

BAPTIST BIBLE SEMINARY

A SUMMARY OF THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM IN
MARK 9:33-41

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A Comparison of Mark 9:33-41 with the Other Synoptic Gospels

Key Exact equivalence
Slight grammatical difference
Synonyms

Matthew 18:1-5

18

En ekein/h/th/wra/proshl qon oilmaq
htai; tw/ jhsou legonte"
:tiw' ara meizwn epti;
n ejh th/basileia/twn oujranwne

²kai; proskal esameno" paidion epths
en aujto; ejh mesw/aujtw; ³kai eipe
n

:ajmhn legw uhin, ejan mh; strafhte k
ai; genhsqe w/ ta; paidia, oujmh; eijse
qhte eij' thn basileian tw n oujranw n.⁴
o sti" ouh tapeinw sei eauton w/ to; p
aidion touto, oujto" eptin olmeizwn ej
n th/basileia/ tw n oujranw n.

Mark 9:33-41

³³Kai; hl qon eij' Kafarnaoum. Kai; ejh t
h/oikia/genomeno" ephrwta aujtoul':tiv
ejh th/obw/dielogizesqe³⁴oilde; ejsiwpw
n:pro;" ajlhlu" gar diel ecqhsan ejh t
h/obw/
tiw' meizwn.

³⁵kai; kaqisa" ejfwnhsen tou;" dwdeka k
ai; legei aujtoi":ei|ti" qelei prwto" eil
nai, eptai pantwn epscato" kai; pantw
n diakono".

³⁶kai; labwn paidion epthsen aujto; ejh
mesw/aujtw n kai; ephagkal isameno" aujt
o; eipen:
aujtoi"

Luke 9:46-50

⁴⁶Eijshl qen de; dialogismo;" ejh aujtoi", t
o; :tiw' ah eih meizwn aujtwn.

⁴⁷olde; jhsou" eijdw;" ton dialogismon t
h" kardia" aujtwn, epilabomeno" paidi
on epthsen aujto; par eautw/

⁴⁸kai; eipen aujtoi":

⁵kai; oʻ eʻan dexhtai eʻn paidion toiou
to epi; tw/ohomati mou, eʻme;
decetai.

10

⁴²kai; oʻ aʻh potish/ eʻha tw n mikrwn to
utwn pothrion yucrou monon
eijʻ ohoma maqhtou, aʻmhn
legw uhin, oujmh; apol esh/
ton misqon aujtou.

³⁷oʻ aʻh eʻn tw n toiou tw n paidiwn dev
xhtai epi; tw/ohomati mou, eʻme; deceta
i; kai; oʻ aʻh eʻme; dexhtai, ouk eʻme; dece
tai aʻj l a; ton aposteii anta me.

³⁸[Eʻf h aujt w/ oʻ j l wannh": didaskal
e, eidomen tina eʻn tw/ohomati
sou ek bai l onta daimonia kai; ek w l uo m
en aujton, oʻti ouk hkolougei hmin.

³⁹olde; j l h sou" eipen:
mh; kw l uete aujton. oupei;" gar eʻstin oʻ
poi h sei dunamin epi; tw/ohomati mou
kai; dunhsetai tacu; kakologhsai me:

⁴⁰oʻ gar ouk eʻstin kaq l h mwn, upe r h m
wn eʻstin. ⁴¹) O" gar aʻh potish/ u ma"
pothrion u dato"

eʻn ohomati
oʻti Cristou eʻste, aʻmhn legw uhin oʻti
oujmh; apol esh/
ton misqon aujtou.

oʻ eʻan dexhtai touto to; paidion
epi; tw/ohomati mou, eʻme; deceta
i; kai; oʻ aʻh eʻme; dexhtai, decetai ton
aposteii anta
me olgar mikrotero" eʻn pasin umi
n u par cw n ouʻto" eʻstin mega".

⁴⁹Apokriqei;" de j l wannh" eipen: epistav
ta, eidomen tina eʻn tw/ohomati sou ek
bai l onta daimonia kai; ek w l uo men aujto
n, oʻti ouk akolougei meq l h mwn.

⁵⁰eipen de; pro;" aujton ol j l h sou":
mh; kw l uete

oʻ gar ouk eʻstin kaq l u mwn, upe r
u mwn eʻstin.

Summary of the Synoptic Problem in Mark 9:33-41

Taking three of his disciples down the mountain after revealing his glory to them, Jesus would probably have hoped to see those disciples in such a humble state of awe that they would have been hanging on his very words and ready to learn. Yet soon after the mighty Transfiguration experience, once the twelve had regrouped, they amazingly seemed to forget the implication of seeing the glory of God. Instead, they argued about which of them was greatest.

Entering Capernaum and into a house, Jesus exposes their hearts by illustrating the need for humility in order to be great in his kingdom; he did so with a small child. Mark's gospel highlights this event, followed immediately by the account of the disciples reporting a stranger who casted out demons and their hindering him from doing so; this brought rebuke by Jesus. The account is also recorded in both Matthew's and Luke's gospel, but with some significant differences. These create a "problem" in that they bring into question either the accuracy of one account or the apparent reading of one or more. Can they be pieced together as the same event?

1.) The first problem encountered is whether the disciples asked Jesus their question or whether he gave his teaching simply what he knew they had been discussing. According to Mark, upon entering a house in Capernaum, Jesus initiates the conversation and receives only silence for an answer. The effect of his illustration is heightened by the fact that they had not told him what they had been discussing. Matthew, however, depicts the disciples asking the question, seemingly to Jesus, and thus receiving the illustrative teaching. Four possible explanations may explain this:

- First, these may be two different accounts. There may have been several occasions where Jesus taught them this lesson, and in this case the illustration is rather different between Mark and Matthew.
- Second, they may be the same account but told with less historical accuracy by Mark. Since his account is more detailed, he may have created the information to fill in the story.
- Third, Matthew may have written a less accurate account. This seems more likely than the second, for the more detailed account would seem to be more credible. Besides, the story is the same; whether or not the question was addressed to Jesus is not overly significant.
- Fourth, the accounts are both the same and both historically accurate. Both accounts occur shortly after the Transfiguration, upon entering Capernaum. Matthew even adds the words “at that time” in 18:1 to show that no time had elapsed. One reason for this view is that the illustration, while differing between Mark and Matthew, are both done with a child and for the same purpose; doing two such illustrations close to the same time would seem redundant.

One reasonable possibility was that Mark’s account simply omitted the fact that after the silence, someone in the group broke the silence with the question recorded in Matthew. I doubt this due to the embarrassment obviously held by the 12 at that time.

The other excellent possibility was that the Matthew account only appears to record a question posed to Jesus. The Greek text seems to support this, for no word for “to question” is used; rather, the simple word for “to say” is used in participle form. Matthew may have easily meant that while on the way to where Jesus was staying in

Capernaum, the 12 were saying *to themselves*, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of

Luke’s account adds insight at this point. The details are less abundant, but the few recorded definitely portray a silent crowd, whose thoughts were all Jesus needed to prompt him to give his illustration with the small child. The natural reading of this account is that Jesus exposed the hearts of the 12 before they admitted their thoughts; again, this seemed to heighten the effect. Thus, he received no answer for the question recorded in Mark. Rather, his simple yet profound teaching pierced their hearts by the power of their loving, omniscient leader.

2.) Another problem is the differences in the illustration used by Jesus. At three different times, Jesus refers to the least and greatest, and they are all at different points in the dialogue. However, this can be explained as emphasis for effect. Matthew’s additions of other words spoken by Jesus in the same event do not conflict with the other accounts but rather serve Matthew’s purpose of explaining the kingdom of heaven. Concerning the cup of water, Matthew’s use of this illustration is found at an earlier time within the context of instructions to the 12 who are being sent out. Due to the time difference and the fact that Matthew uses the term “little ones” instead of “you” as recipients of the cup, I suggest that this verse in Matthew was a separate account. There is no problem with Jesus using the same word picture to convey different ideas at different times.

3.) Lastly, concerning John’s accounts, which are found on the highlighted sheet, are both different accounts in my opinion. The story of new birth has a different purpose than does the story of humility in God’s kingdom. Furthermore, in John 13, Jesus

speaks of those who identify with anyone he sends out as being received by him. The point is identifying with Jesus' followers as a sign of belief. But the point of Mark's account is having a spirit of humility depicted by receiving someone *like* a small child, who was looked down on in that era. Thus, the synoptic problems in this passage, while real, seem to each have reasonable solutions.

Total number of words in the Greek text of this pericope

Matthew.....	103
Mark.....	161
Luke.....	100

***Note** that Mark, while the shortest gospel, gives the most details for this pericope; this is true in other passages as well.

Agreement in Wording Between the Synoptics

*This chart shows the number/percentages of words which are identical or which only differ in inflection or word order between any two of the synoptic gospels.

	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Matthew	x	(39) 24%	(17) 17%
Mark	(39) 38%	x	(58) 58%
Luke	(17) 16.5%	(58) 36%	x

***Note** that Luke's gospel contains the highest percentage of equivalent material. However, the vast majority of its equivalent words are found in Mark. Among the three gospels, Mark has the highest number of words which are found elsewhere. Furthermore, there are no words in Luke which are found in Matthew but not in Mark. Thus, Mark seems to be the common ground, the "lender," and this suggests Markan priority.

As one final piece of evidence, **50%** of the words in Mark are repeated elsewhere. Thus, the equivalence between Mark and Matthew and that between Mark and Luke do not overlap much at all.