plausibility.

Theologically, the Gospels present Jesus’ words as a primary medium of revelation and divine action. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus’ speech interprets the Law, proclaims the kingdom, forgives sins, and summons disciples, while in John his words disclose divine identity through revelatory claims such as the “I am” sayings. Although the Synoptics emphasise authority through teaching and pronouncement, John intensifies this by

¹³ Richard Bauckham, interview on *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, St John’s Timeline, <https://youtu.be/292NTf1cCNw> [accessed 1 January 2026].

¹⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ‘Jesus Christ’, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jesus/The-context-of-Jesus-career#ref222996> [accessed 1 January 2026].

¹⁵ Anna Wierzbicka, ‘Language: A Key Issue in Understanding Jesus and Christianity’, in *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 455–464.

¹⁶ Alan Kirk, “Oral Tradition, Writing, and the Synoptic Problem: Media Dualism and Gospel Origins,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 100–118.

grounding authority in Jesus' relationship with the Father. Both traditions converge on the claim that Jesus' authority is encountered through his words.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that Jesus' authority in the four canonical Gospels is established most consistently through his spoken words. In the Synoptics, authority is recognised through teaching, reinterpretation of the Law, and pronouncements that enact forgiveness or judgment. John develops this further by grounding authority explicitly in Jesus' divine identity through revelatory speech. Although the Gospel traditions articulate authority differently, both converge on the claim that Jesus' words function as the primary medium of divine authority. Recognising this emphasis is essential for New Testament studies, as it highlights how early Christian understandings of Jesus' identity, mission, and authority were shaped not only by what he did, but by what he said.

Bibliography

Bauckham, Richard, interview on Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, St John's Timeline, <https://youtu.be/292NTf1cCNw> [accessed 1 January 2026].

Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

Collins, Adela Yarbro, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Jesus Christ', <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jesus/The-context-of-Jesus-career#ref222996> [accessed 1 January 2026].

France, R. T., *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Jeremias, Joachim, *The Parables of Jesus* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972).

Keener, Craig S., *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

Kirk, Alan, 'Oral Tradition, Writing, and the Synoptic Problem: Media Dualism and Gospel Origins', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. by Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 100–118.

Lincoln, Andrew T., *The Gospel According to Saint John* (London: Continuum, 2005).

Sanders, E. P., *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

Schnelle, Udo, 'The Person of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John', in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, ed. by Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 324–326.

Schröter, Jens, 'The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony? A Critical Examination of Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 31.2 (2008), 195–209.

Wierzbicka, Anna, 'Language: A Key Issue in Understanding Jesus and Christianity', in *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 455–464.

Wright, N. T., *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996).