

Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels, Part 1

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Proverbs 18:17—The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.

Our goals for this evening

To understand the challenge posed by the claim that the writers of the Gospels make repeated, significant historical errors.

To examine, from an historical point of view, several of the most common historical objections raised against the Gospels.

To assess the case for the genuineness and substantial historicity of the Gospels in the light of our investigation.

The skeptical argument in outline

1. If the Gospels were trustworthy historical documents, they would not contain numerous serious historical errors.
2. The Gospels contain numerous serious historical errors.

Therefore,

3. The Gospels are not trustworthy historical documents.

The critical claim here is premise 2.

The importance of Mark

1. The Gospel of Mark was the first of the four Gospels to be written, and it was used by the authors of Matthew and Luke.
2. Mark contains serious errors in Palestinian geography, Jewish culture, and Jewish law.

Therefore,

3. Mark was not written by someone who knew at first hand about Jesus' life and ministry.
4. If the author of "Matthew" had been a disciple of Jesus, he would not have used such a defective source.

Therefore,

5. The author of “Matthew” was not a disciple of Jesus.
6. If the author of “Matthew” was not a disciple of Jesus, we do not have good reason to trust what he says about Jesus’ ministry.

Therefore,

7. We do not have good reason to trust what the author of “Matthew” says about Jesus’ ministry.

So a lot depends on getting our facts straight about Mark.

The case against Mark: geographical and cultural errors

1. Mark is mistaken about the geography around the sea of Galilee (Mark 5:1-13)
2. Mark is mistaken about the geography of the coast of Palestine (Mark 7:31)
3. Mark is confused about the relation between Judea and the Jordan river (Mark 10:1)
4. Mark gets the locations of Bethphage and Bethany wrong (Mark 11:1)
5. Mark is mistaken about the Jewish custom of hand washing (Mark 7:2-3)
6. Mark is mistaken about the Jewish law of divorce (Mark 10:12)
7. Mark’s description of Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin is in contradiction to Jewish law (Mark 14:53-65)

Objection 1: Mark 5:1-13

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. . . . and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and were drowned in the sea.

The problem

Gerasa (modern Jerash) is not on “the other side of the sea.” It is located far south of the Sea of Galilee. The swine would have had to run 37 miles before falling, exhausted, into the Sea. Has Mark just blundered about the geography of Palestine?

Hold that thought! We will return to this passage later.

Objection 2: Mark 7:31

Then he [Jesus] returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

Why would anyone go *north* in order to go *south*? Some “critical” scholars (e.g. Dennis Nineham, *The Gospel of Mark* (1963), p. 40) argue that this shows “the evangelist was not directly acquainted with Palestine.”

One possible reply: “Perhaps Jesus just had a specific reason for wanting to visit Sidon before going back to Galilee. The narrative simply doesn’t tell us.”

That would be a fair response. But we can do better. Any topographical map will show that there is a mountain (Mt. Meron) 3/4 of a mile high directly between Tyre and the Sea of Galilee. But there is a pass from Sidon through the mountains to the Jordan river valley, where foot travelers to Galilee could have fresh water for the journey.

First moral: Before you criticize the knowledge of a first century author who is traditionally supposed to have lived in Palestine, make sure you get your geography right.

Check a good map

Objection 3: Mark 10:1

And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, . . .

The Jordan river is the eastern boundary of Judea. Did Mark just say that Jesus, coming from Capernaum, would have crossed the Jordan to go to Judea? Is this “theological geography,” as claimed by some commentators? (See C. S. Mann, *Mark* (1986), p. 389.)

Paying closer attention to the text:

And he left there and went to the *region* of Judea and *beyond the Jordan* (πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου), . . .

Compare John 10:40:

He went away again *across the Jordan* (πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου) to the place where John had been baptizing at first, . . .

Jesus went from Capernaum—in the *region* of Galilee—to the *region* of Judea, and then *across the Jordan* to the place where John the Baptist used to baptize people. There is no geographic error here.

Objection #4: Mark 11:1

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples . . .

Does Mark give the wrong order of Bethphage and Bethany for someone traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem?

A critic states the objection: “Anyone approaching Jerusalem from Jericho would come first to Bethany and then Bethphage, not the reverse. This is one of several passages showing that Mark knew little about Palestine; we must assume, Dennis Nineham argues, that ‘Mark did not know the relative positions of these two villages on the Jericho road.’” (Randall Helms, *Who Wrote the Gospels?* (1997), p. 6, quoting Nineham, *St. Mark*, pp. 294-95)

Let’s read that verse again:

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples . . .

Mark does *not* say “when they drew near to Jerusalem, they came first to Bethphage, then to Bethany, . . .” He is simply telling his readers approximately where it was on the road that Jesus sent his disciples on ahead. Bethphage and Bethany were both on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives, about half a mile from one another.

Second moral: When someone claims that a first century author has made a geographical error about the country where he is supposed to have lived, read the passage for yourself—and try to use some common sense.

Read the text for yourself

Objection #5: Mark 7:3

For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders,

“Mark 7:3 indicates that the Pharisees ‘and all the Jews’ washed their hands before eating, so as to observe ‘the tradition of the elders.’ This is not true: most Jews did not engage in this ritual.”

—Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* (2010), p. 287

What is the evidence that Mark is wrong?

In Exodus 30:18-21; 40:30-32 and Leviticus 20:1-16, the *priests* are called to observe hand washing practices, but the *people in general* are not. But *did* the Jews of Jesus’ time, who were heavily influenced by the Pharisees, engage in the practice even though the written Law did not require it of them?

Some Jewish evidence

“And as is the custom of all the Jews, they washed their hands in the sea and prayed to God, ...” —Letter of Aristeas (~200 BC), sec. 305

The law “does not look upon those who have even touched a dead body, which has met with a natural death, as pure and clean, until they have washed and purified themselves with sprinklings and ablutions; ...” Philo (~AD 30), *The Special Laws* 3.205

See also the Mishnah, tractates *m. Yadayim* 1.1-2.4, *m. Hagigah* 2.5-6, etc.

Modern scholarly opinion

“The centrality of impurity to Jewish life in the Second Temple period is supported by archaeological evidence. The discovery of *mikvaot* in such diverse places as Gamla, Sepphoris, Herodium and Massada suggests that in Palestine *the removal of impurity* was not a rite reserved only for approaching the sacred precincts of the Temple, but was *common practice for Jews of all walks of life*. . . . [T]he textual evidence suggests that the Jews of the Diaspora also purified themselves, if not through immersion, then by sprinkling, splashing or *hand washing*.”

—Susan Haber, “*They Shall Purify Themselves*”: *Essays on Purity in Early Judaism* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), pp. 130-31 [emphasis added]

Objection #6: Mark 10:12

. . . and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.

Jewish law made provision for a man to divorce his wife (Deuteronomy 24) but not for a woman to divorce her husband. Was Mark a gentile who here betrayed his ignorance of Jewish law?

A critic states the objection: “This sentence is generally regarded as an addition to Jesus’ teaching that was made to address situations related to Roman legal practice whereby a woman could initiate divorce proceedings.”

—John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, vol. 2 (2002), p. 295, note 12.

A Jewish historian sheds some light:

Herodias “took it upon herself to confound the laws of our country” and divorced her first husband in order to marry Herod Antipas.

—Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.4

Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee, *the very place where Jesus was then teaching*.

Third moral: Before concluding that an author who is supposed to have lived in Palestine in the first century made errors regarding Jewish customs and Jewish law, find out what those customs were. Consider the possibility that someone might use a Roman law to do what Jewish law would not allow—particularly since the wife of the current ruler in Galilee was a Jewess who had done exactly that.

Check the historical and cultural context

Objection #7: Mark 14:53-65

In the description of Jesus' trial, there are several points that have been claimed to violate Jewish law:

- The Sanhedrin were forbidden to hold trials at night
- The Sanhedrin could hold trials only in the Temple
- The Sanhedrin could not hold trials during Passover
- There is no 24 hour waiting period before the sentencing
- The charge of blasphemy is anachronistic; Jesus' response would not have seemed blasphemous, since claiming to be the Messiah would not be seen as claiming to be God

Point by point response

The trial was held at night, not in the Temple, during Passover, and without a 24 hour waiting period between the trial and the sentencing.

All that these points show is that the trial of Jesus, *if it was intended as a capital trial* and was not just a fishing expedition for a pretext to hand him over to the Romans, was highly irregular. But the Jewish leaders did not always follow either their own rules or Roman rules when it came to killing people: see Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1 (§200).

[But was it even *intended* to be a capital trial? Perhaps not. See Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus: A Philological-Historical Study of the Key Jewish Themes Impacting Mark 14:61-64* (1998).]

The question of blasphemy

E. P. Sanders argues, on the basis of *Sanhedrin* 7.5, that the description of Jesus' words before Caiaphas cannot be authentic, for it would not have been understood as blasphemy by the Jews at the time unless Jesus uttered the Divine Name (*Jesus and Judaism* (1985), 309-18).

Blasphemy in Mark 14:61-64

“Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ And Jesus said, ‘I am, and you will see *the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.*’ And the high priest tore his garments and said, ‘What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?’ And they all condemned him as deserving death.”

Jesus’ allusion to Psalm 110:1

“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘*Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.*’”

Jesus’ quotation from Daniel 7:13-14

I saw in the night visions, and behold, *with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*

The significance of the phrase “Son of man”

In the Jewish context of the first century, the phrase “son of man” would be understood as an ascription of divinity. [Even Bart Ehrman agrees! (*The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (2004), p. 77)]

The first century Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria treats any personal assumption of the prerogatives or nature of God as blasphemy (*Legatio ad Gaium* 26; *Flaccus* 5; *De Somniis* 2.18).

Two scholarly opinions

“[W]hat made his reply a scandalous blasphemy lay in the combination of the phrases from Psalm 110 and Daniel 7.” Craig A. Evans, “In what sense ‘Blasphemy’? Jesus before Caiaphas in Mark 14:61-64,” in *Jesus and His Contemporaries* (2001), p. 414.

“What is emerging is a developing consensus that the key to the blasphemy resides not in the mere use of a title, but in the juxtaposition of Ps 110:1 with Dan 7:13 to apply to a human figure an unusually high level of heavenly authority.” Darrell Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the final Examination of Jesus* (1998), p. 21.

Fourth moral: Claims about what a first century Jewish audience could not have understood as blasphemous must not be made without very full knowledge of the historical context. Even Sanders (a very highly respected scholar) appears to have been misled here.

Do your historical homework

The case against Matthew

1. Matthew follows Mark in many places
2. Matthew's story of the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem is not historical (Matt. 2)
3. Matthew places the scene of the demoniac and the Swine in Gadara, seven miles away from the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 8:28)

Objection #1: Matthew's use of Mark

If Mark had been proved seriously wrong in many places, that would create problems for Matthew's trustworthiness. But most of the charges against Mark have been shown to be groundless, and several of them even provide extra reasons to believe in the historical trustworthiness of Mark. The *general* objection therefore fails.

Objection #2: Matthew 2 and the slaughter of the innocents

The story of the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem is found in no other Gospel; it is also unmentioned in the works of Josephus, who gives a very lengthy and detailed account of the life and death of Herod the Great.

How much weight should an "argument from silence" like this carry in our assessment of Matthew's account?

Why this argument from silence is weak

Most of the literature from Palestine in the first century has been lost. If someone else wrote about this event, there is little reason to think we would still have his work.

Bethlehem was an obscure village, and probably no more than a dozen children were killed. This was not an event of civic or military importance; there is no particular reason to think that Josephus would record it if he were aware of it.

Examples of similar silence outside of the Gospels

Josephus and Philo both pass over the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius in silence, though it is mentioned by the second century Roman historian Suetonius (*Life of Claudius* 25.4). We have just one passing mention of the event in a first century source—in Acts 18:2.

Despite Josephus's silence, all historians acknowledge that the event took place

No first century source we now possess reports the destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in AD 79, though Pliny the Younger gives a detailed account of the eruption.

No one infers from Pliny's silence that the event did not take place—archaeology proves that it did.

One more bad argument from silence

Mark 15:33—At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.

“[A] distinct chapter of Pliny is devoted to eclipses of an extraordinary nature, and unusual duration,” but Pliny does not mention this darkness.

— Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 2 (Dublin, 1781) ch. 15, p. 312

If there really was such a darkness, how could Pliny have missed it?

Assessing Gibbon's argument from silence

- * Pliny did not live in Judea at the time.
- * The darkness could not have been due to a solar eclipse.
- * The entire “chapter” is just eighteen words long in Latin. Here it is in translation:

“Unusually long, portentous eclipses of the sun also take place, as when Caesar the dictator was slain; and in the war against Antony, the sun remained dim for nearly a year.” (Pliny, *Natural History* 2.30)

This is hardly a comprehensive record of unusual periods of darkness everywhere in the Roman Empire!

Fifth moral: An argument from the silence of ancient authors is almost never a good reason to disregard the direct positive testimony of a contemporary author.

Distrust arguments from silence

Objection #3: Matthew 8:28

And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, ...

Two problems:

1. Matthew seems to place the event in Gadara, not in Gerasa, as Mark did.
2. Gadara is still seven miles away from the Sea of Galilee.

What is going on?

Checking the text

There are several significant variants in the Greek text of Mark 5:1 and the parallel texts, Matthew 8:28 and Luke 8:26-27. In Mark and Luke, the best-attested reading is “Gerasenes,” an attempt to represent the adjective corresponding to the place name. The Aramaic version of the place name would be written without vowels: Gerasa = GRS or KRS.

Checking the map

The identification of “the region of the Gerasenes” in Mark with Gerasa (modern day Jerash) is doubtful.

A plausible identification is with Kersa, modern Kursi (in either case, from the root KRS), on the eastern shore, where a steep hill runs down almost directly into the water.



But what about “Gadarenes”?

It seems probable that some early copyist of Matthew’s Gospel either misspelled the term “Gerasenes” or mistook it for “Gadarenes,” much as someone might mistake or mistakenly correct “Oshtemo” for “Otsego.” The copyists of manuscripts are not immune to making errors of spelling or to “fixing” what they are copying if they think it is a spelling mistake.

A review of the objections

Objections to Mark:

1. The geography around the sea of Galilee (5:1-13)
 - Dubious geography; Kursi answers to Mark's description both in location and in topography
2. The geography of the coast of Palestine (7:31)
 - Bad geography; a topographical map reveals the rationale that Mark leaves unstated
3. The relation between Judea and the Jordan river (10:1)
 - Bad reading skills; careful attention to the text shows that there is no problem here.
4. The locations of Bethphage and Bethany (11:1)
 - Serious misreading of the text; simple examination of the text shows that there is no problem here.
5. The Jewish custom of hand washing (7:2-3)
 - Bad history; refuted by modern archaeology.
6. The law of divorce (Mark 10:12)
 - Shockingly bad history; refuted by reference to Josephus
7. Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin (14:53-65)
 - The objection is based on the assumption that this was intended to be a formal trial before the Sanhedrin, which is doubtful
 - It would at most prove that the Jewish leaders didn't always follow their own rules, which we could already discover from reading Josephus
 - Jesus use of Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13-14 would qualify as blasphemy by the standards of first century Jews like Philo—a hostile "jury" looking for an excuse to condemn him to death would certainly find it here.

Objections to Matthew:

1. Matthew follows Mark in many places
 - Since Mark has been shown to be innocent of the criticisms leveled against him, this is not a problem for Matthew

2. Matthew's story of the slaughter of the innocents is not found in other first century sources
 - But this is merely an argument from silence and is not a serious reason to doubt Matthew's account
3. Matthew's reference to the region of the "Gadarenes" (8:28)
 - Probably just an early scribal error

Summary of the morals drawn

Check a good map
Read the text for yourself
Check the historical and cultural context
Do your historical homework
Distrust arguments from silence

This talk is the fourth in a series:

1. Who Wrote the Gospels? (January 23)
2. External Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels (February 13)
3. Internal Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels (February 27)
- 4a. Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels, Part 1 (May 21)
- 4b. Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels, Part 2
5. Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels
6. The Resurrection of Jesus

If you enjoyed it, please come back for some of the other talks!

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