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Barr, *Gospels and Acts* IBS 20, April 1998  
**SIGNIFICANT SCALE CHANGES IN THE GOSPELS AND  
ACTS**

*Dr. George K. Barr*

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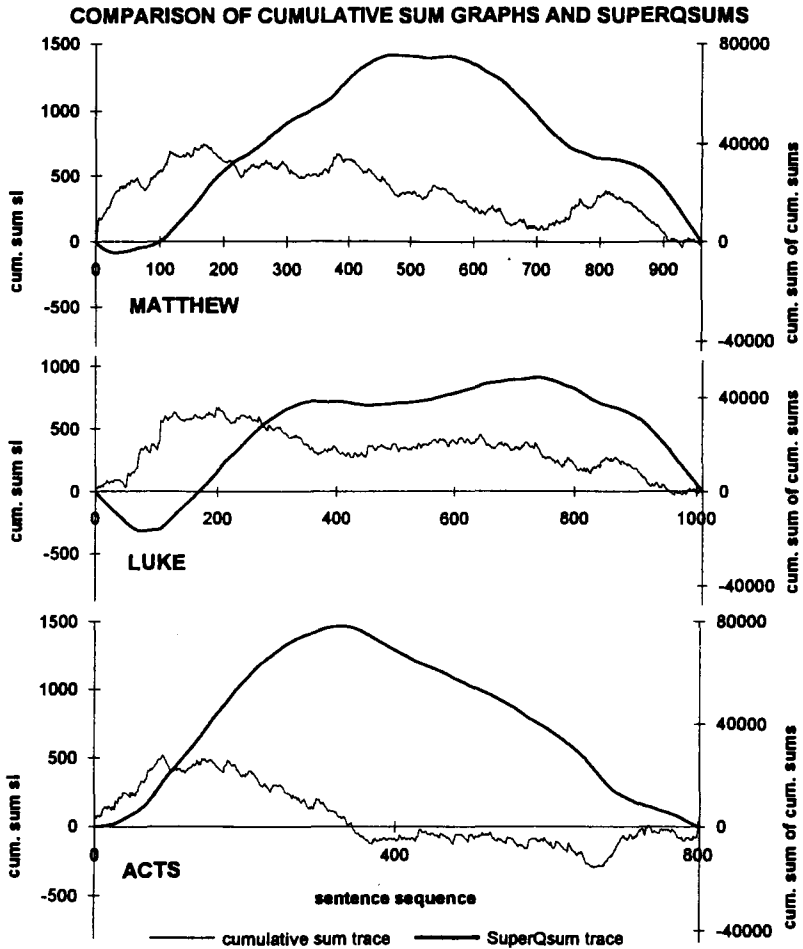
Abstract

Changes of scale within the texts of Matthew, Luke and Acts produce similar patterns which are different from those found in the Gospels according to Mark and John. The cause of these differences throws new light on the ways in which source material has been used in compiling these works. Scale levels also provide significant evidence regarding the Passion narratives.

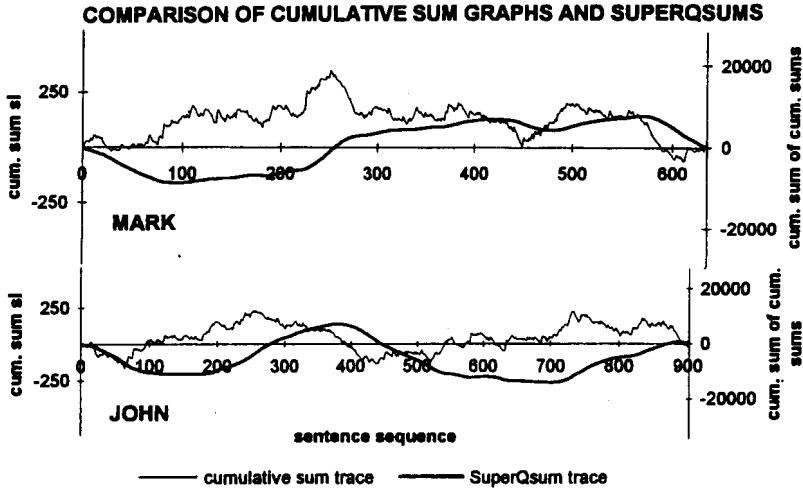
### **Scale Changes**

The most useful practical guide to scale level is the average length of sentences. Every author has his own range. In my own work, the average sentence length of a piece of writing varies between about 14 words and 23 words per sentence. Isocrates works on a grander scale; the average length of sentence varies between about 24 words in his earliest work and 54 words per sentence in his last work. Sentence length, however, provides only a general guide because there are also other variables involved. A high-scale work has comparatively long sentences; a low-scale work has comparatively short sentences. The range of each author is different but many authors' ranges overlap.

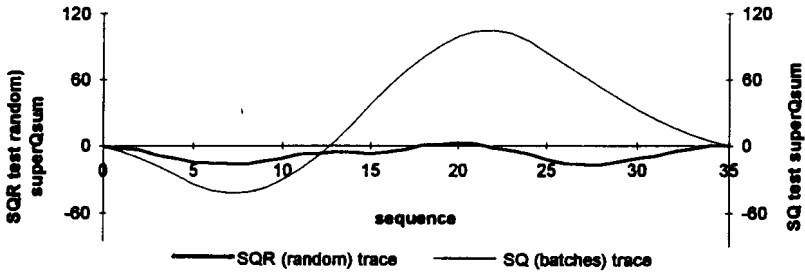
It not infrequently happens that batches of material written at different scale levels are found within one work. For example, Paul's epistles frequently show theological (high-scale) and ethical (low-scale) sections within one epistle. Short stories may have descriptive sections (high-scale) and also passages of conversation (low-scale). The late J.S. Stewart's sermons had low-scale passages in which he examined a human situation, followed by monumental, high-scale passages in which he looked at that situation in the light of the holiness of God. These monumental passages employ exceptionally long sentences. Paul, John (of the Revelation), John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle all use exceptionally



**Fig. 1** The cumulative sum graphs show the fluctuations in length from sentence to sentence. The SuperQsum trace eliminates the “noise” and gives a smooth curve which reflects the substructure of the work. The SuperQsum is different in form from the cumulative sum graph, but if an author produces similar cumulative sum graphs in different works then the SuperQsums will also resemble each other. Note that these SuperQsum traces rise above the cumulative sum graphs when the scales are in the relationship shown above. Compare those in Fig. 2.



**SQ test - Series 5,9,8,4,2,6,7 (x5) in SQR trace, numbers are taken in random order. In SQ trace numbers are taken in batches of five in the order shown above.**



**Fig. 2** The scales in these graphs of Mark and John are in the same relationship as those of Matthew, Luke and Acts in Fig. 1. The SuperQsum curves are low in comparison. The SQ test graph is a mathematical model which provides an explanation. When numbers are taken in random order they provide a low graph. When they are grouped in batches of the same number, they provide a high graph. This may be related to the scale patterns within the texts.

**Scale Planes in Graphs - Matthew, Luke and Acts.**

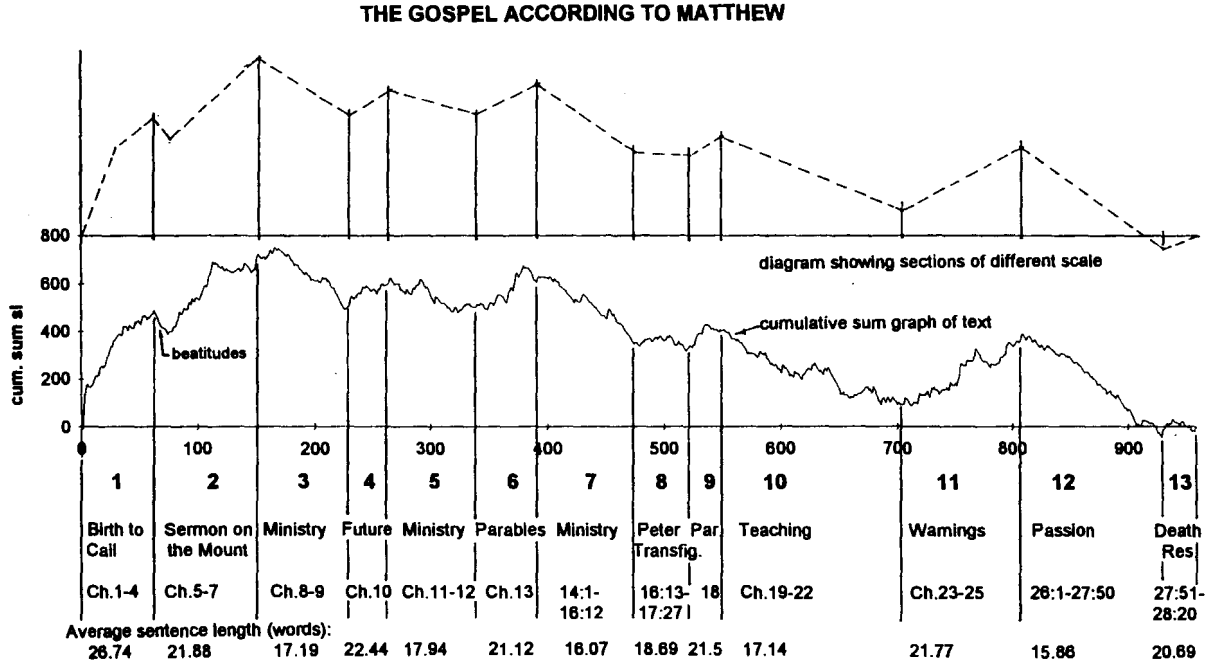
If the above argument is sound, then it may be expected that facets or planes will appear in the graphs corresponding to batches of pericopes which have been recast. These facets or planes will be disguised by the local saw-tooth pattern, but should be more discernible in Matthew, Luke and Acts than in Mark and John. It is important to note that such a scale plane should cover several pericopes (and not just one long pericope) and that the plane should be related to the content of a clearly defined section of the text. This is, in fact, the case.

Fig. 3 shows the underlying scale planes in Matthew's Gospel. Each facet or plane is related to a section of the text with clear boundaries. The Birth narratives (Sec. 1), the Sermon on the Mount (2), some parable sections (4, 6 and 9) and the section containing warnings (11) are higher than average in scale (indicated by a rising graph). The sections on Jesus' ministry and teaching (3,5,7 and 10) are lower than average in scale (indicated by a falling graph). The Passion narrative is conceived at the lowest scale level. These levels are reflected in the average sentence lengths given in the bottom row of numbers. The low scale of the Beatitudes forms a small hiccup in section 2 relating to the Sermon on the Mount.

Fig. 4 shows the scale planes in Luke's Gospel. These are less complex than those found in Matthew and are clearly related to the content of the text. The opening section from Birth to Baptism (1) and the little section on the End Time (8) are above average in terms of scale. The sections on ministry and teaching (3,5 and 6) vary in scale. This may not necessarily reflect differences in genre but may reflect different batches of material and different sessions in writing out the recast material. Again, the section on the Passion (9) is lowest in scale.

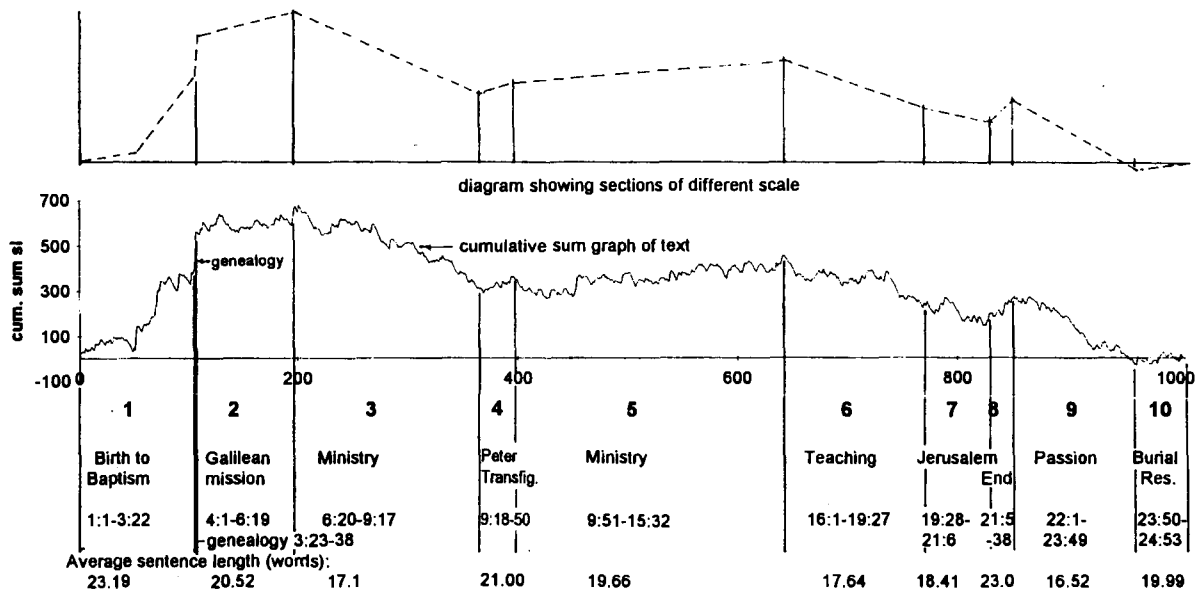
Fig. 5 shows the scale planes in Acts - the clearest of all. In the first section on the Early Church, the text is suffused with a sense of the numinous and this results in an element of monumentality with sentences which are much longer than the average for the whole work. That section is interrupted by a small

pericope which is clearly conceived at a different scale level; it is the story of Ananias and Sapphira. This does not necessarily indicate that the story has been inserted at a later date. It may be that the pericope has simply been included at the scale level at which it was found in the source material, without recasting. There are clear differences between the sections on Early Evangelism and Paul's Journeys (3 and 4). Again these may reflect sessions in the compilation of the work as there seems to be little difference in terms of genre. The sections relating to Jerusalem and Caesarea do not necessarily indicate that the text was written in these places, but rather that these represent batches of material or sessions in the compilation. The high scale of the section relating to Caesarea is due largely to the reconstruction of the speeches of Paul. It may be noted in passing that of all the speeches attributed to Paul in Acts, only that addressed to the Ephesian elders has characteristics which might be identified as Pauline. The speech is too short to be certain, and it is incomplete as it merges into unrecorded prayer, but the characteristics could possibly be Pauline. This proposal may be considered romantic and should not be pressed unduly, but Luke appears to have been present on that occasion and he may possibly have possessed tachographic skills.



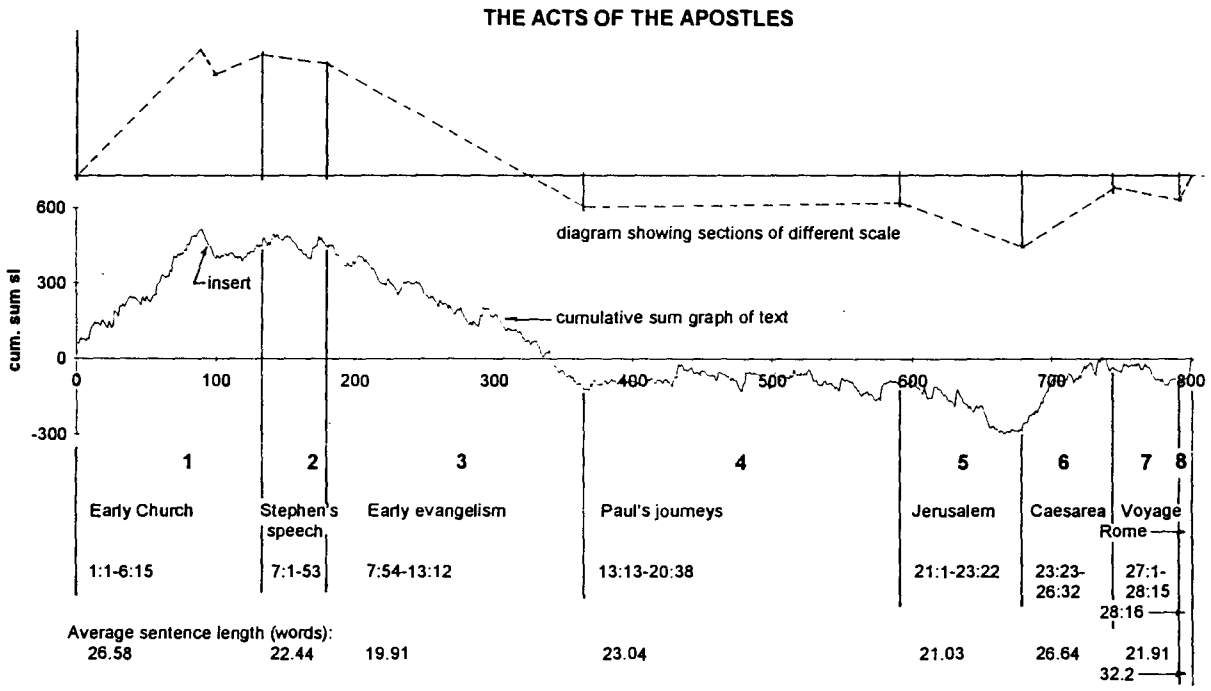
**Fig. 3** The scale changes in Matthew for the most part match the chapter layout. Sections on ministry are generally at the low end of the scale range, but the birth narratives, the Sermon on the Mount and sections with eschatological overtones are at the high end. The Passion narrative is at the lowest scale level.

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE



**Fig. 4** In Luke's Gospel the birth/baptism narratives and the passage on the end time are at the highest scale level. Different sections on ministry and teaching vary, but lie in the middle range. The Passion narrative is written at the lowest scale level.





**Fig. 5** Each of these sections in Acts is largely homogeneous in terms of scale and each section of the graph is clearly related to the content of the text. The scale planes are more clearly defined than in the gospels. The insert refers to the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

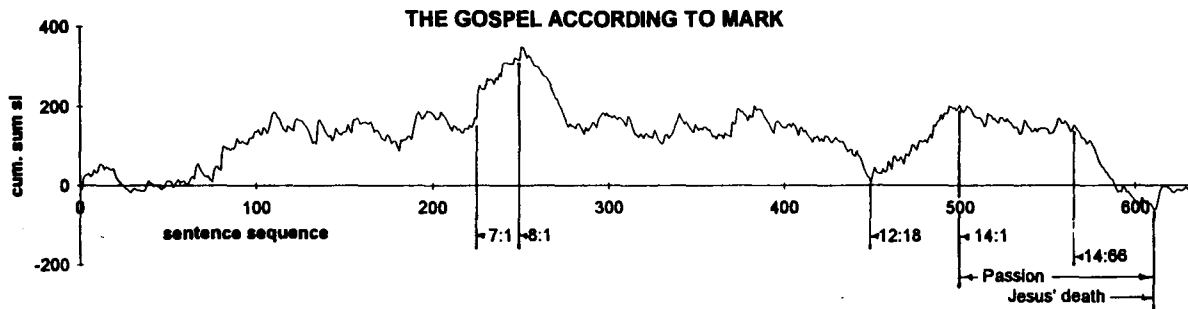
### **Series of Pericopes in the Gospels of Mark and John**

In Mark and John, which in contrast to Matthew, Luke and Acts produce the low type of SuperQsum, there is a marked absence of scale planes which can be related to specific sections of text. Instead, there is greater variety in the scale levels from pericope to pericope. Fig. 6 shows the graph of Mark's Gospel. The strong feature at sentence 225-280 which looks important, is in fact caused by two long pericopes, one high-scale and one low-scale. The first represents the encounter with the Pharisees beginning at 7:1; the second, beginning at 8:1, represents the story of the Feeding of the Four Thousand and subsequent events. These are unimportant regarding scale planes. The passage from 12:18 to 13:37 has eschatological overtones which result in a higher scale level; this may be a genuine scale plane. The treatment of the first part of the passage on the Passion is not very different from other passages of narrative, but from Peter's denial at 14:66 the scale is suddenly reduced as in the other gospels.

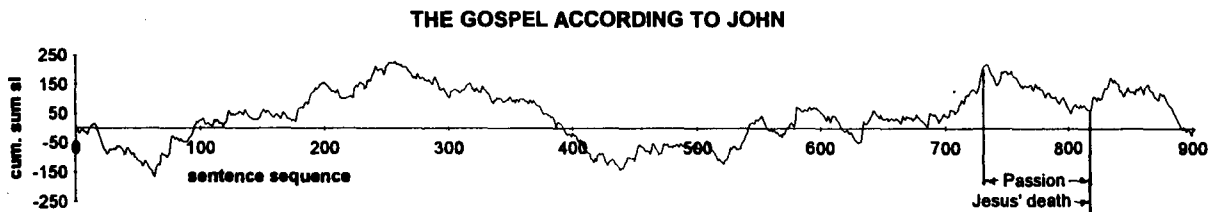
Fig. 7 shows the graph of John's Gospel. An examination of the pericopes in detail does not reveal any batch of material which might be related to a scale plane, except the Passion narrative from 18:1 to 19:30 which again is at a low scale level.

### **The Compilation of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and the Book of Acts**

The graphs of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and also that of the Acts, show marked scale planes, indicating that pericopes have been selected from source material and arranged in batches. These batches have then been recast to some degree, giving an overall scale level to each batch. It is wise to say "to some degree" because it is not a black and white choice - to recast completely or not at all. Nevertheless, clear distinctions may be seen between the different works. The scale planes are particularly clear in Acts. We may therefore imagine Matthew and Luke with a variety of written sources before them and arranging the material in batches, possibly adding their own memories of some events. Thereafter each batch was written out with some recasting of the material so



**Fig. 6** Fluctuations in the trace up to 12:18 are due to individual pericopes at different scale levels. The feature at sentences no. 225-280 is caused by two long pericopes beginning at 7:1 (higher scale) and 8:1 (lower scale). From 12:18 to 13:37 a change of mood and eschatological content result in a higher scale level. The treatment of the first part of the Passion narrative is similar to that of other narrative sections, but from Peter's denial at 14:66 the scale is suddenly reduced as in the other Gospels.



**Fig. 7** In the graph of John's Gospel there are no substantial scale planes related to the text except the Passion narrative from 18:1-19:30 which is a low scale passage.

that the whole batch was fairly homogeneous in terms of scale. Such treatment would produce a scale plane for each batch.

### **The Compilation of the Gospels of Mark and John**

If there is anything in the tradition that Mark recorded the substance of Peter's preaching, then we may imagine him making notes on membranae as Peter preached. Tachygraphic skills (as described by Cicero a generation or two earlier) were available, and verbatim recording was possible. In such circumstances, the scale level of these recorded notes would be that of Peter's speech on that particular day. To these notes may have been added other source material and Mark's own memories. In compiling his gospel, it would appear that he did not recast the material in batches, but used the pericopes more or less as he found them and at their original scale level. Only the eschatological material in 12:18 to 13:37 produces a scale plane indicating a higher scale level. The Passion narrative is not so consistently low-scale as in the other gospels. We may therefore imagine Mark compiling his gospel using source material more or less at the scale level and in the form in which it came to his hand.

John's Gospel seems to present an anomaly. In analysing the content of John's Gospel one might conclude that of all the gospels it shows the greatest degree of literary construction. The material is organised with purpose. Yet it shows a randomness in the scale levels of pericopes which produces the low type of SuperQsum and which suggests that source material has been used without recasting it in batches.

A possible solution may lie in the hypothesis that the written sources available to John had long been absorbed into his teaching and preaching material. I have noticed that when I introduce an old and familiar illustration into a sermon, the illustration may be produced with exactly the same words and phraseology used on previous occasions. In other words, familiar material may be stored in the brain's memory bank at a particular scale level and may be introduced into a new context without changing that scale level. Indeed, scissors and paste methods using

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material stored on computer produce the same effect. This may lead to a certain unevenness in the text of a sermon.

Here we may note a difference between Paul and John. Whereas Paul used argument, John tended to use stories. Paul argued theologically and sometimes employed metaphor, for example in explaining the meaning of atonement. It does not appear to have been his habit to tell stories other than his own personal history. Occasionally, however, he passed on elements of oral tradition in the form in which they had been handed down to him, for example regarding the tradition of the Lord's Supper. John, on the other hand, seems to have been mainly a story teller, although his gospel is not without distinctive theological content. In a society which is largely nonliterate, stories take the place of written historical records in establishing and maintaining the identity of the people. Narrators in ancient times shared the characteristics of story tellers found more recently in the Gaelic speaking highlands and islands of western Scotland and in western Ireland. In the hands of such a narrator, oral tradition may be recast to some degree but then becomes frozen in the narrator's own form by dint of frequent repetition. It is stored in his memory bank at a particular scale level. Comparison may also be made between the Synoptic accounts and John's gospel. The stories in the Synoptics represent a primitive stage of the oral tradition; those in John's gospel represent a later stage, when the content of the story is recast to suit the narrator's purpose.

Behind John's gospel there may lie a long history of teaching and preaching and a prodigious memory bank. When John was persuaded to record the gospel story, he drew on this material, choosing pericope after pericope and reproducing them substantially at the scale level at which they were retained in his memory. The framework of his gospel is therefore a new creation, but it is given flesh by using pericopes retained in his memory at many different scale levels. The result is a work which produces a low SuperQsum like Mark's, and quite unlike those of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and the Acts. Like the other gospels, however, John's narrative of the Passion from 18:1 to 19:30 is low

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in scale; this may provide a genuine scale plane dependent on the  
original source material.

### **The Passion Narratives**

It is surprising that the Passion narratives should be framed at a low scale level as they describe the turning point of history. When other writers look back to the turning points of history they tend to do it in monumental terms, using very long sentences. When Matthew and Luke looked back to the Birth of Jesus, they described these events in passages set at the highest scale levels found in their gospels. When Luke recalled the story of the Early Church and Pentecost in the first six chapters of Acts, his record is suffused with a sense of the numinous and these chapters have the highest scale levels in Acts. Yet the Passion narratives are consistently low-scale, even domestic in scale. The eye witnesses behind these sources were unaware that they were standing at a turning point in history.

In the Birth narratives and in the story of the Early Church recorded in Acts, the authors look back over a period, possibly of some decades, during which tradition has grown and their record has developed a degree of monumentality, that is, it is recorded at a comparatively high scale level. The numinous awareness and the sense of wonder, however, are located in the mind of the author, not necessarily in the minds of those who are recorded as witnessing the events. The eye witnesses of the Passion of Christ were unaware that history was at a turning of the ways; they knew only grief and shock, and this is reflected in the low-scale, domestic nature of the record. The fact that the Passion narratives are utterly devoid of any monumentality is a sign that they do indeed represent eye witness accounts, written close to the events they describe with little understanding of the significance of these events. At a later date these eye witness accounts were to be incorporated in the gospels at the scale level at which they were first recorded. Monumentality would only appear when Paul looked back and with hindsight expounded the meaning of the Passion of Christ in the theological sections of his epistles. There the text would show the highest scale levels in the New Testament.

### **Conclusion**

The comparison of cumulative sum graphs and SuperQsums shows the startling differences between the group comprising the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and the Book of Acts, and the pair comprising the Gospels of Mark and John. The mathematical model shows that these differences are due to the different ways in which material has been assembled and used. Matthew and Luke recast their material in batches, resulting in a fair measure of homogeneity in terms of scale within each batch. Mark used his source material more or less at the scale levels at which it came to his hand, and therefore his gospel produces little in the way of significant scale planes. John may have drawn his material from memory, rather than from written sources, and employs the scale levels at which the material was previously used.

The texts of the Passion narratives bear the hall marks of eye witness accounts, being utterly devoid of monumental development, and indicate the respect which the gospel writers had for this unique, primitive material.

Finally, the comparison of cumulative sum graphs and SuperQsums in the other New Testament works may be noted. The thirteen Pauline epistles all contain prime patterns which have strong contrasts between high scale and low scale sections; this provides distinctive wide band SuperQsums. Likewise, Hebrews, 1st Peter (from 2:1 where the author resumed writing) and 2nd Peter show another kind of prime pattern with a strong high-scale central inclusion which is also reflected in the SuperQsums. James and 1st John include series of topics dealt with at different scale levels and therefore show some scale planes. Revelation provides an unusual and irregular rhythm of monumental, high-scale passages followed by low-scale passages which results in a wide band SuperQsum. None of these epistles, however, are compiled using pericopes from other sources. 2nd and 3rd John and Jude are too short to provide significant patterns.

Paul mentions "the parchments" (2 Tim. 4:13) which suggests that he made notes which may have been used in the preparation of his epistles. The form of such material, however, can

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hardly have survived the process of dictation which has produced such exceptionally strong forms in his epistles. Only the Gospels and Acts are compiled using pericopes from other sources, and the distinction drawn between the group comprising the gospels of Matthew and Luke and the book of Acts and the pair comprising the gospels of Mark and John appears to be a valid one.

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