

Synoptic Problems: An Illustrative Study from Mark 5

Introduction

- 1) The Bible contains four accounts of the life of Jesus that are canonical and received as authentic scripture.
- 2) Believers consider these books to be accurate and authoritative as the inspired word of God. (2Ti. 3:16-17)
- 3) But skeptics deny these books are reliable sources for information about the historical Jesus.
 - a. They claim these books are full of inaccuracies, mythology, and contradictions.
 - b. They represent these books as the later production of oral Christian traditions, not dependable accounts.
- 4) A large part of this criticism is based on alleged discrepancies in the synoptic gospels.
- 5) We will use the three stories in Mark 5 as an opportunity to illustrate and engage the “synoptic problem.”

I. Defining the Issues

A. What is a Synoptic Gospel?

1. *Synoptic* is a compound word whose parts refer to *seeing together*.
2. These gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) share a common perspective and are literarily related.

B. What is the Synoptic Problem?

1. The synoptic problem refers to discrepancies in different versions of the same stories.
 - a. These range from insignificant additions to potentially serious alleged contradictions.
 - b. Differences aren't necessarily contradictions, but we must admit there are big differences.
 - c. Denying these accounts differ only betrays how superficial or dishonest our study may be.
2. Skeptics affirm these differences indicate the gospels are unreliable as historical accounts.
3. If we believe the Bible is God-breathed, we must have some way to account for these issues.
 - a. We should not affirm the Bible has no contradictions if we refuse to confront potential ones.
 - b. Honest inquiry can build faith, but dishonest denial will always undermine it.

II. Apparent Discrepancies in the Stories from Mark 5

A. An Exorcism in the Wilderness (Mk. 5:1-20; Mt. 8:28-34; Lk. 8:26-39)

1. Where did the story take place: Gerasenes (Mk./Lk.) or Gadarenes (Mt.)?
(*This is in the ESV. Three possibilities: Gadarenes, Gerasenes, and Gergasenes.*)
2. Was there one demon possessed man (Mk./Lk.) or two (Mt.)?
3. How much is known about him? Mk. – *extensive info*; Lk. – *limited info*; Mt. – *almost nothing*
4. How did the man/men meet Jesus? Mk. – *ran from far and fell*; Lk. – *saw and fell*; Mt. – *met him*
5. What did the man/men say? Mk. – *“I adjure you”*; Lk. – *“beg”*; Mt. – *challenged Jesus*
6. Did Jesus call the demons out? Mk. – *“was saying”*; Lk. – *“had commanded”*; Mt. – *???*
7. Did Jesus have a conversation? Mk./Lk. – *Yes*; Mt. – *???*
8. Did Jesus *permit* (Mk./Lk.) or *command* (Mt.) them to enter the pigs?
9. How many pigs were there? Mk. – *2,000*; Mt./Lk. – *???*
10. What did the townspeople see? Mk./Lk. – *the demoniac*; Mt. – *Jesus*
11. How did the people feel? Mk./Lk. – *afraid*; Mt. – *???*
12. What did they hear? Mk./Lk. – *story retold*; Mt. – *???*
13. What did the man/men do? Mk./Lk. – *ask to go with Jesus, then preached*; Mt. – *???*

B. A Women Healed and a Girl Raised (Mk. 5:21-43; Mt. 9:18-26; Lk. 8:40-56)

1. Did this happen immediately after the previous exorcism (Mk./Lk.) or later (Mt.)?
2. Was Jairus's daughter already dead (Mt.) or dying (Mk./Lk.)?
3. Was the woman healed when she touched Jesus (Mk./Lk.) or not until he spoke to her (Mt.)?
4. Did Jesus know who touched him (Mt.) or not (Mk./Lk.)?
5. Did the woman fearfully confess (Mk./Lk.) or not (Mt.)?
6. Did a servant come to inform Jairus (Mk./Lk.) or not (Mt.)?
7. Did Jesus assure Jairus of healing (Lk.), encourage him to trust (Mk.), say nothing (Mt.)?
8. When did Jesus leave the nine disciples: immediately (Mk.), at the house (Lk.), not at all (Mt.)?
9. Did Jesus put the crowd out (Mk./Mt.) or not (Lk.)?
10. Was the report of the daughter's healing publicly broadcast (Mt.) or not (Mk./Lk.)?

III. Factors in Resolving the Synoptic Problem

A. *Recognize the Nature of the Gospels*

1. The gospels are not modern, western histories, and they must not be judged as such.
 - a. Ancient biographers were not concerned with precision, chronology, and completeness.
 - b. This does not mean the writers merely invented their stories; there were definite controls.
2. If we critique these documents by modern, western standards, we judge them unfairly.
 - a. We must not insist on a doctrine of inspiration which precludes human involvement.
 - b. These writers were guided by God, but they wrote according to ancient standards.
3. The gospel writers use some techniques that obscure technical precision for literary value.
 - a. Matthew telescopes the story at times to get to the point. **Mt. 21:18-20; Mk. 11:12-14, 20**
 - b. In such cases it is appropriate to admit the stories are true but not always precise in details.

B. *Recognize What are Real Contradictions*

1. Not every discrepancy in a story is a real contradiction; the vast majority clearly is not.
 - a. Matthew says there were two demoniacs; Mark and Luke only mention one.
 - b. This isn't a contradiction since Mark and Luke do not insist there was *only* one man there.
2. But it must be admitted some discrepancies certainly appear to be actual contradictions.
 - a. Was Jairus's daughter dead when he came to Jesus or was she still alive? **Mk. 5:23; Mt. 9:18**
 - b. Unlike many other differences, it is hard to argue in this case that she could be both!
3. Once again, Matthew appears to telescope the narrative and generalize to move to the point.
 - a. Was the girl dead when Jairus met Jesus? Not technically, but she died soon after.
 - b. The precise chronology of the girl's passing is irrelevant for the point Matthew is making.
4. Most differences in the gospels are not this difficult, but even this one can be resolved.
 - a. In this case the difference can be explained as a literary technique rather than historical error.
 - b. We must not force a meaning or level of precision never intended. (e.g. Mt. 3:17; Mk. 1:11)
5. A contradiction involves two facts in which for one to be true the other must be false.
 - c. Before asserting unreliability, we must factor in literary conventions, hyperbole, and purpose.
 - d. If a reasonable resolution exists, even if uncertain, it does not discredit the text's historicity.

C. *Recognize There are Four Gospels, Not One Harmony*

1. The four gospels have different perspectives.
 - a. Mark wrote like a storyteller: simple language, vivid descriptions, less refined theology.
 - b. Luke wrote like a historian to provide a structured, credible account of Jesus' life. **Lk. 1:1-4**
 - c. Matthew wrote to Jews as a Jew, drawing strongly on OT tradition. (e.g. structure of ch. 1-7)
 - d. John wrote like a theologian, consciously arranging his material to make a case. **Jn. 20:30-31**
2. The four gospels have different purposes (within the larger purpose of telling Jesus' story).
 - a. Mark paints Jesus' story; Luke chronicles it; Matthew explains it; John expounds it.
 - b. The later gospels sometimes explain material in earlier accounts. **Mk. 1:9-11; Mt. 3:13-17**
3. The four gospels have different original audiences.
 - a. Matthew's audience would benefit from having "two witnesses." **Mt. 9:27-31; 20:29-34**
 - b. How can you explain the differences in the teaching on divorce in the four gospels?

D. *Recognize the Core Message in the Gospels*

1. Despite the discrepancies, the core message of the gospels about Jesus remains unchanged.
 - a. There is a consistent confession of Jesus' person, purpose, teaching, and actions.
 - b. Even if there were contradictions, there still would be overwhelming evidence to believe. *(I'm not suggesting there are actual contradictions. I believe the apparent discrepancies can be reasonably explained and that the gospels are inspired, infallible, and inerrant.)*
2. The four gospels are reliable as sources of information about the historical Jesus.
 - a. We can have confidence our faith is based on actual history and valid evidence.
 - b. We do not have to make a blind leap into the dark and hope our convictions are true.

Conclusion

- 1) Some people may fear digging deep into scripture and confronting alleged difficulties in the text.
- 2) But truth has nothing to fear from honest inquiry; unless we challenge our faith, we can never trust it.