

# OpenTheo

## S2E2 - Observations of the Synoptic Problem | Part 1

March 6, 2019



### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In this episode, Dr. Licona discusses some of the inferences one can make from looking at the writing style of the synoptic gospels. What types of observations are there to suggest a relationship between them?

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. He's also 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 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host. On today's episode, we're looking at observations in the synoptic gospels that suggest that a relationship exists between them.

And so we've got five categories here. And the first one that we'll start off with, Mike, is on verbal agreement. What does that mean that there's verbal agreement in the synoptic gospels? Okay, well, as we mentioned in the last episode, last week, there was a... You know, if we look at two accounts, you and I are in a restaurant, and a couple is at the table next to us, and they begin arguing in Spanish, and then the intensifies, they stand up, they're screaming at each other, the woman takes up a glass and smashes it on the guy's cheek and, you know, whatever.

And they come and they arrest her, they attend, the EMTs attend to his wound, and the police officer asks us to write an account. We're going to write the account, we're going to describe the details. You and I were detail-oriented, we're going to describe it pretty accurately, I think, and pretty similar, but we're two different people.

And we're, you know, if we're completely independent and not copying off of one another, they're going to be two different, you know, two different accounts. There's not going to be a lot of verbal similarity in this, but when we come to the gospels, we read some things, some different accounts, and we see that in many cases it's virtually word for word on a significant amount of text. And then so when we see that, especially when we consider the matter of translation in there as well, but when we see that verbal agreement, it really grabs our attention.

And you say that there are many examples here. I'm hoping in this episode we might be able to dive in and open up the text. I've got my Bible here.

Maybe for our listeners, they might pause this and quickly go get their Bible or look things up online here. But what's a good example here of this word for word agreement? Yeah, well, there's Jesus talking about, you know, in both Matthew and Luke. I'll give you the references.

So any of our listeners want to write them down. Matthew chapter 12 verses 41 and 42. And the parallel text is Luke chapter 11 verses 31 and 32.

So Matthew 12, 41 and 42, Luke 11, 31 and 32. And this is where Jesus says, let me read it to you in Matthew. It says, "The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

The queen of the south will rise up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon and behold, something greater than Solomon is here." Now that's how it reads in Matthew. In Luke, there are just a few differences. This is a total of, I think, 61 words, 61 and 62 words.

I think, something like that. So what we have here, the difference at Luke, Luke starts up with the queen of the south and then talks about the men of Nineveh whereas Matthew starts up with the men of Nineveh and then transitions to the queen of the south. So if we are to invert one of those, let's say we invert Luke's order so that it reads the men of Nineveh verse and the queen of the south, it's really interesting.

The word-for-word agreement here is stunning. So the difference being in Matthew, Jesus says the queen of the south will rise up with this generation whereas Luke says the queen of the south will rise up with the men of this generation. So it's a little bit different

there.

This generation versus the men of this generation and then it says, rise up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it whereas Luke says this generation at the judgment and condemn them because it's talking about them is the pronoun modifying the men of whereas it is the pronoun modifying this in Matthew. So that's like the only differences between these. That's one example.

It's just so many words that are similar here. You know, you just don't recall an event like this with that verbatim agreement especially when you consider that Greek is in it. Jesus is translating, or I'm sorry, Jesus is speaking in Aramaic and the gospel authors are writing in Greek not only would you have this verbatim recollection decades later but you have that verbatim recollection after it has been translated from Aramaic into Greek.

Right. So just to clarify here, when we see this agreement in English, we're not saying that the English editors or translators are smoothing out these Greek differences through translation. What you're suggesting here is that this is in the Greek word for word the way it appears in Matthew and Luke with just a couple minor changes.

That's correct. That's a good clarification. Yes.

Okay. Wow. And you said that there are some other examples.

Maybe we could go through another one. Sure. So this is when John DeBaptis is talking and some of the Jewish leaders show up.

And so for the listeners, let me give you the references here. Matthew chapter three verses seven through ten and Luke chapter three verses seven through nine. Okay.

Now the only differences here, let me read the text here. So this is what Matthew says. "Brewed of vipers." Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? "Therefore produce fruit worthy of repentance and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father, for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.' And now the axe is laid at the root of the trees.

Therefore every tree not producing good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." That's Matthew's version. When you come to Luke, it is verbatim again except for, I believe it's three instances. So John says, "Therefore produce fruit worthy of repentance and their fruit worthy is singular in Matthew, but it's plural in Luke." You can't tell that in English for us because fruit, the way we use it could mean singular or plural.

Pick the fruit off the tree. My wife goes to the grocery store, let's say, and she gets some fruit. Well, that's not just one apple.

To use our maybe an example in English, sheep. One sheep, three sheep. Exactly.

But in Greek you could tell. So one difference is Matthew has fruit worthy in the singular. Luke has fruit worthy in the plural.

Luke has John about to say, "And do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father, whereas Matthew has John say, and do not think to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. So is it think or begin? One of them has substituted a word in there. It's different." And then a third difference is toward the end, John says, "And now the axe is laid at the root of the trees in Matthew, but in Luke's version he inserts the Greek word, I think it's Kai in there where he says, "And even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees." So he puts one more word in there.

So the difference is Matthew, you've got sixty three words. Luke, you have sixty four words. The additional one is the word even.

And the only other difference, you have one substitution begin versus think, and then you have a singular versus a plural. Otherwise they are verbatim, word for word. And again, you just don't have this by accident.

Alright, Mike, so what you're suggesting here is that there's verbal agreement between these two gospels. And would that suggest a literary relationship that maybe Luke is copying directly from Matthew, or is there some other possible solution? Yeah, well there's a number of possibilities here. At this point it could be a literary dependence, or it could be they are depending on the same oral tradition.

Since we're talking Matthew and Luke here, it could be oral tradition, it could be written tradition, hard to tell in this particular scenario. A number of scholars have posited the existence of a hypothetical document, and we'll get into that in a later episode. But maybe you could just briefly tell us about the notion of Q. Well, Q is there's nothing to, you know, someone mentions a scholar mentions the Q document or the Q source.

It's not a matter of, well, it's not like the Gospel of Thomas, or that this is some sort of document or source that contradicts the gospels. It's nothing to feel threatened over. Q is this.

And we'll be talking more, but like you said about this later on. But when we find material content that is so similar, that it seems like there's some sort of dependence, and it appears in Matthew and in Luke, but it's not in Mark, then they say that either Luke used Matthew as a source, or Matthew used Luke as a source, or they both had access to the same source. It could be oral or written.

So if it's access to a same source that's no longer with us, that we no longer have, what do you call that? Well, the German word for source is quella, so they just abbreviate quella as Q. It's just like saying X, you know, so that's our source, hypothetical source from which Matthew and Luke use. X source sounds like it'd be much cooler to say than

Q source. X source.

I don't know. There's Q and James Bond, right? Oh, that's right. There you go.

All right, so we've got verbal agreement here between the synoptic gospels. Now, when we look at the synoptics, we do see somewhat of a chronological order, a similar order between some of those events. I take it.

That's part of the the synoptic problem here as well. It is. How do you explain the order? Now, you said chronological order, and of course, you know, you're going to find the person's birth before you find their death, right? Yeah.

Typically speaking, things are going to progress chronologically, you know, birth, child, beginning of adulthood, you know, on what goes on as they progress through death, things like that. But in many cases, like when we're into gospels, there are times when things don't appear in a chronological order. They're in a thematic order or just any kind of an arbitrary order, no order.

But when we find that same order like there are times when there are multiple events that are listed in the same order throughout the synoptics, but there's not a chronological tie or theme throughout them, when we see that, it would, at one point, there's like 11 events that appear in all three of the synoptics. And in the same order, right? These 11 events. Same order, even though there may not necessarily be a chronological or it might even be, you know, something at one point, and then it might go back a little bit chronologically and then come forward again.

You know, so if we find that same order in two or three of them, and it's consistent throughout so many, like a dozen of them or so, you're going to say that there is some sort of dependence and it's probably not an oral tradition that we're talking about here. It's probably a literary tradition, a literary dependence that's going on. Are we able to go through maybe what those events are so people can get a gist of how the synoptics might be laid out? Sure.

So these appear in almost all three. Most of them are in all three, I'll note where they don't. So, for example, here's 11 of them in a row.

Number one, you got Peter's confession. Jesus, who do you think that I am? You're the Messiah, the Son of God. Number two, Jesus predicts his death in his resurrection.

Number three, Jesus teaches on discipleship. Number four, you come to the transfiguration. All four of these are in chronological order.

Number five, Jesus talks about the coming of Elijah, and that's John the Baptist. Well, that's in Matthew and Mark, it doesn't appear in Luke. And then you've got Jesus heals a demon-possessed boy.

Then Jesus predicts his death again. Then Jesus offers his thoughts on paying the temple tax. That's number eight.

And then you have the question where Jesus addresses to his disciples, which one of them is the greatest. Who's the greatest? That's nine, ten. You've got an anonymous exorcist.

What do we do with this person? He's not really following us. That's in Mark and Luke, Matthew doesn't mention it. And then in 11, you've got dealing with one sin.

How do we do this? And Luke locates us elsewhere, but Matthew and Mark locates it here. So by and large, you've got these 11 different events that for the most part appear in the same order in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And that shows some sort of dependence going on, literary dependence.

Okay, so we've got verbal agreement here. We've got similar word order. Now, this third observation is really an intriguing one.

Well, the second one is similar order of the events. Oh, sorry. Similar order of the events.

This third one here is an intriguing one because it's not so much that there are these things in common, like the first two points. And this third one is something that a lot of people miss because we just read the Gospels and sort of short bits here and there. Yeah, this third observation, Kurt, is editorial fatigue.

And this has been noticed by scholars for some time. And you really won't see these things unless you spend a ton of time in the Gospels. And even then you probably miss them.

But when you see it, it's pretty interesting. There are numerous examples of editorial fatigue that have been given over the years. A lot of them I don't find very convincing.

But there are a couple of them that I think are very interesting. One of those is the parable of the talents. And that appears in both Matthew and Luke.

Let me give references for our listeners here if they want to write these down and look at on their own time. So the first one is Matthew chapter 25 verses 14 through 30. And the second, the other parallel is Luke chapter 19 verses 11 through 27.

What we have with the parable of the talents is, okay, so you have a man, he's getting ready to go out of town and I'll approach this from Matthew's version first. So Matthew, this man's getting ready to go out of town. He calls three of his servants in and he says, "Look, I'm going out of town.

I'm going to give you some money here. I want you to invest it." So he gives five talents. That was a Roman silver coin.

It could be worth a lot of money. Especially today. Exactly.

So he gives five talents to the one servant and to a second servant he gives two talents and to a third servant he gives one talent. It goes away. Then when he comes back, he calls his three servants in.

And the first servant said, "Look, Master, the five talents you've given me. They have earned five more." So he said, "Great." So he's got ten talents, right? This is great. Well done, good and faithful servant.

He calls in the second one. He says, "Lord, your two talents have earned two more." Well done, good and faithful servant. And then the third one comes in, "I know you're a difficult man, sir, and I was afraid of you, so I took this one talent you gave me.

I buried it. Here it is, you're one talent." And he said, "You wicked servant. You could have invested this and at least gotten interest.

Take the talent away from him and give it to the one who has ten." Alright, so that's Matthew's version. When you come to Luke's version, there's some differences. First of all, it's not three servants, but he calls in ten servants.

Okay? And he doesn't give like one, two and five talents. He gives a minor, not a talent, a minor to each of them, not one, two or five, but he gives to each of the ten one minor. So we see three differences here already.

Ten servants rather than three, and he gives each of them one minor rather than different for each of them. And it's a minor rather than a talent. You see, wait a minute, Mike.

Jesus could have told the same parable, these parables on different occasions. It's just a different version of the same thing. Exactly.

You're right, absolutely right. It's not even necessarily the same context here in Luke. So that's not a problem so far.

Just follow me here, okay? So the guy comes back after going on a trip and he calls in the first servant and he says, "Look, your minor has made ten more." And then he calls in the second and he says, "Your minor has made five more." And then he calls in the other. It's not like another or the third, it's the other. It's what it has in Greek.

Implying only three. Implying only three. Now that is not extremely impressive, but it is suggestive here that he's familiar with another version of this parable where there's only three servants.

Because then he stops at the other. It's the first, the second, and the other. Nothing is made of the mention is made of the other seven.

And what's really interesting, he comes to the other and he says, "Lord, I know you're a difficult man." And so I wrapped it in this handkerchief and here is your minor. And he says, "You wicked servant, you know, you could have invested this and got interest. Take that servant, or take that minor away from that guy and give it to the one who has eleven." No, not eleven.

He says, "Give it to the one who has ten, minus." Well, which one has ten, minus? None of them. Because the first guy earned ten, so he's got eleven. The one that has ten is the one in Matthew's account who had five and earned five more.

So there's not good math that's going on here on Luke's part. And so it seems like there's one of two things that are occurring, that is occurring. The first is that Jesus could have told these two different parables or whatever.

And Luke is familiar with both. He's kind of cross pollinating the details and they're getting kind of confused here between the two. Or it could be that Luke has redacted.

He has edited this parable or his source has redacted it, edited it. And Luke is familiar with Matthew's version. There's still some cross pollinating, some confusion that's going on here with the details.

In either sense, Luke seems as though he is aware of the version that's mentioned by Matthew. This is editorial fatigue. Interesting.

Unfortunately, that's all the time we have to cover on today's episode. But next week we'll keep looking at these other observations. Now, like I had said on last week's episode, we are beginning to solicit questions from our listeners.

And this next question comes from Corey, who's wondering about the ending of Mark. Corey writes in, "Since some of the earliest manuscripts do not contain Mark 16, 9 to 20, but most translations included parenthetically, should we treat that passage or those verses as inspired? Should this passage be included in preaching, teaching and apologetics?" Good question. So, modern English translations do put, as Corey has said, puts verses 9 through 16, chapter 16 in brackets, sometimes they're even italicized.

And there's usually a footnote that says these verses are not found in the earliest and best, most reliable manuscripts that we have, and that's absolutely true. This is the text where it says that you can pick up poison to snakes and drink poison, and you'll be okay. Okay, kind of what they do in West Virginia.

And so this is regarded by probably 99.9% of New Testament scholars today, even conservatives, as a spurious text that was not part of the original. And various reasons for that, but our best manuscripts do not have these verses. They're not mentioned until a couple centuries later.



So that means that the text that we have of Mark, probably stopped at chapter 16, verse 8, where it says, after the angel tells the women that Jesus is not here, he has been raised. Now go tell the disciples in Peter that he has gone ahead of you into Galilee, and there you will see him just as he told you. And he told them that's what would happen in chapter 14, verse 28.

And then it says the women, out of fear and trembling, ran away and said nothing to no one. And that's how it stops. So it's really weird what's going on there.

And scholars, there's no agreement, a number of scholars, a minority, but a significant minority, say that either Mark's ending was lost or he may have intended to continue here, but he was unable to maybe imprisonment, sickness, or death. The majority would say that Mark did intend for him to end the gospel at verse 8, but there is no agreement whatsoever, not even a wide agreement on why he ended it here. It goes from, okay, well, this was an oral performance, and it's left here because this could be performed by any number of people orally, and they were to add their account of the resurrection appearance to them at the end, or it could be, well, you know, Matthew and John mentioned the appearance to the women, and you don't want women as witnesses.

And so you just have, you know, they're going to change it to whoever male witnesses there. Or some have said, well, yeah, the women said nothing to no one, and that means our earliest gospel doesn't report the resurrection appearances, so the resurrection appearances were invented later on. The empty tomb tradition was entirely independent of the appearances, and that's just bunk.

I mean, you've got Paul mentioning the appearances, and he's writing in 1 Corinthians 15, you know, perhaps as much as a decade or more before Mark wrote. Now, it could be that Mark wrote before Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, but I mean, we don't know, but for those who think that Mark is dated sometime after 55, after the year 55, well, then they got to think that, you know, the earliest here is Paul writes about the appearances, and he's talking about the resurrection in a bodily physical way throughout his letters, and so he knows of a physical resurrection. That implies an empty grave of some sort.

Plus Mark even mentions the appearance. Jesus predicted that they will see him in chapter 14, verse 28. And if the women didn't tell anyone, then how does Mark know about it? And then you look at the same kind of grammatical structure in Mark chapter 1, verse 44, where Jesus tells a man whom he had healed of leprosy to go back and show himself to the priest, and say nothing to no one along, you know, say nothing to no one, same grammatical structure there, and so what it's basically saying is saying nothing to no one along the way.

So there's no reason to think that Mark doesn't know about the appearances. We just don't know why it ends. So the final part of the question of Corey here is, should we use Mark chapter 16, verses 9 through 20 in our preaching? And I would say no, I would

avoid that.

I don't think it is part of the original Mark. Hardly any scholar would say it's part of the original Mark. I don't think that this should play a part in our preaching.

It doesn't seem to be part of the original apostolic preaching. It's just something invented to put in there in order to make an ending. Great.

I mean, maybe it could be part of our preaching if we're talking about additions to the New Testament later additions. Yeah, I wouldn't preach from it though, as though it's an inspired word. Yes.

And that we should go picking up poison to snakes and drinking poison. Yeah. Right.

I'd discourage you from doing that. Yeah. Great.

Well, Mike, thank you for that answer and for clueing us in here about these initial observations that there exists a relationship between the synoptic gospels. I'd like to look forward to learning more next week. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, please visit [RisenJesus.com](http://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 some really great resources like free ebooks, videos of debates, mics, debates and lectures, or simply read some articles that he's written. 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 RisenJesus podcast, a ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona.

[Music]