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S2E3 - Observations of the Synoptic Problem | Part 2

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In this episode, Dr. Licona continues discussing some of the observations we see from looking at the writing style of the synoptic gospels (such as editorial fatigue and parenthetical remarks) and how these things 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>

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Transcript

[music] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Michael Lacona. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University, and he is a frequent speaker on university campuses, churches, retreats, 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 continue exploring the five observations that suggest a relationship exists between the synoptic gospels. And if you're just joining us for this season, we're devoting season two to the synoptic problem, which explores the relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Mike, thanks for coming on the show here today. Now, last week we looked over the first three observations that we had, and I just want to spend a moment or two here to review those. So the first observation we make is that there's verbal agreement between them.

What is verbal agreement? Well, if we're looking at the gospels as entirely independent,

written entirely independently of one another, then we're going to expect differences in the way the things that matter are reported. That's not to say that they're going to be discrepancies or contradictions. It's just they're going to use different words and doing it, just like if you and I went to the same event, like I think I gave the example last week, you and I were at dinner in Chicago and a couple next to a start to argue.

And then it erupts into a full-blown yelling match, and the woman takes a glass and slams it on the guy's face in big gas. And then later the police officer asked us to describe in our own words what happened. Our words aren't going to, there's not going to be a verbal similar, there's going to be some similarities, but it's not going to be a word for word, of course, right? Like a verbatim, no way.

And especially if we're talking about, if we're translating, let's say we heard, we're reproducing, recalling the conversation between the couple, as they're arguing, they're speaking in Spanish, and let's say we understand Spanish and we translate it to English. There's still not going to be this word-for-word similarity in this, you know, lengthy dialogue between the two of them. We're going to be translating translation.

Anybody who knows another language understands that when you translate, you're going to translate it a little bit differently, just like when we find English translations of the Greek New Testament, like the New American Standard Bible and the English Standard Version, they both are functional equivalent, literal translations, and yet when you read what they translate, they're differences. It's not a word-for-word in many cases. So when we come across texts between Matthew Mark or Mark and Luke or Matthew Mark and Luke, and it's verbatim almost, we know that there's some sort of dependence going on.

They're using a source. Either they're using one of the Gospels or more of the Gospels or using one of the other Gospels as a source, or they're using a common source. And we see this in things such as Jesus talking about the men of Nineveh and the Queen of the South.

We see it in the words of John the Baptist when he's talking about the coming judgment, the acts as laid at the roots and things like that. So we see these precise word-for-word verbatim recollections of what's going on that seem to suggest that there's some sort of a literary dependence going on. Secondly, we looked at a similar order that there are many, many events that appear in the three synoptics all in the same order with maybe an exception or two here, despite the fact that there's no chronological link.

And that similar order structure also suggests some sort of relationship. Maybe they've got the same idea for the ordering of these events. Exactly.

So if we're recalling events and there's no chronological ties to them, let's say, why are they going to be arranged in the same order? Now, of course, throughout a person's life,

if you're writing a biography, their birth is going to come prior to their death. And of course, Jesus is baptism by John the Baptist is going to come prior to his final week, Palm Sunday, the temple cleansing, things like this. But when you have numerous events that there's really no chronological sense to them, and yet they're listed all in the same chronological order, multiple events, like 11 in a row.

Well, then that seems to suggest that there's some sort of literary dependence here or dependence on some other source. Now, we lastly covered editorial fatigue and intriguing observation. And we had a couple examples there.

And since our last time together, you've thought of another example that you wanted to share of editorial fatigue. Yeah. So like, for example, we talked about the parable of the talents, which appears in Matthew, whereas it's the parable, the minas in Luke.

And while certainly we can expect that Jesus would have told the same parable on different occasions and could even mix it up and change some of the details to adapt it to his audience. No problem with that. But in this case, it seems that there are clues in Luke's version that strongly suggest that he is familiar either with Matthew, or he's familiar with the same parable that Matthew records, because Luke's math is off.

Matthew, you've got the one guy, the one servant, he had five talents and he earned five more, so he's got ten, right? And so the king orders that the one talent taken away from the lazy guy who buried it be given to the guy with ten talents. Well, in Luke's version, the guy that earned the most had one minor and he earned ten more, which makes eleven. So at the end, the guy says, take the minor away from that lazy guy and give it to the one who has ten minas.

Well, in that parable, no one has ten minas. The guy has eleven. The one that has ten is in Matthew's gospel.

So that's one of the two things that would suggest that there's some sort of dependence, a common source or that. Luke is familiar with either Matthew's source or Matthew himself, what Matthew has written. The other one I think is pretty interesting too.

So when you go to Mark chapter nine verses 33 through 42, you've got the disciples who have been out and they have been talking about who's the greatest. Okay. Who is the greatest? And you have Jesus who takes a child and sets it before him and he says, look, you've got to be converted.

You've got to become like children or you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. You've got to humble yourself as this child. You receive this one, this child, in my name you receive me.

And then he says, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to stumble, it would be better if you put a millstone around the guy's neck and he'd be

drowned in the sea. Okay. Then you cause one of these little ones to stumble.

Well, it's interesting when you look, you also have the same text. That's in Mark or Matthew, but you also have the same thing that's going on in Mark. But when you come to Luke, it's interesting.

You have Jesus who is, you know, they're arguing with one another, who's the greatest. Jesus knows what they're thinking. So he takes this child, he stands the child by his side and he says, you know, whoever receives his child, my name receives me.

If you receive me, you receive the one who sent me, the one who's least among you is the greatest. But that's pretty, that's where it stops. That's chapter nine.

We don't get the second part of it until you jump down to chapter 17. And it comes right on the heels of chapter 16, where you've got the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus is in Abraham's bosom, the rich man in hell.

It's, I think it's fascinating. And let me see if I can read it to you just with chapter 17 verse one. And Jesus said to his disciples, temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come.

It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Now, if you've read Matthew and Mark on this, you're thinking, well, yeah, no problem. What's the problem here? Well, the problem is if you're reading Luke, if you're Luke's original audience, Theophilus, you might be thinking, what little ones? There's no little ones that's been mentioned here.

There's no little ones that's been mentioned for several chapters. So what little ones? Well, it's obvious here that what Luke has done is he has displaced this portion of the pericope, the story of the Lord. The story that goes back to Luke chapter nine.

He's taken this latter part, displaced it and transplanted it at the beginning of chapter 17. And because he wants to couple it with the certain thought and just have it rather than talking about children, anyone who causes another one who is a believer to stumble. Except Luke does not take out one of these little ones, which he should have because he's redacting Jesus' words here and given it an interpretation, extended it not only to apply to children, but also to any believer.

And in doing so, he doesn't clean it up. It's called editorial fatigue. Now, it's interesting.

All of this has some implications for the matter of divine inspiration, which we'll get to in a later episode, but I think this is kind of interesting. So, to summarize here, what we have here is in Luke, we have him take a certain portion of something from Matthew and it's earlier in his gospel. And a little later, or a lot later even, you come along and Luke's

gospel and you see all of a sudden these children just pop out of nowhere.

That's right. It wouldn't make sense. It's just what children? You haven't mentioned any children here.

Wait, there have been children all along this whole time? Yeah. Right, right. Okay.

Good. So that's editorial fatigue. And now, let's move along to parenthetical remarks.

Maybe we can go through a few examples here of what parenthetical remarks clue us into some sort of relationship between this and optics. Yeah. Let's see if I could think of an English equivalent on the spot here, but it's as though you pause to think of something.

So, I might be talking and saying, "All right, we're getting a lot of rain here in Atlanta. We don't get snow here often, but we got so much rain here in the last few days that parenthetical comment, we don't get much snow here." If I'm recording those, writing those words down, and then later on, someone is saying the same thing verbatim and saying, "You know, we're getting a lot of rain here in Atlanta. A rain here.

You know, we don't get much snow here in Atlanta. We're getting a whole lot of rain here." Well, then there seems to be some sort of a, someone's copying the other sorts. So, we've got some of this.

Would that be the same case if, so let's say you said something like, "The lake water is so high right now. We don't get all, because of the rain, we don't get a lot of snow here." So, there could be sort of different bookends, but it's the same parenthetical remark. Is that right? That's right.

That's exactly right. Yeah. Okay.

Yeah. I just wanted to clarify. Yeah.

So, like, here's a couple of examples. I'll give you some, I'll save the best one for last here. But, so for example, when Jesus is healed into paralytic in Mark chapter 2, it says, "But, and this appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, almost verbatim, but the parenthetical statement is certainly there." He says, "But that you may know that the son of..." Remember, he tells the guy, "Your sins are forgiven, and then the Jewish leaders there are saying, "Well, gosh, that's blasphemy.

Only God can forgive sins." And then Jesus says, "Well, which is easier to say, "Arise up and walk, or that your sins are forgiven, but that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," he said to the paralytic. "Take up your bed and walk." All right. That's interesting.

That little pause there, it's like a little ellipses, so that you may know that the Son of God

has forgiveness of sins," he says to the paralytic. Get up and walk. So that's in all three gospels, which shows that there's some sort of dependence on either one or more of the gospels, depending on another, or there's a common source that all three are using here.

There's some sort of dependence. Again, this is part of the synoptic. By common source, you don't necessarily mean here that there's a pre-synoptic gospel existing out there, but maybe part of the oral tradition, the teachings of the apostles.

Yeah, right now we're just saying at this point in our discussion of the synoptic gospels, the synoptic problem, we're just saying that there is some sort of a relationship here between the gospels between one another or between them and another source be that source written or oral. That's what we're saying. Right, it just seems very unlikely, given this example and other things we've talked about, for these three gospels to all be exhaustively independent of each other.

That's right. You can't just say that they're all eyewitnesses or heard from an eyewitness in all written on their own. There's some relationship here that's going on.

That's right. That's right. Maybe we can go through a few other examples of the parenthetical remarks.

All right, so there's another one where the story of Jesus casting out demons from Legion, right, because there were many of them and he cast them out. They go into the swine that run down the hill and are drowned in the sea. So you've got in Mark and Luke, you've got the demon sees Jesus falls at his feet and says, "What are we to do with something like it? What are we to do with you? Please do not torment us." And then the next statement is, "For Jesus was saying to him, 'Evil Spirit, come out of the man.'" Now, you would think if you were narrating this, it would be more natural that the man with the evil spirits comes and falls down before Jesus and Jesus saying, "Come out of that man.

Come out of that man. Come out of that man." And then Legion says, "Please do not torment us at this point." But it's like you put the cart before the horse here. He falls at his feet and says, "Please do not torment us for Jesus was saying to him.

The evil spirit come out of that man." And that's the way it appears in both Mark and Luke. Another example is when Jesus is before Pilate, and this is in Matthew and Mark, and it says, "Pilate says, 'Who do you want for me to release to you? Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ, the next statement for Pilate knew that it was because of envy that they had delivered him over.'" That's interesting. Why wouldn't that have been said that last part said beforehand? It's a little unique that it would come afterward, but both Matthew and Mark have it that way, which suggests, literary or dependence on the same source.

But here's the one I think is the most interesting one. And this is at Jesus' Olivet Discourse. It's after he's done the temple cleansing in the triumphal entry, the temple cleansing.

It's his last week, and they've passed on the way out from the temple. They've passed in the buildings of the temple, and as disciples say, "These are wonderful, beautiful buildings in Jesus saying, "Hey, there's going to come a time when not a single stone is going to be left upon another." Later on, they're on the Mount of Olives, and the disciples come to him and say, "Hey, one of these things is going to be." And so Jesus starts to talk about these things, and when these things are going to happen, and then he ends up saying, "Let's see if I pull that up here." Okay, so like in Mark 13 verse 14, he says, "But when you see the abomination of desolation, standing where it should not be, let the reader understand, then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains." Now, what does that mean? Let the reader understand. Well, it's probably you've got Mark here, which is supposed to, back then you read these biographies publicly as a matter of instruction and entertainment, and you'd read it at night.

They didn't have television back then, you know? So you could read it at night, you could read it in a worship service, but that little statement in there, okay, when you see the abomination of desolation, stand it where it should not be, let the reader understand, then those who are in Judea must flee to mountains. Now that in itself is interesting. Now, when you take it and you go to Matthew 24 verses 15 and 16, you find something very interesting.

Jesus says, "Therefore, when you see the abomination of desolation, which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place, let the reader understand, then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains." What's interesting about this, Kurt, is because not only does this show some kind of dependence of the same source, but because this has let the reader understand, it shows that there's a dependence on a written source here, not an oral source. So there is some sort of a literary dependence that is going on here between the Gospels. Yeah, because this wouldn't just be heard, spoken.

This is the author of the Gospel making a remark here, but the reader of this text understand, and you see that happened twice. So my initial clarifying question was that maybe there are different contexts when or different phrasings when you receive the parenthetical remark, but in these four examples, we even have the similar wording and the identical parenthetical remark. That's exactly right.

So all the more so reason for us to say, "Oh, huh." Yeah, I mean, this is crystal clear. And you put all this together. I know we still have one more to discuss, but you put all this together, and it becomes very clear that there's some sort of a dependence, a relationship between these Gospels.

Either that or you've got to posit that they're using another source that we no longer have, which could be the case as well, or could be both going on here, which we'll talk a little bit more later. But so the process of divine inspiration involved this, the Gospel authors using sources. Yeah, great.

Let's go on to our final observation here, which you've branched off into its own category away from verbal agreement, but there's puzzling verbal agreement. Yeah, this is interesting. So at the beginning of all three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, or especially right in the first couple of verses in Mark, but a little bit later on in Matthew and Luke, it's talking about how Isaiah the prophet said, "A voice of one crying into wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Now, this is verbatim in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but here's what makes this a puzzling verbal agreement.

What are they, which version of Isaiah are they quoting? It's not the way it reads in the Hebrew. The Hebrew reads, "make straight in the desert a highway for our God." And when you read the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew, it says, "make straight the paths of our God." So where are they getting this from that Isaiah says, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." We don't have that in any other, we don't have it in the Septuagint, we don't have it in the Hebrew, but all three synoptic Gospels have it that way, which either suggests that they were using another Greek text, maybe another version of the Septuagint that we no longer have, or one of them just translated the Hebrew that way, or is paraphrasing the Hebrew or the Septuagint, and the others are copying from it. It would seem-- They're using that person as a source.

It would seem very improbable for all three of them to separately paraphrase identically. Exactly. Which, you know, this is interesting for-- This is something for King James Version only people to take note of, because we can see that either there was another version of the Septuagint or another version of a translation, or an ability to paraphrase here that the biblical author is doing.

Well, which version is divinely inspired? Is it the Septuagint? Is it the Hebrew, or is it this version, or is it both of them? Or is it a matter of, you know what, maybe we make too much out of the different translations. If the different biblical authors, some of which new Jesus it would seem, or pass it along traditions from Jesus, if these folks felt free to paraphrase and not stay word for word and make an issue of it out of the Hebrew, then that can serve as an example to us moderns, that the translation, as long as it is providing an essentially faithful representation of what the original said, we're good with that. You know, to accuse others, because it doesn't have the exact wording as the King James Version in the modern translations, is really, I think, it misses the point of what the ancient authors were doing.

They felt a freedom to do things that King James Version only people scold modern translations for doing. Interesting. So when we look at these five observations, verbal

agreement, similar order, editorial fatigue, parenthetical remarks, and the puzzling verbal agreement, we really come away with thinking, in some cases there's certainly a literary relationship, in other cases there's a source relationship, some type of source, whether it's a document or oral tradition, something like that, or an eyewitness, you know, as a source, but there's some relationship here between these three gospels.

That's right. And it's the synoptic problem, or the synoptic puzzle, is trying to figure out what that relationship is. And it's difficult, and there is no consensus among scholars on what's going on, but it is a very interesting exercise to try to figure out what is going on.

And we can talk about the arguments for each, and why they hold things, and what the majority holds today. Yeah, and I'm looking forward to that in future episodes. Before I let you go, let's take a question from one of our viewers here.

Steve asks, "How would you define an erancy, and why is that such an important doctrine in evangelical discussions?" Well, I would, there's different ways, of course, to define the doctrine of biblical and erancy. The most conservative definition probably is the Chicago statement on biblical and erancy, which was crafted by Norman Geisler, R.C. Sproul, and J.I. Packer. And it's, I think, six pages long to say, "Here's what an erancy is, here's what it isn't." And yet even the three guys don't agree with one another on certain things.

So, for example, Norman Geisler says that interpreting Genesis 1 in view of theistic evolution or that would allow theistic evolution, you can't do that. You can't believe in theistic evolution and believe the Bibles in erot. Whereas J.I. Packer says that Genesis 1 doesn't say anything about the mode of creation or theistic evolution one way or the other.

So even the framers, so-called framers of the Chicago statement don't agree on that, even after six pages of what an erancy is and what it isn't. Myself, I prefer the Lausanne Covenant, L-A-U-S-A-N-N-E, the Lausanne Covenant, which was put together around the same time, maybe a little bit before the Chicago statement. You've got people like Billy Graham, John Stott, and nearly 3,000 people who signed that.

And that just basically says the Bible is truthful. It's without any error in all that it affirms and all that it teaches. And that's a little more vague, I suppose you could say.

But I think that we can be more truthful to things like that in terms of what we can allow, especially when we start to consider things like literary devices, compositional devices, the way ancient literature was written. So yeah, it'd be interesting to talk about an erancy, but I like that definition of an erancy. It's something I can feel comfortable affirming, that it's without error and all that it affirms.

Does that mean that I think there are any errors in the minor details? Well, I don't know. I

mean, as I said in my debate with Bartirman a year ago on historical reliability of the Gospels, I could name a dozen and a half items in the Gospels that are reasonable candidates for being errors. I'm not saying they are, but they could be.

People try to explain them. Just because you have a possible explanation doesn't mean that that's what happened. So I think if we're being honest, we've got to say, "Hey, these may or may not be errors.

Why does it matter so much to American evangelicals?" I think just because, you know, back in the '70s there was this real strong move toward a liberal theology and the conservatives fought back. And they probably, you know, they could have, they may have gone too far on the other side in order to resist that. And so that just became almost in the minds of some.

In fact, Norman Geiser calls biblical an erancy a fundamental doctrine. But then you've got people like William Lane Craig who would say, "No, it's a tertiary doctrine." And Gary Habermas would also say it's a tertiary doctrine, I think. I know he wouldn't say it's a fundamental doctrine.

So, yeah, I don't think it should be a fundamental doctrine. Great. Well, thank you for answering that Steve's question there on an erancy.

And for providing us a couple more fresh examples of the observations suggesting a literary or a some type of relationship between the synoptic gospels. 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 questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the gospels. There you can check out free resources like ebooks, articles, audio or video materials, such as Mike's debates or even lectures.

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