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Edmondo Lupieri

The Text and Its Problems

While reading the Gospel of Matthew, I have always been intrigued by the passages where the Evangelist seems to drastically reduce, almost to the bone, the narrative we believe he had found in Mark. The Matthean text, though, is never just a summary of Mark. The avoiding of sentences or words—together with the addition of details, even if few and at times minimal—does change dramatically the whole scene. Usually the result is fully ‘Matthean,’ even if it appears often to be in some sort of dialogue with the parallel passage in Luke (when existing), who typically goes his own way.

In a recent advanced course at Loyola University Chicago, we read Matthew 8–9 and gave particular attention to what is now the end of chapter 8 and the beginning of chapter 9. From 8:5, the scene takes place in Capernaum, where Jesus first heals the “boy” (slave?) of the centurion (8:5–13). Next, he heals Peter’s mother-in-law (8:14–15) and then, when it is evening, many demoniacs and sick people (8:16–17).¹ The detail specifying the time (ὀψίας δὲ γενομένης ὅτε ἔδου ὁ ἥλιος) is necessary in Mark’s parallel passage because it indicates the end of Shabbat and shows that the people who bring their sick ones to Jesus are observant Jews (Mark 1:32–34); not so in Matthew, where the mention of the fact that it was “late” (ὀψίας δὲ γενομένης)² is a seemingly useless chronological note (and could be considered a sign of ‘editorial fatigue’).

¹ Matthew does not report any form of dialogue between Jesus and any of them. Mark 1:34 says Jesus did not allow the devils to talk, because they knew him. Luke 4:41 says that they screamed and said: “You are the Son of God,” but then Jesus did not let them talk, because they knew him. The Lukan public recognition of Jesus’s divine sonship by the devils in this context could be an interesting element for the discussion we will develop in the conclusion.

² Luke 4:40 has δύνοντος δὲ τοῦ ἡλίου. The two most common explanations are that A) Matthew and Luke independently decide to derive—one the first and the other the second—chronological indications from Mark, or B) that there was a proto-Mark which contained only

At that point, seeing the crowd, Jesus gives orders to cross “to the other side” (of the Lake/Sea of Gennesaret: ἐκέλευσεν ἀπελθεῖν εἰς τὸ πέραν; Matt 8:18). But then immediately a scribe tells Jesus he is going to “follow” him wherever he would go, to which Jesus responds by showing him how difficult it could be to follow him. Then “another of his disciples” (does this imply that the scribe is one of them?) asks for Jesus’s permission to first go bury his own father (and therefore to accomplish one of the most stringent duties of a son), but Jesus tells him “Follow me” instead (8:18–22). After these interactions Jesus embarks in “a/the boat,”³ and his disciples “follow” him, though it is not clear who all are his disciples at this point.⁴

Here Matthew positions the narrative of the storm at sea and its calming by Jesus (8:24–27). Jesus is asleep (apparently it is night, and therefore the chronological detail of 8:16 seems useful to explain the otherwise strange behavior of Jesus), and the disciples must wake him up. After the miracle, Matthew stresses that “the people” on board do not really understand who Jesus is. Οἱ ἄνθρωποι may include women and presumably includes all the disciples who are there, but its usage here also provides a way for Matthew to specifically indicate that those *humans* did not understand. The scene, therefore, prepares for the following one, in which *demons* will know who Jesus is. In any case, at this point the disciples disappear from the scene (they will appear again at 10:10).

Then we come to the section we are discussing:

When he came to the other side, to the territory of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him: [they were] so fierce that no one was strong enough to go through that way. And—behold!—they screamed saying: “What [is there] between us and you, Son of God? Have you come here before the [expected] time to torment us?” But far from them a herd of many swine was feeding. And the demons begged him saying: “If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.” And he said to them: “Go!” And they, having come out, went into the swine; and—behold!—the whole herd rushed down the cliff into the sea and they died in the waters. But the [swine]herds ran away and having gone into the city they announced all the things, also those regarding the demoniacs. And—behold!—the whole town came out to meet Jesus, and having seen him, they begged [him] to go away from their region.⁵

ὄψιας δὲ γενομένης; this was known to and accepted by Matthew, while Luke changed it, and his text influenced the final redaction of Mark.

³ The manuscript tradition is split regarding the presence of the article; if the word is anarthrous, this boat is any boat, not owned by any of the disciples—which would fit better in the rest of the narrative.

⁴ Matthew will be called later in ch. 9, and the Twelve will be chosen and sent in ch. 10. Have the scribe and the son of the dead father remained with Jesus, or are they two examples of failed discipleship?

⁵ Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the authors.

After this passage, Jesus, apparently still alone on the scene, enters a boat and crosses back over the sea, to go to “his town,” which should be understood as Capernaum (Matt 9:1). Matthew then goes on describing miracles and various events, which often have to do with discipleship and mission and culminate with the call of the Twelve and the apostolic discourse of chapter 10. While the following narrative will not be the object of our analysis, I mention it to stress the fact that the healing of the demoniacs is inserted in a literary context dealing with discipleship and mission. It seems logical, therefore, to expect that Matthew’s teaching here is focused on issues of interest to the groups of followers of Jesus belonging to Matthew’s own time and area, probably (and more generally) on (conflicting?) ideas of discipleship and mission.

Why does Matthew tell this story at this point in his Gospel, and how can we understand his intention in telling it? My impression had been that most commentaries did not consider this pericope to be of particular importance for Matthew’s narrative. Rather, most scholars seemed to invest the bulk of their attention discussing the fact that the first Gospel has two demoniacs, while Mark and Luke have only one, or trying to understand where Gadara is and why the town is not Gerasa or Gergesa or something else. It also seemed to me that most commentators have tried to explain why Matthew avoids some passages from Mark, while spending little time commenting on the small details, sometimes single words, that Matthew adds. So I asked the four PhD students in that class (now all ABD) to investigate four elements that could help us better understand the scene and its meaning in Matthew. The four sections which follow present the results of their research. The first contribution summarizes the most usual positions in contemporary scholarly criticism and offers some insight toward further research; the second analyzes what the earliest Christian writers had to say on three textual details that appear only in Matthew; the third examines pre-modern discussions regarding the name of the town near which the event allegedly took place; finally, the fourth tries to find an answer as to why Matthew avoided mentioning Δεγίων, the name of the demon(s) relayed in Mark’s account. These four contributions are followed by a *Conclusion*, in which I will seek to use the results of this research for a better understanding of Matthew’s possible reactions to Mark 5:1–20 and his intentions in re-working the Markan material.

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