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S2E4 - Matthean Priority

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In this episode, Dr. Licona explores the idea of Matthean Priority (the hypothesis that the gospel of Matthew was written first). Who holds this hypothesis and what does it mean for other views on the gospel?

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

[Music] Hello and welcome to the Reason 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 Reason Jesus, a 501c3 non-profit organization.

My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host. On today's episode we're talking about methane priority as one of the possible solutions to the Synoptic problem. Mike, it has been the case in church history that they believed Matthew was written first.

Could you provide a little bit of background to that for us? Yeah and you know this is important because when we're talking about the Synoptic problem, the Synoptic puzzle, it's a matter of who was dependent on who. So one of the main things, the first thing we need to do is try to figure out who wrote first of the gospels. And it's interesting to note that when they commented on it, it's unanimous among the early church fathers that Matthew wrote first.

So you have figures like Uranaeus, Origen, Augustine, UCB as Clement of Alexandria. They all talk about Matthew being written first. Now of course the early church fathers aren't perfect.

They make mistakes. UCB has made one that's a bit of a howler where he talks about a letter that Jesus wrote and sent to the king, I think his name was Agabus, and communicates with him. And I mean nobody today thinks that that is an authentic letter of Jesus, but UCB has apparently did.

So these guys make mistakes. In fact, Clement of Alexandria says it's a different order. Matthew's first, but he thinks Luke wrote second, Mark wrote third, John fourth, whereas it seems like the others place it, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John.

So they're not an errant, they're not divinely inspired. They do provide us with valuable insights because they are writing a lot closer to the events than we are today. But they did make mistakes.

But it is interesting that when they talked about the order of the gospels, all of them who comment on it, say Matthew was written first. And this is the strongest argument in favor of Matthew and priority. Now I'd like to read from a short passage from St. Augustine's work called The Harmony of the Gospels, where he talks about this order.

And also, you know, if time allows here at the start of our program, the principles on which they wrote, providing some background here. So here's Augustine. Now those four evangelists whose names have gained the most remarkable circulation over the whole world and whose number has been fixed as four, he continues on, are believed to have written in the order which follows first Matthew, then Mark, thirdly Luke, lastly John.

Hence too, it would appear that these had one order determined among them with regard to the matters of their personal knowledge and their preaching of the gospel, but a different order in reference to the task of giving the written narrative. So that's interesting there about that. So here's what he has to say about Matthew.

And I want to definitely get what you know about this. He says, "Of these four, it is true. Only Matthew is reckoned to have written in the Hebrew language, the others in Greek." Could you tell us about this here where Matthew's written in the Hebrew language? Yeah, you know, there was one of the early church fathers.

I don't remember who it was, but he said he had actually seen a manuscript of a Hebrew Matthew's gospel. Now, when they talked about that, they could also be referring to Aramaic and very likely were referring to Aramaic rather than Hebrew. But yeah, so he mentions that.

And then we have another author who wrote very early. His name is Papius. And he talks about how Matthew was written in Hebrew or Aramaic.

So that's kind of interesting because we don't have anything like that today. And there's some arguments against that. Hardly any scholar today thinks that even evangelical things that Matthew that we have today was written in Hebrew.

But that was the testimony of some in the early church and appears to be even of Papius who is a very good source and our earliest source. Interesting. What does Papius have to say about the content of Matthew's gospel? Well, this comes from the fragments of Papius.

He wrote five volumes of Jesus' teachings. And they have not survived. They've been lost.

Unfortunately, it would be great to have them. They're only preserved in what are called fragments. In other words, there are just portions of that that have been preserved in the writings of other ancient authors.

So there's a compilation of those surviving fragments is what's called the fragments of Papius. And they're numbered differently. So if you get one that's put out by let's say Lightfoot or Bart Erman, you'll have one numbering system.

If you're looking at the one that's probably most popular today, the one by Michael Holmes, his version of the Apostolic Fathers, there's a little different numbering system in there. So I'm going to read from Holmes here. Okay.

And this comes from the fragments of Papius. It's fragment three. And we start at verse.

Let's see. Verses 15 and 16. So 15, he starts off with Mark.

And he says, in the elder, and he's referring to the elder John, and there's a dispute among scholars if he's referring to John, the son of Zebedee, the apostle, or if he's referring to another apostle, a minor apostle, a minor disciple of Jesus who had traveled with Jesus. You know, he had minor disciples in addition to the 12 who traveled with him. Is it referring to that? And they call him the elder John to distinguish him from John the apostle.

Most scholars think he's referring to John the apostle of the son of Zebedee. But some significant scholars think different like Richard Baucom thinks he's referring to a minor disciple. So anyway, it's still an eyewitness of Jesus.

So here's what Papius says, and the elder used to say this. So this apostle of Jesus used to say this. Mark, having become Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately everything he remembered, though not in order of the things either said or done by Christ.

For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, followed Peter, who adapted his teachings as needed, but had no intention of giving an ordered account

of the Lord's sayings, the La Guillon, sayings, teachings. Consequently, Mark did nothing wrong in writing down some things as he remembered them, for he made it his one concern not to omit anything that he heard, or to make any false statement in them. So then is the account given by Papius with respect to Mark.

But with respect to Matthew, the following is said, and he quotes Papius again. It's only one sentence. So Matthew composed the oracles, the talagia, the teachings, the sayings in the Hebrew language, and each person interpreted them as best he could.

The sayings of Jesus there for Matthew. The sayings or the teachings, yes. Now, that's interesting what he has to say about Mark.

That Mark's gospel is not an ordered account, per se, but also this ambiguous or vague phrase here about the construction of the sayings. Now, maybe this means either that Peter constructed Jesus's teachings in his own way, or maybe it means Mark constructed Peter's teachings in that way. There's vagueness about who the reference is, but very interesting point here comparing different approaches to the genre of the gospels and the implications there.

That's exactly right. As you know, I've done some study and written on this. Just a little, just a little, as a hobby.

And we can see the flexibility that ancient authors took with their sources when we look at Plutarch, Suetonius, people like that, Tacitus. And we can see the gospel authors doing it as well. They even do it with the Old Testament scriptures.

So when you, and we saw that in our previous episode, how they did that with the Greek translation of Isaiah. So, but we can see here that Papius is either saying that Mark did that with Peter, or Peter did it with Jesus, which is kind of interesting. It shows that they had no problem with this kind of flexibility in how they were reporting things.

Now, they didn't just have this blanket license to just invent things, but they did have a license to do things like what the crayat would be, pithy saints. It's like what Jesus says to Peter after he laps off the ear of the servant of the high priest. He says, those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

That is a crayat. That is a pithy saint. Jesus may have said that elsewhere in his ministry, and Mark just put it there in that context.

Or it could have happened in that context, but you had a freedom to take those craya and place them wherever you wanted. So, there was this flexibility, and Papius is talking about that right here. Nice.

Now, getting back here to the order of the gospels. So Matthew has these oracles that he's arranged. Here's what Augustine, again, from this, the harmony of the gospels has

to say about Mark.

Let's see. Mark follows him that is Matthew. Mark follows him closely and looks like his attendant and epidermizer.

For in his narrative, he gives nothing in concert with John apart from the others. By himself separately, he has little to record. In conjunction with Luke, as distinguished from the rest, he has still less.

But in concord with Matthew, he has a very large number of passages. So here we see even Augustine comparing the relationship between the gospels, all four. Now, so what sort of reasons we've looked at the external evidence, the church tradition on this, but what sort of internal evidence might there be to support Matthew in priority? Well, there's just a few more arguments.

The early church father saying Matthew is the strongest, but there's something called Mark and redundancies. So this is where you have Matthew uses one way of saying things. Luke has another way of saying it, and Mark concludes both.

So for example, Matthew at one case talks about Jesus. I forgot the exact context. It might be when he was ready to cross the lake, and he says that evening and Luke, so that's Matthew 816 and Luke 440, it says, as the sun was setting.

So Matthew says Jesus did this at that evening. Luke says that he did it as the sun was setting, but Mark 132 says that evening at sundown. So it's kind of like he can, he includes both of them.

So, and there are 17 instances of this that can be identified. So you have to ask the question, is it more likely that in these instances, Mark had, if we go Mark in priority, that in this instance, Matthew chooses to use this one portion of what Mark said and Luke chooses to do another, or is it more likely that Matthew said it one way Luke said another and Mark combined them? Interesting. So the internal evidence doesn't seem as strong for Matthew in priority compared to... No, it's somewhat subjective, of course, but it's an argument, and it's not even quite as strong as the external evidence of the early church father, saying Matthew was written first.

Another argument would be when, and this is something that's been recognized by scholars for many years, when Mark is writing and he's transitioning from one event to another, he'll say, I come to the end of it, and he says, and again, Jesus did this, and again, Jesus did this. It's kind of like to move the story along rapidly, and it's like Kai Paulin, Kai Paulin, and again, and he does this as a connector on 15 occasions, it seems. Well, those embracing Matthew in priority would say, well, if Matthew was writing first, and Matthew was using Mark, well, then you would expect at least on some of these some of these occasions, 15 occasions, that Matthew would include Kai Paulin, and

again, but it never occurs that way, and if Luke's using Mark, he doesn't use it that way either.

So it would make more sense that Mark is familiar with Matthew and perhaps Luke, then it would be the other way around. So that would be an argument for Matthew in priority. Interesting.

Now, I don't mean to open up a can of worms, but what are some of the reasons for thinking that Matthew was not written first? Oh, well, all the reasons that we would give for Mark in priority would be one. But we've mentioned Papius, right? So let me just bring him up, because I think this is a very strong argument against Matthew in priority. I read that passage of Papius that's reported by Eusebius, but let me go back to it and read it again.

So remember, he says, Matthew composed the sayings in the teachings in the Hebrew language, right? And each person interpreted them as best he could. So Matthew, he said, wrote in Hebrew or Aramaic, just as some of the early church fathers, only a couple of them mentioned that he actually wrote in Hebrew. Okay, they all mentioned he wrote first.

Okay, but only a few of them say he wrote in Hebrew. So all right, so we go back to Mark. And the elder used to say this, Mark having become Peter's interpreter wrote down accurately everything he remembered, though not in order of the things either said or done by Christ, for he neither heard the Lord nor followed, but afterward, as I said, followed Peter who adapted his teachings as needed, but had no intention of giving an ordered account of the Lord's sayings.

Okay, the Lord's sayings. So consequently, Mark did nothing wrong in writing down some of these things as he remembered them for he made it of concern, not to omit anything that he heard, or to make any false statement about them. Now, if Mark heard these things from Peter directly, then why is there such verbal agreement on so much between Matthew and Mark? If Mark is putting down at what he heard Peter say, and Matthew is writing first, then why the verbal agreement, it would seem that there is literary dependence as we talk member, let the reader understand, and the parenthetical comments and things like this, there's some sort of a literary dependence.

It would seem that either Matthew is depending on Mark as a source or Mark is depending on Matthew as a source here. Maybe they're using a common source in that case, the early church fathers are wrong. Right.

So what Matthew was written first, there's a source even earlier than Matthew on this. The point I'm making what I make here is since Papius says, and he says he's got this information from one of Jesus, an associate of one of Jesus' apostles, while that apostle was still alive in preaching, it would appear if Matthew was written first, then Mark's

primary source is not Peter, it's Matthew. And why is it that they're translated in the same Hebrew in precise Greek language? As we talked about in an earlier episode, this is just extremely implausible.

And if you want to say, well, yeah, but that's the work of the Holy Spirit just says, well, then why do you have editorial fatigue? Why do you have Matthew and Luke improving Mark's grammar and things like that? So there's all kinds of problems with that kind of an answer right there. Yeah. Yeah.

In a nutshell here, Papius would basically be wrong. Because on one of them, yeah, right, because he's saying Mark gets his material, it seems he's saying exclusively from Peter. Yeah.

But if Matthew wrote first, and there's a suggestion here that Mark had access to Matthew, that wouldn't be the case. So that's a stretched read on as a possible solution to this, this an optic problem. Who are we going to go with on this too? Are we going to go with Papius who's writing sometime in the latter part of the first, or who's getting this information sometime in the latter part of the first century from an associate of one of Jesus actual disciples who had walked with him? Or are we going to believe others who do not provide their sources and who write 100, 200 years after, you know, later, after Papius had received this information? I put my money on Papius, but still, I don't think we can undermine or just reject what all of these early church fathers are saying about Matthew writing first, and even in in Hebrew, even Papius says he wrote in Hebrew or Aramaic, we've got to be able to account for that.

And I think we can do that. Huh, interesting. Now, could it be the case that Matthew was written independently of Mark? So Matthew could have been written first, independently, entirely independently from Mark, you know, that might explain why we get sort of the historical tradition, the church tradition here, but it wouldn't explain the internal evidence, would it? Well, it wouldn't explain like the verbal similarities, the editorial fatigue that we're going to talk more on that in a little bit.

It wouldn't explain all these things that we went over in previous episodes, the five, you know, elements that seem to suggest that there's a literary dependence going on. And again, if Matthew's written first, then because of these verbal agreements and the parenthetical comment and the puzzling verbal agreements and things like that, the editorial fatigue, it would seem if Matthew's written first, then Mark is using Matthew rather than Peter. Yeah, nice.

Good. Well, could you give us maybe a few names of people that support Methian priority in the scholarship today or even over the past couple hundred years? Oh boy. Well, I think David Allen Black, who used to teach at the southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, I think he holds to Matthew in priority.

David Barrett Peabody takes that view in the book, a recent view, the recent book, *The Synoptic Problem for Views* that's edited by Stanley Porter and Brian Dyer. It's an excellent book. If you want to look at the Synoptic Problem, see the different views.

And they interact with one another, which is good. So there are some professors, I think, at Southern Evangelical Seminary who take that view. It's not a popular view.

I mean, hardly any scholars take that anymore. So that doesn't mean it's wrong. It is still a puzzle, the Synoptic Problem.

There are some decent arguments for Matthew in priority. Again, I don't think that we can dismiss the unanimous testimony of the early church fathers when they're talking about it. I don't think we can just dismiss that.

I think we've got to look for a solution that can take that testimony, that unanimous testimony into account, while also taking into account the difficulties involved. And I think we can do that. So I know we'll be talking about that in another episode, but I think we can do that.

So I just wouldn't say that the... Yeah, I'll just say that for the future episode. Good. Let me ask you this last question.

So if scholars by and large reject Matthew in priority in favor of Mark and priority, what might explain why the early church believed Matthew was written first? I don't know. I mean, there were some testimony that was going around. Unfortunately, they don't provide their sources.

Papi, it provides his source there, right? But they don't necessarily provide their... The others don't provide their sources for saying why Matthew was written first. It could be pure speculation that maybe they were arranged, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and someone took that to mean that Matthew were written in that order. But of course, then you got Clement of Alexandria who says it was Matthew, Luke, Mark, and John.

So where did he get that from? Unfortunately, we don't know, because he doesn't mention his sources. So it's just difficult to say. Interesting.

All right, let's take a look here. We've got a question from John here, who's just wondering what your reception has been about your book on gospel differences. Well, it's been mixed.

There have been some quite positive reception of it by, let's say, Michael Kruger, the president of Reformed Theological Seminary. He wrote a positive review of it in the *Westminster Theological Journal*. Robert Stein wrote a positive review of it.

And when they're... I say positive, it doesn't mean that they were like... Informed.

Exactly. But very positive, though.

Robert Stein, who taught at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, he's retired now, but he wrote a positive review of it in the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society. Trying to think, Mark Strauss, prominent New Testament scholar who teaches at Bethel Seminary out in California, he wrote a positive review of it in The Melios, a journal. J.I. Packer, very conservative evangelical theologian.

He gave me a blurb. It was unsolicited. And that blurb endorsement appears on Amazon.

In fact, he heard me lecture on it in Vancouver before the book came out. And it was like the first time I'd met him that day. And after I lectured, I sat down and while people were still clapping, he walked up to me, shook my hand and said, "I'll never forget it because I wrote it down." Here I am meeting with this iconic scholar, and I immediately put the note down on my cell phone.

He said, "Thanks, tops, agreed with every word." Now, he heard my lecture. He hadn't read the book at that point, okay? But he liked my lecture on gospel differences and accounting for them through compositional devices. So there's been some negative.

I'd say there was a negative review of it and a review of biblical literature. But this guy had an axe to grind. It was pretty obvious.

I forgot his name. I'd never heard of the guy before. But I went to his teaching.

I think he teaches at Mars Hill College and he leans toward postmodernism. I don't think he's a historian as a New Testament scholar. It's more of a theologian.

But he thought I was there to defend the reliability of Scripture. In fact, he even said that this was written for the person in the pew. It wasn't academic.

Well, it's published by Oxford University Press as an academic. They were going to publish it as a monograph and sell it for \$135. And I begged them to just pull the price down.

So they did. They made it like \$35, which it sold a lot more copies. But it's interesting.

Two months after that book, two or three months after that book, came out, Oxford approached me and said, "Hey, would you write a popular version of it, not an academic version, but a popular version and publish that with us as well?" So even Oxford recognized it wasn't meant for the person in the pew. And it's interesting. You've got one conservative evangelical out there criticizing me and saying it's undermining the reliability of the gospels, whereas this other guy criticizes me for saying, "I wrote it to defend the reliability of the gospels." So it's like, "I can't win." So it's had some mixed reviews.

But you know when I had the leading Plutarch scholar in the world, Christopher Pally, who endorsed it and offline, he said some very positive things to me about the book and said he was very encouraged in his cross-disciplinary thing and a work. When you have him saying such positive things and some others who have said positive things, I think that's pretty cool. Yeah, nice.

Great. Well, John, hopefully that can answer your question there. Mike's response clues us in to its reception in the academic world.

Mike, thank you for introducing us to the Methian Priority View, exploring the pros there. I'm sure in the forthcoming episodes, we'll explore more of the cons when we talk about Markin Priority. Oh, on that note, I want to encourage our listeners.

If you've got a question that you'd like Dr. Lacona to answer, please feel free to submit them our way. One of the best ways to do that is to follow Mike on Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube and just submit your questions there. We look at some questions that pop up in the comments, so we're happy to put those here when we've got the opportunity on the podcast.

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