

Verbal Differences in Parallel Passages in the Synoptics and Their Implications for a Doctrine of Divine Inspiration

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There is no subject more vital to our Christian faith than the inspiration of the Scriptures. Actually, all other doctrines are based upon this one. Without a divine revelation we have no basis for a belief in the deity of Jesus and His atoning sacrifice for our sins. Take away the foundation of inspiration and the whole superstructure of the Christian faith must inevitably collapse in ruins.

It is not our purpose in this paper to make a comprehensive study of this important subject. That would be impossible within the narrow limits of space allowed. Neither do I propose to attempt an adequate definition of inspiration. The severe limitations of my knowledge of epistemology and psychology preclude that possibility. Rather, I desire to point out the bearing on this subject of one of the most interesting phenomena in the New Testament—verbal differences in parallel sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels.

One of the most obvious and interesting features encountered in the Synoptics is the frequency with which the distinctive characteristics of Mark appear in that shortest of the Gospels. Vividness, forcefulness, fulness of detail, picturesqueness in descriptions, the use of strong terms—all these confront the reader over and over again.

One of these, attention to detail, shows up even in a quotation from John the Baptist. Where Matthew has, speaking of Jesus' shoes, "I am not worthy to bear (*bastasai*)" and Luke has "I am not worthy to unloose (*lysai*)" Mark reads "I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose (*kypsas lysai*)."¹ It seems obvious that the Holy Spirit in leading the three evangelists to record this saying of John the Baptist was concerned with the thought rather than the exact form of words. Mark, by his added word, simply draws the lines a bit more sharply in the picture of a humble servant.

It has long been the tradition of the church that Mark's Gospel represents the preaching of Peter. This position, supported by evidence from the early Christian centuries, has been challenged fre-

quently in recent years. But we see no compelling reason for abandoning it.

One of the ways in which Mark seems to echo Peter is in the use of stronger language than that adopted by the other two Synoptists. Impulsive Peter was a forceful speaker. His very temperament would lead him to employ graphic terms.

Two examples of this appear in the first chapter of his Gospel. Describing the scene at Jesus' baptism Mark says that the heavens were "rent asunder (*schizomenous*)," which might well be rendered "split apart." Matthew and Luke employ a much milder term, the verb *anoigō*, "open."

The other example is to be found in connection with the temptation of Jesus. Matthew says that Jesus was "led up" (*anēch-thē*) into the wilderness by the Spirit. Luke employs the simple verb *agō*. But Mark has *ekballei*, "driveth him forth."

It is true that many verbs appear to have lost some of their pristine force in the Koine period. And probably *ekballō* is one of the several examples that could be cited. Nevertheless it is still significant that Mark should have chosen, perhaps following Peter, a stronger term than those used by the other two.

Another characteristic of Mark appears in this passage—the frequent use of the historical present where one or both of the others have a past tense. Can we rule out the evidence for either the personality of Peter or the preference of Mark? In other words, can we honestly and intelligently ignore the human element in the writing of Holy Scripture?

Still looking at the temptation narrative we note that Matthew and Luke have the expression "the devil," while Mark has "Satan." Checking the matter we find that while all three Synoptics use "Satan," Mark never uses "the devil." The reason for this preference is not involved in the present discussion. We simply note the fact as indicative of the freedom exercised by the writers of the Bible in their actual choice of terms.

This becomes even more striking in another passage where Mark has "Satan" (*ho Satanas*), Matthew has "the evil one" (*ho ponēros*) and Luke has "the devil" (*ho diabolos*) (Mk. 4:15; Mt. 13:19; Lk. 8:12). For these three different expressions occur in a parallel saying of Jesus.

We would expect that the Synoptists in recording the same saying of Jesus in what is unquestionably the same setting, would

give it in exactly the same words. In one instance after another we find that such is not the case. Very evidently the evangelists felt that they were being faithful reporters of what Jesus said if they reproduced the *thought* accurately, regardless of the exact *form* of the words.

Of course, there is involved right at this point the question of the language in which Jesus originally uttered the words and the language in which the Gospels were written. Most New Testament scholars are agreed that Jesus probably spoke in Aramaic as a usual practice. But opinion is divided as to whether the Gospels were originally written in Aramaic or Greek. If our present Greek text is itself a translation, then the question of divine inspiration is not so closely involved. For few would extend the full force of inspiration to the work of translators. But if the Gospels were first composed in Greek under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit we are compelled to face the fact of verbal divergencies and seek to account for it. This paper is based on the latter assumption, as the majority of New Testament scholars hold to Greek originals for the Gospels.

Another case in point is the voice from heaven at the baptism of Jesus. Mark and Luke report the voice as saying: "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased." Matthew reads: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Mk. 1:11; Lk. 3:22; Mt. 3:17). Actually the difference is not as striking in the Greek as in the English. In the former the entire saying is the same in all three accounts except for one word in the second clause. Where Mark and Luke have *soi*, Matthew has *hō*.

It is interesting to note an early effort to harmonize Matthew with Mark and Luke in this passage. Instead of the initial *houtos estin* of our text of Matthew, Codex Bezae, the Old Latin MS *a*, the Sinaitic and Curetonian Syriac and Irenaeus have *sy ei*, "Thou art." This would be essentially the same as the reading in Mark and Luke. Some scribes changed the *soi* of Mark, evidently to harmonize with Matthew. For the bulk of the Greek manuscripts, both uncial and cursive, have *hō* in Mk. 1:11. This is the reading represented in the King James Version.

If we are concerned primarily with the exact form of the words, then we are in difficulty in seeking to recover what the voice from heaven actually said. But if our quest is rather for the meaning of the truth uttered, then we have no problem here. Which was

the purpose and aim of the Spirit as He inspired men of old to write the sacred record? That is the question which this paper seeks to face. In the study of the Synoptic Gospels—where we have unparalleled opportunity for the study of parallel passages—the answer becomes increasingly clear. It is the spirit rather than the letter.

The personal preferences and points of view of the evangelist Luke seem to intrude themselves into his Gospel. It is sometimes claimed that Cadbury has completely exploded Hobart's thesis of medical language in Luke's writings. Personally, I think that is an exaggeration. It is true that Hobart has overstated his case, as Cadbury has shown. But that is a very common fault of men who have discovered a new and significant truth.

One can hardly rule out the impression of a physician's touch at a number of minor points in Luke's Gospel. In the case of the exorcism of the demon in the synagogue at Capernaum Luke alone notes that the unclean spirit did not hurt the man as it left him, though it convulsed him (Lk. 4:35). In a saying of Jesus (Mt. 9:12; Mk. 2:17; Lk. 5:31) Matthew and Mark have: "They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick." Luke reads exactly the same except for the change of one word. Instead of *ischyontes* he has *hygiainontes*. Laying aside the discussion as to whether certain words have technical medical connotations, we still have to answer the question: "Why does Luke in a number of such instances as this choose another word in preference to the one used by Matthew and Mark?" The most natural explanation is his medical background.

An interesting example of the difference in point of view between Matthew the Jew and Luke the Gentile appears in Mt. 5:47 and Lk. 6:33. Matthew quotes Jesus as saying: "Do not even the Gentiles the same?" Luke has: "For even sinners do the same." In the Jewish mind Gentile and sinner were largely synonymous. But a Gentile writing to Gentiles would hardly wish to reflect that usage. The point that Jesus was making was that more is expected of us who have the grace of God than of those who do not. The truth is reproduced with equal accuracy by both evangelists, though the form of words is different. It would appear that the Holy Spirit was more concerned with the truth to be expressed than with the mechanical form.

Several times Matthew has "Father" where Luke in a parallel

saying of Jesus has "God" or "angels of God." Examples of this can be found in Mt. 6:26; 10:29, 32, 34 and Lk. 12:24, 6, 8, 9. Why the difference? Evidently Matthew is reflecting the Jewish conception of God as father, found in the Old Testament and given new emphasis in the teaching of Jesus. He is also seeking to avoid the overuse of the term "God."

That the evangelists were free to choose different words to represent the same idea receives striking support from Luke's preference for *epistata*. This word is found in the New Testament only in Luke's Gospel, where it occurs seven times. One instance is Lk. 8:24. Mark has in this place *didaskale*, while Matthew has *kyrie*. In Lk. 9:33 and parallels we also find three different words used in the three accounts of Peter's words on the mount of transfiguration.

Which word was used by the disciples in the storm and by Peter on the mount? Apparently it does not matter. What other conclusion can we draw from the records? The form is different; the thought is the same.

One other very obvious and interesting verbal difference in the Synoptics is the use of "kingdom of the heavens" in Matthew where Mark and/or Luke have "kingdom of God." Matthew uses the former phrase thirty-two times, Mark and Luke not at all. Matthew's preference seems to reflect the Jewish effort to avoid the too frequent use of names for God. "Heaven" was a good euphemistic substitute for "God."

The question remains: Which did Jesus use? Perhaps both. But we are still faced with the fact the Synoptics use different terms in reporting exactly the same saying of Jesus in the same setting. It appears that the evangelists felt they were faithfully reproducing the teaching of Jesus, though they used divergent terms.

Somewhat the same phenomenon is seen in the quotations from the Old Testament in the New. Often the wording is definitely different from both the Masoretic Hebrew text and the Septuagint Greek text. The writers of the New Testament exhibit considerable freedom in the matter.

What conclusion are we to draw from all this? It was the study of a Greek harmony of the Synoptic Gospels which first forced me to see how utterly unacceptable was any theory of inspiration which savored of mechanical dictation. The personal preferences of the evangelists showed up too strongly for this.

If a business executive were to dictate letters to several differ-

ent secretaries, there would be a similarity of style and vocabulary which would be distinctive of the author. But if that same executive should indicate the subject matter of the letters but leave the actual composition to the secretaries—only checking the written letters to see that they rightly reproduced what he wanted said—then the style and vocabulary of each letter would reflect the individual secretary.

That is the phenomenon we find in the New Testament, and precisely in the Synoptic Gospels. We have cited only a few examples from many, for an exhaustive study would far exceed the bounds of this paper. But we have called attention to enough evidence to demonstrate the point.

Is the Bible a divine book or a human book? The “either . . . or” philosophy would compel us to choose between the two. But the “both . . . and” philosophy is often far truer and far more enriching.

Let us look at a very pertinent parallel. Is Jesus Christ divine or human? One group has lifted up His deity until it has almost lost sight of His humanity. Another group has emphasized His humanity and eliminated His deity. Which side is right? The answer is obvious. Neither group is in the center of the road of truth. If you will allow the figure of speech, the truth concerning Jesus rides on the twin rails of His deity and His humanity. To deny or neglect either one in emphasizing the other is to try to ride one rail—with unfortunate results. Without the deity of Jesus we are left helpless and hopeless, with no Savior from sin. But without the humanity of Jesus we are deprived of a compassionate High Priest, who is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. We need both.

Just as the Living Word is both human and divine, so is the Written Word. Inspired by the Spirit of God, it was yet actually written by human hands. The Bible is divine in its ultimate origin but human in the mechanics of its production. One man sees only the Spirit hovering overhead and cries out: “It is divine.” Another sees only the man sitting at a desk and concludes: “It is human.” Why cannot we face the fact of its human origin as well as believe in its divine origin? An intelligent faith proclaims both. We do not get anywhere by ignoring what might be called the human element in divine inspiration.

The real problem that faces us is the “how” of the inspiration of the Bible. Just how did God inspire men to write the divine

record? The nearest answer in the New Testament is found in the statement of II Pet. 1:21 that men spoke from God as they were borne along (*pheromenoi*) by the Holy Spirit.

The point that seems to me all important is that the inspiration was not at the point of the pen, nor due to an arbitrary power that compelled the fingers to move mechanically. Rather, it was in the hearts and minds of the writers. They thought the thoughts of God after Him and recorded them as best they could in their own words. They felt the mighty surge of divine truth as it passed through their personalities. This does not rule out the possibility that the Holy Spirit did, when the communication of divine truth required it, indicate the choice of one word rather than another, or guide the writer to use the proper form of the word employed.

All the phenomena of the New Testament—the frequent references of Paul to his own feelings and reactions, the distinctive style and vocabulary of each writer, and precisely the verbal differences we have noted in the Synoptic Gospels—can be accounted for by making a proper allowance for the human factor in divine inspiration.

The pure sunlight of divine truth was broken up into its various beautiful hues as it was filtered through the prisms of human personalities. The result is the colorful variety of form and expression we find in the Synoptic Gospels, even in parallel passages.

Personally, I cannot get away from the conviction that the inspiration lay in the realm of thought and ideas, rather than in the exact form of words. I believe that God by His Spirit enabled men rightly to understand His truth and accurately to record it, while at the same time giving them a large measure of freedom in the choice of words. This alone seems to me to account for the phenomena of the Synoptic Gospels.