

OpenTheo

S2E1 - Introduction to the Synoptic Problem

February 27, 2019



Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

At the beginning of season 2, we talk with Dr. Licona about the relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke - also known as the synoptic gospels. What's the best way for us to view the differences between these three perspectives?

The Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Mike Licona equips people to have a deeper understanding of the Gospel, history, and New Testament studies. The program is hosted by Kurt Jaros and produced in partnership with Defenders Media.

website | <http://risenjesus.com>

facebook | <http://www.fb.me/michael.r.licona/>

twitter | <http://www.twitter.com/michaellicona>

Transcript

[Music] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Mike Lacona. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University and he is a frequent speaker on university campuses, churches, conferences and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs. Mike is the President of Risen Jesus, a 501c3 nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host. Welcome to the second season of the Risen Jesus podcast and in the first season we have the opportunity to learn about Mike and his work, his mission and purpose for the ministry that he is doing. In the second season we are going to be looking at the depth of New Testament scholarship.

Well we are introducing you at least to it and we will be looking at an issue within New Testament criticism called the synoptic problem. Sometimes referred to as the synoptic puzzle but the synoptic problem and this explores the relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke. Mike I will go ahead and let you take it away.

Oh, well thanks Kurt. Yeah this is fun. Well you know the synoptic problem, synoptic puzzle is a very interesting discussion.

I think a lot of viewers are going to find this, listeners are going to find this an interesting season. When we read the Gospels, many view the four Gospels as being entirely independent that they were simply writing their own accounts. But when we read the four Gospels many of the stories are repeated.

I mean we would expect that of course if we are looking at four different independent accounts. We could say well why four? You know wouldn't it be better just to have one containing all of them together? Well a lot of people thought about this. The first person we know of of which you are aware of who thought about this was a guy named Tayshyn in the latter part of the second century and he wrote what was called the Dea Tesseron.

He took the four Gospels and out of that he made one Gospel. That was around the year 180. And then you know there are harmonies of the Gospels that we have today.

His was the first harmony of the Gospel and then you've got several of them today. You can just look on Amazon or Christian book distributor any of these and find harmonies of the Gospels where they try to make one. And you know that you can explain that the different accounts and the differences in them by saying okay we've got four independent authors but they are reporting about Jesus from different angles and that's why they differ on some things.

You know that it's always given about if you have four witnesses looking at a car accident they're looking at four different angles. They're going to describe it differently and that's why the Gospels differ in some ways. And that is true to an extent alright but that's not the full story.

So when we talk about the synoptic problem alright the first thing we look at what does the word synoptic mean and it comes from two Greek words. The one first is soon meaning with or together and then you've got opposites which means a sight viewing. So synopsis means to view together to see together and the reason they say that is you've got a book it's called the Synopsis of the four Gospels put out by Kurt Alon and what it does is it takes the stories let's say the feeding of the five thousand which appears in all four Gospels and the story is set in four separate columns one for Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and then you can read the story as it progresses line by line word for word.

Well when you look at Matthew, Mark and Luke in some of these stories that are in a synopsis of the four Gospels you see that there are some verbal similarities alright but you're able to put them side by side you're able to look at the way they report it differently and you're able to look at the similarities. Are you able to maybe give us just one example here of these similarities? Look I mentioned the feeding of the five thousand right so that would be one and you can put them side by side and you can see

lots of verbal similarities you can see some differences. What a synopsis of the four Gospels does is it allows you to see the differences but even more importantly it allows you to see the striking similarities.

A harmony of the Gospels will downplay the difference between the accounts while a synopsis will help a person a reader identify them. There are even differences in English translations how translations render Matthew, Mark and Luke and their words in our modern language today. Yeah now you know we look at the as you mentioned these English translations of course they're different objectives behind those translations so you have what are called functional equivalent or your literal translations they tried to reproduce it as literal translation as word for word is possible of what the original Greek Hebrew says.

Then you have what are called dynamic equivalents and they are more interested in communicating the concepts they want to maintain a word for word as much as possible but at times you're going to you want readability here and you want the concepts that are communicated that's where the emphasis is rather than the words that be like the new international version the new living translation you have paraphrases of course you have optimal equivalents that are like hybrids between the literal and dynamic that be like the Christian standard Bible okay but when we take say literal translations like the new American standard Bible and the English standard version okay so they're both functional equivalents literal translations we can see that they will translate the same verse pretty much the same but there are differences so for example in Mark 138 the new American standard Bible reads let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby so that I may preach there also for that is what I came for when you read the same verse in the English standard version it says let us go on to the next towns that I may preach there also for that is why I came out so you have two versions English versions with the same objective and they translate it differently and the reason being of course is anybody who's even remotely familiar with another language will know that grammar is different in different languages if you were to translate German or French or Spanish into English you're going to translate it one way on a particular day but another way on a different day it doesn't mean the translation is wrong or improved it's just there's it's kind of an art to it there's no one for one correlation when you're translating. I know for me the a common example that's brought up in apologetic discussions of gospel differences is the the signage on Jesus's cross and how they don't all say the same thing this there's a relationship here between on the synoptics and and this issue and it also has this sort of apologetic value as well what what should we think when we see differences on the the signage of of Jesus as the king of the Jews on the cross. Yeah well like like you were sent with Matthew it says this is Jesus the king of the Jews when you read it mark it just says the king of the Jews Luke says this is the king of the Jews and John says Jesus of Nazarene the king of the Jews now you can't really the only similar thing in that is the king of the Jews right so what does it say before that or does it even

say anything before you can't really harmonize this perfectly what we get here is that is that the authors are reporting an essentially faithful representation of what occurred a gist an accurate gist of what occurred of what was written on that plaque so we don't expect that we're getting a precise wording now maybe one of them has the precise wording but we don't know you don't know what the precise wording on that was so when some people want to get that precise wording they're really taking a rigid lens approach to the gospels instead of recognizing them in their genre and that these minor differences were acceptable because like you said the purpose was for the for the gist or a reliable conveying of what happened.

Yeah, so I mean it's not like this was dictated you know I mean I used to think that when I learned Greek I remember reading Jesus's words in John to the man who was born blind whom he had healed and as are talking back and forth and thinking wow this is what it really I'm reading it in Greek and said this is what it really sounded like and of course I wasn't thinking that well Jesus probably in this guy probably were Jews they were probably speaking in Aramaic not Greek so that's not what it sounded like and then I had no idea that you know I mean that's only that one's only reported in John I think but when you read it and when you read other things that Jesus said in the synoptics and you read it what he says differently then you realize they are not reporting his precise words they are recalling what he had said. Would you give us a modern day example of what it might look like for a recollection of an event? Yeah, so let's let's just say you and I I think I'm scheduled to come up there in May and we're supposed to do something and we're going to see each other than I think in October too but let's say one of those events you and I are having dinner okay and and you're taking me to dinner in a really really nice expensive Chicago restaurant. This is Shirley Fantasy.

And as we're as we're eating the there's a couple at the table next to us a man or woman and they just start arguing and it gets more intense and it gets more intense and and they're arguing in Spanish and then finally they stand up and they're screaming at each other and she takes a glass smacks it and breaks it on the guy's face and big gas opens up and just then police come in the handcuff the woman and paramedics take care of the guy's wound on his cheek and the cop comes over one of the police officers comes over and says hey you guys were in the table right next to it can you describe what happened and so they give us something to write on and you and I began writing and we handed over to the police officer. Now the police officer reads it now if we were doing this entirely independently without any collusion at all but or collaboration between the two of us let's say we're going to report the same event a lot of the details are going to be similar but we're not going to report it in the same words right and if the if the police officer looked at his reading our two accounts and he sees that they are virtually word for word then he knows that there was collaboration between the two of us one of us was copying from the other or we put this story together we came up with it together and wrote it down that way and what it would even seal the deal even more is if

we heard it in Spanish and let's say we're both fluent in Spanish and we're putting it where we recall in the event in English and that translation was virtually word for word that would seem to suggest that there's collaboration between us if they're not independent accounts we might have seen it independently and we might be agreeing on the details but we either collaborated to come up with the single account or nearly single account or you know we were one of us was relying on the other as a source to copy from and this is some of the stuff the kind of stuff we observe going on in the gospels which suggest that they are not writing this is the synoptics at least Matthew Mark and Luke yeah John is very different so that he's not he's even though he's included in a synopsis of the four gospels Matthew Mark and Luke are so similar in many ways that we'll be discussing that they're called the synoptic gospels and so we see this and we see there's some sort of a literary relationship between them hmm now in the example you gave I've got a number of maybe questions and remarks so here you've got this hypothetical scenario where we're in a restaurant an expensive fancy restaurant and we're both fluent in Spanish so now this is certainly fantasy since I am not neither am I and so but now even then so that's two of us looking at the events with the synoptic gospels Matthew Mark and Luke were told at least in Luke and church tradition tells us that mark that both of those were not eyewitness accounts right but were based upon eyewitness accounts from from others so mark being based on Peters teachings and and Luke in chapter one explicitly tells us that you know he is undertaking an investigation so there might be some some copying going on if if Luke maybe has you know very likely has mark or maybe even has Matthew so but when Luke saying he's doing this investigation there's nothing wrong then per se with him copying some things from some of these gospels is there oh no you know it was standard for ancient historians and biographers to use other sources we know that plutarkey used a sinius polyo who was an eyewitness to much of the civil war he was the Roman Civil War he was with Julius Caesar he's a friend of Julius Caesar you know Salist he was an eyewitness to some of the things with with Caesar but plutar's gonna mention a sinius polyo you've got others who mentioned their sources so itonius is going to mention his sources like for example in his life of Augustus he mentions that he had access to letters that Augustus had personally written so yeah there's all kinds they'll mention sources and it was fine it was it was standard for someone to sit down and use one source as their primary source and then to supplement it so we're not to expect necessarily like scholars and students do today where you sit down and you've got a desk and you have all these books that are open and consulting these commentaries and and and other resources word studies lexicons things like that it wasn't that way they would they didn't have a table and chair back then you know they're kind of sitting reclining on the floor they they used servants and you know they would have one primary source they would call recall things from memory but they usually use one primary source and then supplement that with other sources and have drafts and then and then a final so yeah alright so with this example again here what we have is this we have what's the gist of the story and if we were to give completely independent accounts we wouldn't we would expect there to be

variation and there is to some degree some variation but at the same time there are variation right yeah plenty variation but at times we do see word for word and it's not just word for word of the original language that Jesus spoke but it's word for word of Greek and so this this sort of sets off red flags in the sense that there is some relationship some deeper relationship here rather than independent strictly exhaustively independent accounts yeah and when you say red flags it would only send off red flags to if we have the view right that these guys sat down and wrote independently with without knowledge or use of one another's work okay that they wrote completely entirely independent well then such observations as we've alluded to here they're going to put up red flags to say hey that view may be problematic right right not that the gospels themselves are are you know problematic correct yeah it would be our view of the gospels that could be problematic a fine distinction there yes alright well we're going to be getting into observations in the text that suggests this sort of relationship exists in our next episode but something you know before we close with this episode something we've done in the off season here is to solicit questions from our listeners Mike and we've had a couple people inquire about about book recommendations so Brandon here asks what theology books would you recommend to people who aren't in seminary and just beginning to traverse the theological field so your answer could include a must read list of theologians slash books to read haha well there are a lot of them I don't I don't focus a whole lot on theological matters I mean I do some but I don't focus on a lot of them but you know some good theology books out there there's one caught New Testament theology by i Howard Marshall came out not long ago it's an excellent book of theology of the New Testament by George Elton Lad that's a really good one you got the story of theology by Roger Olson that's a really nice read it's more of how church of church history it's a it's a very easy read it's a thick book so you'll be in it for a while but it's a very thick book that just in a very clear what manner it just talks about how things were an early church and how things evolved in terms of the church hierarchy structure hierarchical structure you know first in the New Testament we we find that we have overseers which would be like pastors and elders and then you've come up later on you got bishops which would be like the chief church authority in a city that's as you start to have several churches local congregations within a city or town then a bishop would preside and have authority over the various overseers of each of those congregations and then it talks about how the Catholic church and how they were pushing for or how the church was getting together and pushing for a pope and how the first pope came about they were they were trying to replicate how the Roman government was you know they had an emperor so there should be an ultimate authority over the church and the church resisted that for a while and said no we don't want that and finally it did come around and so it talks about all that all that for hundreds and hundreds of years of the church and of course theology is discussed in that in the various councils so that's a that's a good read nice for those that are I'll add a follow up here to Brandon for those that are maybe exploring an academic route is there an academic program for people to begin exploring theology or apologetics oh yeah of course best one in the US best one in

the world at Houston Baptist University thanks for asking I mean I'm one of their professors there and we've got what's called the school of Christian thought and there are you know various masters degrees that they can get there's a philosophy department where you can get a master of arts and philosophy you can get a master of arts in theology in theology department you get a master of arts in Christian in apologetics there and a lot of these maybe even all of them I know you can in the maths the master of arts and theological studies and you can the master of arts and apologetics you can do the whole thing entirely online it's fully accredited regionally accredited which is the highest accreditation you get so ours of all the masters degrees in apologetics ours is the most convenient ours offers the greatest amount of flexibility and what I love about HBU is all of our faculty are evangelical but there's a lot of diversity so we have Catholics we have Protestants we have complementarians egalitarian Calvinists and our minions we have those who like myself who hold to the inerrancy of the Bible we have others like Craig Evans who do not they hold to the authority and the trustworthiness of and and the divine inspiration the Bible but say that there are some errors in it so the real nice thing about it is we all get along we can have friendly discussions of disagreements but we all get along and it's it's really cool Kurt it's just a great program great great well Mike thank you for introducing us to the synoptic problem I'm looking forward to learning more in this field as we explore the the depths just an iceberg tip of the depths of New Testament scholarship well if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona please visit risenjesus.com where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the gospels there you can check out free resources like ebooks watch videos such as debates or lectures or simply read some articles written by Mike if this podcast has been a blessing to you would you consider becoming one of our financial supporters please be sure to subscribe to this podcast and follow us on Facebook Twitter and YouTube this has been the risen Jesus podcast a ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona we all get going on this all come on Mike Lacona.

[BLANK_AUDIO]