In yesterday’s post I mentioned my New Testament class, and that one of the main lessons I’m trying to convey in it is that each of the Gospels has to be read for what *it* has to say. This requires the reader to bracket information that is conveyed in some other Gospel (or that they’ve heard before elsewhere), to see what the meaning of this particular text is.

That shouldn’t be such a hard idea to grasp. If I write a book about Jesus, I don’t expect or want my readers to read my book in light of what some other author said (say, Reza Aslan or Bill O’Reilly), interpreting my views in light of the other person’s views, as if my views, as I state them, are not enough or sufficient. And yet people regularly read the Gospels as if Mark must mean the same thing that John does, or that this passage in Matthew makes best sense in light of that other passage in Luke, and so on. We don’t do that with books generally. So why do it with the Bible?

I think the answer is that we do it with the Bible because (a) historically that’s how it’s always been done; (b) the fact that all these Gospels are bound together in the *same* book encourages us to do so; and (c) for some of us (not including me), the *whole book* is inspired, and so in fact there are not four authors of the Gospels, but one. The One.

But I think it’s a lousy reading strategy, even if someone *does* think that God inspired the whole thing. The meaning of each of these books opens up when you realize that they each are conveying their own distinctive message.

And that’s why I focus so much, at the beginning of the semester, on the differences among the Gospels. These differences, especially the discrepancies, show that the Gospels are each trying to convey different messages.

In my opinion, recognizing the stark differences among the Gospels –in the small details, in the major points, and in the overall portrayals of Jesus – opens up meaning, rather than shutting it down. The differences can go a long way in showing what each author wants to say.

This is clearly seen by some of the methods scholars use to study the Gospels. Since the 1950’s one of the most popular approaches to the Gospels is through “redaction criticism.” A “redactor” is an editor. Studying a “redaction” means studying the editorial changes that an author has made to the sources that he has used in writing up his account. The easiest way to do redaction criticism, then, is to compare an author’s source with his rewriting of his source, to see what he has added to it, what he has taken away from it, and what he has altered in it. For the Gospels, this means it can be of utmost value to decide whether any of the Gospel sources still survives, for the purposes of comparison.

This is one of the reasons why the “Synoptic Problem” is so important to solve. The term Synoptic Problem is a technical term for a specific issue, namely why Matthew, Mark, and Luke have so many similarities – in which stories they tell, the sequence in which they tell them, and the words with which they tell them (verbatim, word-for-word agreements in places!) – and yet also have so many differences. If there were not extensive similarities, there would be no “problem.” But how does one explain these similarities (and these differences)? The answer that has been around for a very long time indeed is that the similarities are there because these books utilize some of the same sources (they, or two of them, are copying) and the differences are there because the authors have altered the sources they have used.
I sometimes have difficulty convincing my students that if two documents have word-for-word agreements (whether a newspaper article, an ancient narrative, or a plagiarized term paper), then someone is copying someone. And so I do a little experiment with them. I did it this last week. I walk into class, and start fussing around in front of the room (of 240 students). I put down my bag; I take out my books; I take off my coat; I put my books back in the bag; I fiddle with the powerpoint; I walk around; I put my coat back on – I do things. Students are puzzled. And then I tell them each to take out a piece of paper and a pen and to write down everything they’ve seen me do since I came into the room.

I then collect four papers, at random, and tell everyone that we are going to do a synoptic comparison. And I read, one by one, each paper, asking everyone else if anyone has a *single sentence* that is just like one of the four. The four are always completely different. And no one – ever, in my 30 years of teaching – has a sentence (or even four or five words in sequence) the same as any of the four.

Then I ask them what they would think if I picked up four papers from the class, and two of them had an entire paragraph, word for word the same. What would they think then? And of course they say “Someone was cheating.” Yes, of course! Someone was copying someone else. But then I ask, what if I didn’t do this exercise today, but I waited forty, fifty, or sixty years, and I didn’t ask you, but I asked four people each of whom knew someone who had a cousin whose wife was next door neighbors with someone whose brother once knew someone in the class to write what happened that day – and they had entire sentences that were exactly alike, word for word?

Inevitably someone cries out from the back row: It’s a miracle!!!

Yup, it’s a miracle. Or someone’s copying someone. Or both. But if someone’s copying someone, it’s important to know who’s copying whom, and once that problem is solved, and if it turns out that one of the Gospels was a source for the other two, then you can see how the other two changed that one, and by doing so, you can figure out what was of utmost importance to them in their retelling of the stories.

More on that anon.

Differences in the Gospels and Redaction Criticism
Discrepancies in the Resurrection Narratives