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S2E5 - Markan Priority

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In a followup to the previous episode's topic, Mike Licona discusses Markan Priority (the counterpoint to Matthean Priority). Why is Markan Priority the prevalent view among scholars and what evidence is there to support this?

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.

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Transcript

Risen Jesus S2E5 - Markan Priority Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Mike Licona. Dr. Licona is Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University, and he's a frequent speaker on Unispeaker. On University campuses, churches, conferences, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs.

Mike is the President of Risen Jesus, a 501c3 non-profit organization. My name is Kurt Jaros, your host. On today's episode, we begin to explore Markan Priority.

Mike, in the last episode, we talked about Matthean Priority, some of the reasons for thinking that Matthew was the first of the Synoptic Gospels to be written. We also explored a concern there against Matthean Priority. What might be a couple other reasons for thinking that Matthew was not written first? Okay.

The last time we talked about how Papius said he received his information that Papius said that Mark got his information from Peter, and that Papius heard this from an associate of one of Jesus' disciples, and that would have been sometime in the latter part

of the first century. He's in a really good position to know. He says, Mark got his information from Peter.

We heard Peter say. Well, when we talked about the literary dependence of some of the Gospels, there's some sort of relationship going on, and we saw things such as verbal agreements, and even puzzling verbal agreements, and the parenthetical comment, remember, let the reader understand things like this, that Matthew and Mark seem to be drawing either one from the other or from the same source. So if Mark is writing down what Peter said, then what's this parenthetical statement that gets put in there? Either Matthew is using Mark as a source, or Papius was incorrect when he said that Mark got his information from Peter.

It would seem more likely that he got his information from Matthew. So another thing is it's difficult to understand why Mark wrote. If he's writing after Matthew, why would he write, since a lot of his content is not unique, or I should say the content that is unique to Mark, doesn't seem significant.

So for example, he omits the Sermon on the Mount, which has some of Jesus' most profound teachings. He omits what we call the Lord's Prayer, our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. That's not in there.

Jesus teaching us how to pray. That's not in there. But what does he put in there that's unique? Well, for example, in Mark chapter 7, he's got where Jesus heals a deaf man by putting fingers in the guy's ears and spitting and touching the man's tongue with saliva.

What's that about? It's kind of strange. That's omitted. Matthew and Luke don't have that.

You've got another case in the following chapter, Mark 8, where Jesus spits on the eyes of a blind man. Spitting in the guy's eyes, you know, and then even then the healing is not perfect because the guy Jesus says, "Well, did that help?" "Oh, yeah, I see now, but you know, the people, they look like trees. It's not clear." "All right, well, let me do it again." So, did Jesus have a head cold that day? What's the deal that his powers weren't working perfectly that day? Well, that's not found in Matthew or Luke.

You've got Jesus' arrest. You've got an anonymous young man who, when they go to grab him in Gethsemane, this young man flees naked. They pull the robe.

They grab the robe and he's got nothing underneath and he flees naked. Well, what's that about? That's not mentioned in Matthew or Luke. Very interesting is you do have, in Mark chapter 2, you've got that case that Bart Erman has talked about that really led to him starting to question scripture about how David and the men when he was fleeing from Saul who was trying to kill him, that they show up to a biothar, the high priest Mark says.

And they ask a biothar for the sacred bread, which wasn't really lawful for anyone except the priest to eat and a biothar gives it to him. That's what Mark says. But when you go to the Old Testament for 1 Samuel, it's not a biothar who gives, who's the high priest.

It's a hemilec who is the high priest. And then in chapter, that's 1 Samuel 21, and in the following chapter it says a biothar was a hemilec son. So that appears to be a contradiction between Mark and 1 Samuel.

And it's something, you do have Matthew and Luke who mentioned this event, but they omit a biothar, the high priest. So what seems likely here is it more likely that Mark has a biothar, and however you may want to resolve this, there is a tension there, there is confusion at minimum. So is it more likely that Matthew and Luke just neglect, they choose not to mention a biothar, and they're using Mark and they choose not to mention, or is it more likely that Matthew and Luke, or Matthew writing first, he doesn't mention it, Luke's using Matthew, so he doesn't mention it.

But Mark adds the questionable name of a biothar in there. That's something you've got to look at. So that's a problem that many would point out as Matthew and priority, that you've got these really strange contents, some of which is unique, that just doesn't seem to contribute anything much to the story.

But Mark includes that while omitting content that seems that it's important, like the Sermon on the Mount and the Jesus' Prayer, the Lord's Prayer. And that's not just the only thing. You've got several church fathers, when they say that Matthew originally written in Hebrew, or probably Aramaic, we talked about that.

All the manuscripts we have of Matthew are in Greek, and when you talk to even evangelical scholars who are extremely proficient in Greek, more so than most New Testament scholars, I'm talking about people like Dan Wallace, who's written a Greek grammar that's used in a lot of places all over the world. And D.A. Carson, who teaches at Trinity, when you talk to these guys, they even say that Matthew is not written in translation Greek. The kind of Greek in which we read Matthew today is not the Greek that is the kind that we read when you're translated from another language.

And they say that no, the gospel of Matthew we have today was originally written in Greek. So that is a problem for those who hold Matthew in priority. They still have to be able to account for why these early church fathers are saying this when the internal evidence is all pointing against Matthew in priority.

So again, I think there's some solutions for this, which we can get into a little bit later, or if you want to touch on it now. I was wondering if we could follow up on that sort of sub point right now. So if Matthew's gospel that we have is not a translation that it was written in Greek, what could explain that the church fathers say he's written in Hebrew, or we might understand as Aramaic? Yeah.

Well, Papius, when he says that Matthew, I'll read that text again, let's see if I have it. Yeah. Matthew composed the, I'm reading Michael Holmes translation here.

So Matthew composed the oracles in the Hebrew language, and each person interpreted them as best he could. This is Holmes translation of what Papius is saying here. The term that's used at Holmes translated as oracles, the oracles is talagia in Greek.

So he's saying Matthew composed the talagia in the Hebrew language could be Aramaic, like I said. But talagia is not referring to a gospel. You know, talagia means the teachings, the saints.

It's not saying Matthew composed a gospel, or a book, or a life of Jesus in Hebrew, in the Hebrew language. He composed the talagia, the saints, the teachings of Jesus. So what Papius may be referring to here, and could have been mistakenly understood as the gospel of Matthew by these later church fathers.

He could be saying that Matthew had a set of notes of Jesus's teachings, not really narrative, but Jesus's teachings of the things Jesus said. Remember Jesus sent out his disciples by twos. So it could be that maybe Matthew, a tax collector, probably literate, would have taken notes of Jesus's teachings.

And so when he goes out, he's got these notes and he could say this is what our Lord is saying. And it's that, since Jesus is probably speaking, teaching most in Aramaic, he probably taught in Greek, especially when he's talking to Romans, and Gentiles, is probably speaking in Greek because they wouldn't know Aramaic or Hebrew. So he's probably bilingual there, at least.

But Jesus is primarily speaking to Jews, and so he's talking in Aramaic. And Matthew may have written down these teachings, these saints of Jesus in Aramaic, as notes. And this is what Papius to which Papius is referring to.

It's not referring to the gospel, and maybe it's the case that at a later date that Matthew used to scribe, just like Cicero used, just like Paul used, and he used to scribe and he says, "Look, I want you, you know, people are asking me to write my own account of Jesus. So I want you to use Mark. He's already written a lot.

It's based on the testimony of Peter, our lead apostle. And I want you to supplement that." And so he supplements it with this material and translates that, the saints, the teachings of Jesus from this. He translates those into Greek and uses those.

So in that sense, we can reconcile what Matthew written first, but it's not talking about the gospel. It's talking about the saints of Jesus. And then we still have Mark in priority.

We haven't talked about the arguments from Mark in priority yet. We will get to that. But that could be the case.

Mark then writes the first complete gospel or biography, Life of Jesus. And then Matthew supplements that with these talagia, these saints, these teachings of Jesus. Interesting.

And that has implications for perhaps the hypothesized cue, which we'll get to in a later episode. Interesting. All right.

Well, so we've looked at some of the further reasons for thinking that Matthew reasons or difficulties for why Matthew may not have been written first. So let's look at the arguments in favor of Mark in priority. Yeah.

Well, this Mark in priority was, you know, that was not positive until the late 18th century by a German scholar named Gotelub Stur. And he looked at some evidence. He pointed out some things.

And it's interesting, even though it didn't, Mark in priority wasn't positive to the 18th century. It is now the very large majority position held by New Testament scholars today, including evangelicals. It's rare to find someone who takes Matthew in priority because the internal evidence that Mark was written first is so strong.

So for example, one thing we can look at is Mark often uses a crude style. His writing style is often crude. So as an example, Mark chapter one, verse 12, after Jesus is baptized, Mark says that the spirit drove out Jesus into the wilderness.

He uses the term drove out echbalo in Greek. Now, what's interesting, almost every occasion in which Mark uses this term, it's used in a negative sense. It's used of Jesus driving out the money changers in the temple with his whip.

It's talked. That's the term that's used when Jesus expells demons from a person. Echbalo, he drives the demon out.

This is the term that Mark uses for the spirit driving out Jesus into the wilderness where he's tempted. When we read Matthew chapter four, verse one, Luke chapter four, verse one, they use a different term. They said that Matthew says that Jesus was led up.

Luke just says that Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness. So they take, it would seem, what is going on here? Did Matthew or Luke use this term and then Mark using Matthew changes that to a synonym, but it has a negative connotation to it. Or is it more likely that Mark wrote first and then when Matthew and Luke use Mark as their source, that they soften that term, that they use the synonym that Jesus was led up or led into the wilderness.

So that is one reason most scholars would say it's the latter. Matthew and Luke soften that term. They take that crude term and use what they would consider to be a more appropriate term.

Another example would be Mark 4, 22, where Jesus is talking and he says, "Nothing is hidden except that it be revealed." Now, if you think about this, for nothing is hidden except that it be revealed, it's not exactly, it's kind of awkward and everybody is awkward in Greek as it is in English. So when we read Jesus saying the same statement in Matthew and in Luke, it reads, "For nothing is hidden, that will not be revealed." Okay, now that makes sense, that is smooth. So what is more likely that Matthew and Luke had this statement as it is, smooth? Or is it more likely, and that Mark kind of corrupted the grammar? Or is it more likely that Mark has this kind of really awkward grammar that Matthew and Luke improve the grammar and make it smooth? Well, most scholars look and say, "Well, it seems like it be the tendency to improve that grammar." So that's another reason Mark's often crude style that is absent in Matthew and in Luke is a reason to think that Matthew and Luke improve Mark's style.

Okay, now in your criticism of Matthew and priority, you mentioned Mark's unique content. Maybe we could review some of that as well in support of Mark and priority. Yeah, so you've got this saying where Jesus heals this deaf man, his fingers in the guy's ears, spitting and touching the guy's tongue.

It's like, that's weird. Or he spits in the guy's eyes, none of this appears in Matthew and Luke. And on the one case, he heals this blind man by spitting in his eyes, but yet the guy's eyes aren't completely healed.

He still can't see clearly, so Jesus has to do it again. This is kind of awkward, right? I mean, you should just be, why not just do it? Boom, like that. And Mark doesn't say it, it's a matter of the guy's lack of faith that just boom.

He's got to do it again. Give it a second try. So this is absent from Mark, I'm sorry, from Matthew and Luke.

So what's more likely that in view of, you know, what we see this awkward content in Mark and unique, is it that Matthew and Luke just decide to omit it because it is kind of strange? Or does Mark include this kind of strange things while omitting some profound stuff like the Sermon on the Mount? You know, another thing we can mention is it appears that there's either some kind of confusion or a mistake when Mark mentions that a biothar was a high priest at the time in Mark chapter 2, when David asked him to give him and his men the other people. And his men the sacred bread because they were very hungry. You don't, you know, when you go to the Old Testament for Samuel, it says a hymnalek was the high priest and a biothar was his son.

So what's going on here? Is this an error? At least it's confusion. And it's something that when Matthew and Luke tell the story, they omit the name a biothar. They don't even say it's a hymnalek.

They just omit the name of a biothar. So what's more likely that Mark kind of introduced

this confusing detail because it wasn't in Matthew and Luke or is it more likely that Mark had this confusing detail that Matthew and Luke just omitted? It seems that most scholars think it's the latter. Yeah, yeah.

Now, when we were looking at the five observations, the second point was the ordering of events. How does that play into supporting a Markin priority? Well, so, all right, so you got Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And you have this thing, I think we mentioned in a previous episode where it's called a synopsis of the four gospels.

And so synopsis, remember, comes from two Greek words, *syn* meaning with and or together, and then you've got *opsis*, which means to see or to view. So it's a book that lines up the parallel stories in all four gospels in a manner that you can look at them line by line, word for word, and see how the stories are similar or different. And it's the similarities that grab you a whole lot more than the differences.

All right, so when you look at these things, we notice that there's a ton of content in Mark that's also present in Matthew and in Luke. So there's approximately the way we have it divided up in English is about 665 verses in Mark, and more than 600 of these 90% of them appear in Matthew and in Luke. So again, you got to look at and say, well, why is Mark even writing if Mark comes after Matthew and Luke, right? But it makes sense that Matthew and Luke could use Mark and supplement him with additional information.

So it would be difficult to understand why Mark is writing if he's writing second. Does that make sense? I mean, he's got 88 stories or what we call pericopies, 88 stories in Mark, and only five of them do not appear in Matthew or Luke. So what's the purpose of him even writing if he's writing after Matthew? It makes more sense that Matthew and Luke take Mark as their primary source and supplement him with a lot more information.

Fascinating. Now, we won't have the time to go into the shortcomings of Mark and Priority, but we'll save that for our next episode. Before we sign off here, Mike, here's a question, a bit more lighthearted question.

Jane writes in, what's your favorite gospel to read? A bit more subjective than academic. Yeah, I really don't have one to be honest with you. For a while it was Mark because I'm thinking, well, it's the earliest one, and so that carries a lot of weight with it, and it's based on what Mark remembers Peter saying.

But then, you know, John is rooted in eyewitness testimony. Most scholars today don't think that John the son of Zebedee wrote it. I think he did.

How about-- I'm open to him, not. How about Witherington's proposal? Yeah, Witherington thinks Lazarus did. And listen, before one laughs at that, he's got a decent argument.

Up until you've got the raising of Lazarus, which I think is John chapter 11, until you get

to that, you don't have any mention of the beloved disciple who is through, yeah, it's chapter 11. So you don't have any mention of the beloved disciple who it seems as the source, even the author of the gospel, of John. And then you get to chapter 11, and it talks about the disciple, it identifies Lazarus as the disciple whom Jesus loved, and then from that point on you see a mention of the beloved disciple.

And, you know, so Agabetas is beloved, and the disciple of Jesus loved, and then beloved disciple from Agape, same thing there. So Witherington takes that and says, "Yeah, it looks like, you know, that's his main argument. There's some others to supplement that." But that would make sense to me.

The only thing that keeps me from accepting that is nobody in the early church identified Lazarus as the author of John's gospel, and there'd be no reason not to. All of them identified John or John the Elder as the author of John's gospel. I mean, they're almost all.

I think there were two others, and one's late and the other seems confused. So other than that, they're all saying John is the author of that gospel. Why not Lazarus? So that keeps me from thinking.

So anyway, either way, what scholars, whether it's Witherington or Baucom or Dale Allison or others, the majority of Joe Hennine scholars, and I get this from Greg Keener who would know this because that's where he's really spent a lot of time with John. He says that the majority of scholars today think, even though they do not think John the son of Zebedee wrote it, I do. Keener does.

Craig Blomberg does. Some others do, but we're in a real minority there. The majority of scholars today think that the author of John's gospel was either one of Jesus' minor disciples or that the author of John's gospel used one of Jesus' disciples, a minor one, or even John the son of Zebedee, as their primary source for the information contained in that gospel.

So still, at the very worst, you've got, if the majority of scholars today are correct, critical scholars, then we've got the same thing with the gospel of John as we have with Mark. It is rooted in the eyewitness testimony of one of Jesus' apostles. That's pretty strong.

So that's pretty cool. Luke writes as a historian. Most scholars, according to Keener, think that he used Paul and he used other eyewitness sources and he used the gospel of Mark as his sources.

And then Matthew, a little fuzzy there on how Matthew fits in. We're not exactly sure. But Matthew has a lot to contribute it.

And if Matthew is playing a large role in the penning of the gospel, I mean, it's still all good stuff. So it's hard to say. I can say I enjoy reading Luke the least because I tried to read the Gospels in Greek and Luke has the most difficult Greek.

But I like them all for different reasons. I don't have a favorite gospel. Now, perhaps a little known fact about you, you've got the Sermon on the Mount completely memorized.

Matthew's version of it. The longer version of Matthew, right. So yeah, maybe you enjoy reading Matthew as well because you've spent a lot of time there working on memorizing that.

Nice. Good. Well, Jane, hopefully that answers your question a little bit.

And if the listener has a question for Mike, please do get in contact with us or just comment along on Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. And we will look for your questions and be sure to consider those to ask Dr. LaCona here. Mike, thank you for introducing us to the arguments in support of Mark and Priority.

If you could tell us maybe some big scholars, I know you said the vast majority of scholars support this view. But like I asked for Matthew and Priority, what are some scholars who support Mark and Priority? Almost all of them. So, I mean, you got Craig Evans, you have Dale Allison, you know, Darrell Bach, Ben Witherington, Craig Keener, Craig Blomberg, Mark Strauss.

And I'm naming mainly the Evangelical ones here. Dale Allison is not an Evangelical, but he's a fantastic scholar. You just name about, Adela Yarbrooth Collins, you just name about anyone.

And they'll tell you that in New Testament scholarship, they think Mark wrote it. Joel Marcus at Duke. You know, it's a matter of who didn't write it, who thinks differently.

And that's a very small minority. Alright, great. Well, I look forward to our next discussion where we'll explore the challenges to Mark and Priority.

Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike LaCona, please visit reasonjesus.com, where you can find authentic answers to 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 Dr. LaCona. 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.

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