

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Contradictions in Scripture: The Demons and the Swine

When we left the Lord and the disciples in our last installment of “Contradictions in Scripture,” He had just calmed the sea, and then had landed at the country of the Gergesenes in Matthew, or the country of the Gadarenes in Mark and Luke. This author had proclaimed that, although these accounts appear to be similar, the differences between them show that they are actually a recording of two separate events. The Lord and His disciples were in different boats, overrun by different storms, and landed at different places. Yet as we look at the record that follows these things, we see that again the events that follow are similar. In both places, the Lord cast out demons into swine upon landing. Can it be that these two miracles, so closely connected by time to the calming of the storms, could yet not be the same event? Let us examine them and see for ourselves.

As we learned earlier, the earlier calming of the storm (that took place BEFORE the calling of His disciples) is recorded in Matthew 8:23-28. The later calming of the storm (that took place AFTER the calling of His disciples) is recorded in Mark 4:35-42 and Luke 8:22-26. Therefore, the record of the casting of the demons into pigs in Matthew 8:28-34 must be an earlier and different event than that of Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-39. Therefore we might expect discrepancies between the event recorded in Matthew and that recorded in the other gospels. Yet the events recorded in Mark and Luke, taking place “immediately” after He landed on the shore, MUST be the same event and therefore should contain no contradictions. Let us look at the three records and see if that is indeed the case.

1. In Matthew 8:23-28, He lands at the country of the Gergesenes. There He is met by two demon-possessed men, who come out of the tombs. They are so fierce that no one can pass that way. No mention is made of attempts to tame them or of their misery. They cry out suddenly, “What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?” “A good way off” a herd of swine is feeding, so the demons beg Him, “If You cast us out, permit us to go away into the herd of swine.” The Lord permits them with, “Go.” The swine suddenly run down a steep place into the sea and perish. The keepers of the swine flee, go into the city, and tell what had happened. The whole city comes out to meet the Lord, sees Him, and begs Him to depart from their region. No mention of further actions on the part of the formerly-possessed men is made.

2. In Mark 5:1-20, He lands at the country of the Gadarenes. There He is met “immediately” by a man with an unclean spirit, who was living among the tombs. He was so fierce that men had tried to bind him in shackles and chains, but he always just broke them. No one could tame him, and he was constantly in the mountains and tombs, cutting himself and crying. He sees Jesus from afar and runs to worship Him, crying out loudly, “What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God that You do not torment me.” Jesus further converses with him, commanding the unclean spirit to come out and asking its name. We learn that its name is Legion, for there are many spirits (a legion of Roman soldiers was about 6,000 men,) and he begs Jesus not to send him out of the country. “There near the mountains” a “large” herd of about 2,000 swine is feeding, so all the demons beg Him, “Send us to the swine, that we may enter them.” The Lord “at once” permits them, and the demons enter the swine. The herd runs down a steep place into the sea and drowns. The keepers of the swine flee, and tell what had happened in

the city and the country. The people there come out to see what had happened. They see Jesus and the formerly-possessed man clothed and in his right mind. Then those who saw it explain to them what had happened. After hearing this, they plead with Him to depart from their region. When the Lord gets into the boat, the formerly demon-possessed man begs Him to allow him to come along, but Jesus refuses, telling him to “Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you.” He departs and begins to proclaim in Decapolis (a ten city region) what the Lord had done for him.

3. In Luke 8:26-39, He lands at the country of the Gadarenes. There, “when He stepped out on the land,” He is met by a man who had had demons for a long time, who was living among the tombs rather than in a house. It is mentioned that he wore no clothes, and that he was so fierce that men had kept him under guard, trying to bind him in shackles and chains, but he just broke them and ran into the wilderness. No mention of his violence, attempts to tame him, or his misery is made. He sees the Lord, cries out, falls down before Him, and asks, “What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg You, do not torment me!” Jesus further converses with him, commanding the unclean spirit to come out and asking its name. We learn that its name is Legion, for there are many demons, and they beg Jesus not to send them into the abyss. “There on the mountain” a herd of “many” swine is feeding, so all the demons beg Him to let them enter the pigs. The Lord permits them, and the demons enter the swine. The herd runs down a steep place into the sea and drowns. The keepers of the swine flee, and tell what had happened in the city and the country. The people there come out to see what had happened. They see Jesus and the formerly-possessed man clothed and in his right mind. Then those who saw it explain to them what had happened. After hearing this, they plead with Him to depart from them. When the Lord gets into the boat, the formerly demon-possessed man begs Him to allow him to come along, but Jesus refuses, telling him to “Return to your own house, and tell what great things God has done for you.” He departs and proclaims throughout the whole city what the Lord had done for him.

Thus we see the obvious and expected differences between the two accounts. In Matthew there are two demon-possessed men, whereas in the other account there is only one. In Matthew only one demon is mentioned whereas in the other account there are legion. In Matthew the men come out of the tombs whereas in the other account he is living there. In Matthew the Lord’s interaction with them is brief whereas in the other account there is a longer conversation recorded. In Matthew the men tell what had happened in the nearby city, whereas in the other account he tells it in the nearby city and the country around. In Matthew the men of the city come out, see the Lord, and ask Him to leave, whereas in the other account they request more information before asking Him to leave. Thus, as expected, these two accounts are clearly of different events.

What of the observed differences between the Mark and Luke accounts? Are they simply complementary accounts, or do real contradictions occur? In Mark we read the man approached Him immediately, and in Luke that He approached Him when He stepped off the boat, which are different ways of putting it but convey the same thing. In Mark he implores the Lord by God not to torment him and in Luke he begs the Lord not to torment him, but we can realize that he probably was begging and repeating himself many times as he cowered before the Lord, so there is no problem here. In Mark, he (the man) begs Jesus not to send him out of the country, whereas in Luke they (the demons) beg Him not to command them to go out into the abyss. It seems that this man was still able to talk sometimes, and sometimes the demons would talk through him. Thus Mark lists the man’s plea and Luke the demons’ plea, but there is no contradiction. After he is freed of the demons and asks Christ to allow him to accompany Him, in Mark the Lord tells him to go home to his friends, whereas in Luke He tells him to return to his own house. These two commands were probably given as the man begged and pleaded with the Lord more than once, hoping to change His mind.

Thus we see that there are no contradictory statements here, only supplemental facts. Thus our assertion that the events in Mark and Luke are the same whereas the account in Matthew is different holds true. As we expected, there are many differences between the event recorded in Matthew and those recorded in Mark and Luke, whereas there are no contradictions of fact

between the Mark and Luke accounts. Thus there is no contradiction here, as the events that are clearly the same give the same story, whereas the event that is clearly different gives a different story with different details. There is nothing here that would lead us to abandon our claim that there are no contradictions between the gospels.

Now some may ask why there are any differences between Mark and Luke. These can easily be explained by the purposes of the two authors. Mark and Luke were written to different audiences for different purposes. Thus, we would expect one author to focus on details that another might ignore and vice versa. We would expect one author to give part of a spoken quote that fits his purpose whereas another author chooses a different part of the quote. This follows naturally from the aim and theme of the book. This does not justify untruths, however, and thus when the same events are mentioned they are perfectly synchronous in factual details. This is what we would expect from an inspired Bible. This is what we would expect from the Word of God.

Thus our faith in the Bible is justified once again. How firm a foundation we stand on! Let us rejoice in that foundation, and pray that God will continue to give us insight into debunking these supposed “contradictions in Scripture.”

Nathan C. Johnson