

Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels

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Luke 1:4

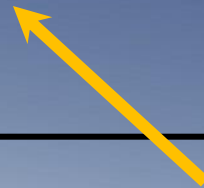
... it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Some Important Questions

1. Is there internal evidence for the truth of the Gospels? ✓
2. Is there external, historical evidence for the truth of the Gospels? ✓
3. What is the truth about alleged contradictions in the Gospels? ✓
4. What is the truth about alleged historical errors in the Gospels?

A map of the material

	External	Internal
Positive Evidence	Non-Christian sources Incidental confirmations	Undesigned Coincidences Other internal clues
Objections	Alleged historical errors in the Gospels	Alleged contradictions between the Gospels



We are here

Our objectives this morning

- To examine, from an historical point of view, several of the most common historical objections raised against the Gospels.
- To draw some morals from our examination of these objections.

Some objections to Mark

1. Mark is mistaken about the geography around the sea of Galilee (Mark 5:1-13)
2. Mark is mistaken about the geography of the coast of Palestine (Mark 7:31)
3. Mark switches the locations of Bethphage and Bethany (Mark 11:1)
4. Mark is mistaken about the Jewish law of divorce (Mark 10:12)

Objection #1: Mark 5:1-13

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. ... and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and were drowned in the sea. (ESV)

The problem

- Gerasa (modern Jerash) is not on “the other side of the sea.” It is located far south of the Sea of Galilee.
- The swine would have had to run 37 miles before falling, exhausted, into the Sea.



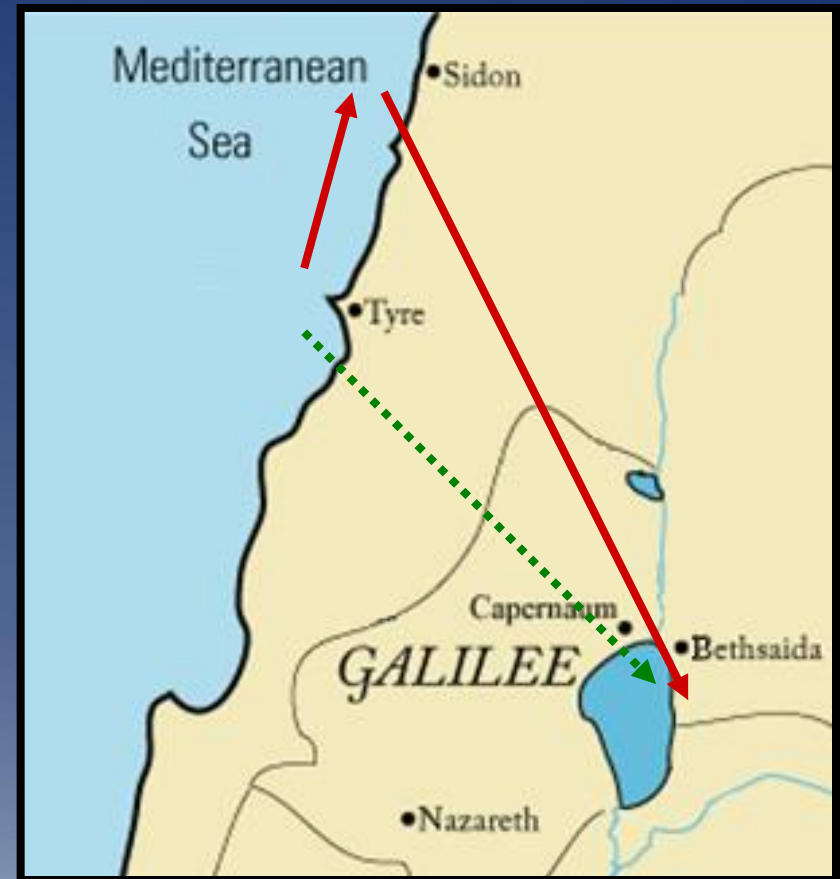
The problem

- Has Mark just blundered about the geography of Palestine?

Hold that thought! We will return to this passage later.

Objection #2: Mark 7:31

Then he [Jesus] returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.



Objection and first reply

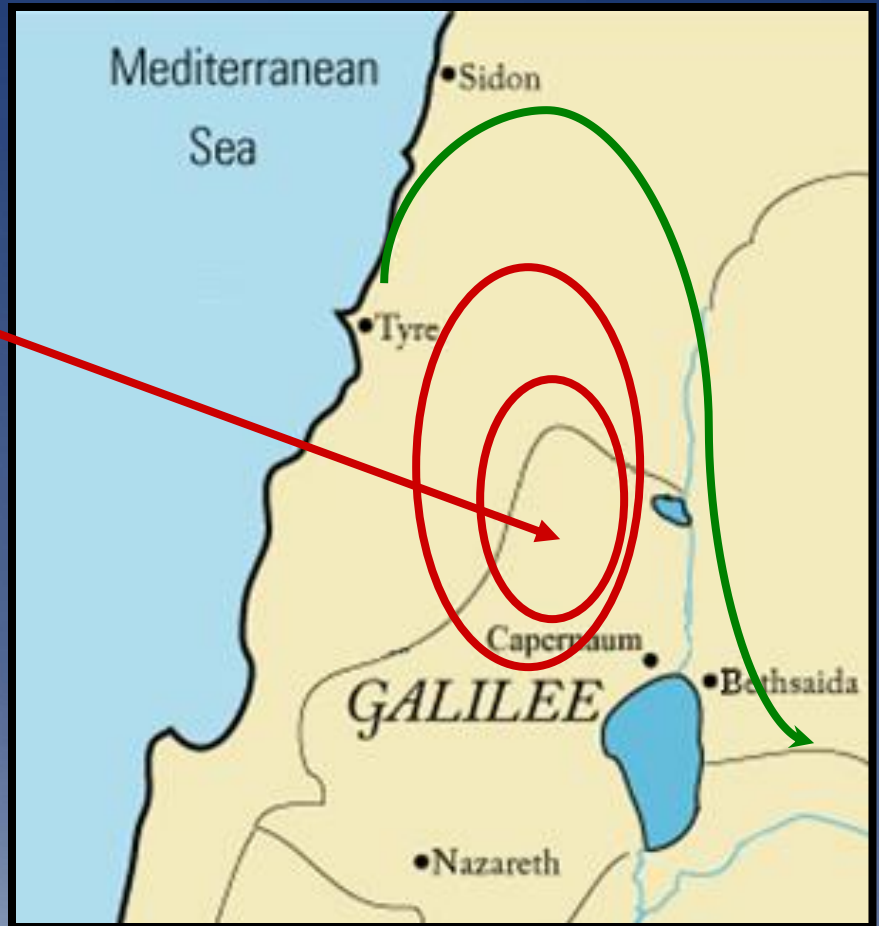
- Why would anyone go *north* in order to go *south*? Some “critical” scholars (e.g. Dennis Nineham, *The Gospel of Mark* (1963), p. 40) argue that this shows “the evangelist was not directly acquainted with Palestine.”
- One possible reply: Perhaps Jesus just had a specific reason for wanting to visit Sidon before going back to Galilee. The narrative simply doesn’t tell us.

That would be a fair response.

But we can do better.

A fuller answer

- There is a mountain (Mt. Meron) 3/4 of a mile high directly between Tyre and the Sea of Galilee.
- There is a pass from Sidon through the mountains to the Jordan river valley, where foot travelers to Galilee could have fresh water for the journey.



Mt. Meron, elevation 3,963 ft.



First moral

- Before you criticize the knowledge of a first century author who is traditionally supposed to have lived in Palestine, make sure you get your geography right.

Check a good map

Objection #3: Mark 11:1

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples ...

Does Mark give the wrong order of Bethphage and Bethany for someone traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem?

A critic states the objection

- “Anyone approaching Jerusalem from Jericho would come first to Bethany and then Bethphage, not the reverse. This is one of several passages showing that Mark knew little about Palestine; we must assume, Dennis Nineham argues, that ‘Mark did not know the relative positions of these two villages on the Jericho road.’” (Randall Helms, *Who Wrote the Gospels?* (1997), p. 6, quoting Nineham, *St. Mark*, pp. 294-95)

Let's read that verse again

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples ...

Mark does *not* say “when they drew near to Jerusalem, they came first to Bethphage, then to Bethany, ...”

He is simply telling his readers approximately where it was on the road that Jesus sent his disciples on ahead.

Second moral

- When someone claims that a first century author has made a geographical error about the country where he is supposed to have lived, read the passage for yourself—and try to use some common sense.

Read the text for yourself

Objection #4: Mark 10:12

... and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.

Jewish law makes provision for a man to divorce his wife (Deuteronomy 24) but not for a woman to divorce her husband.

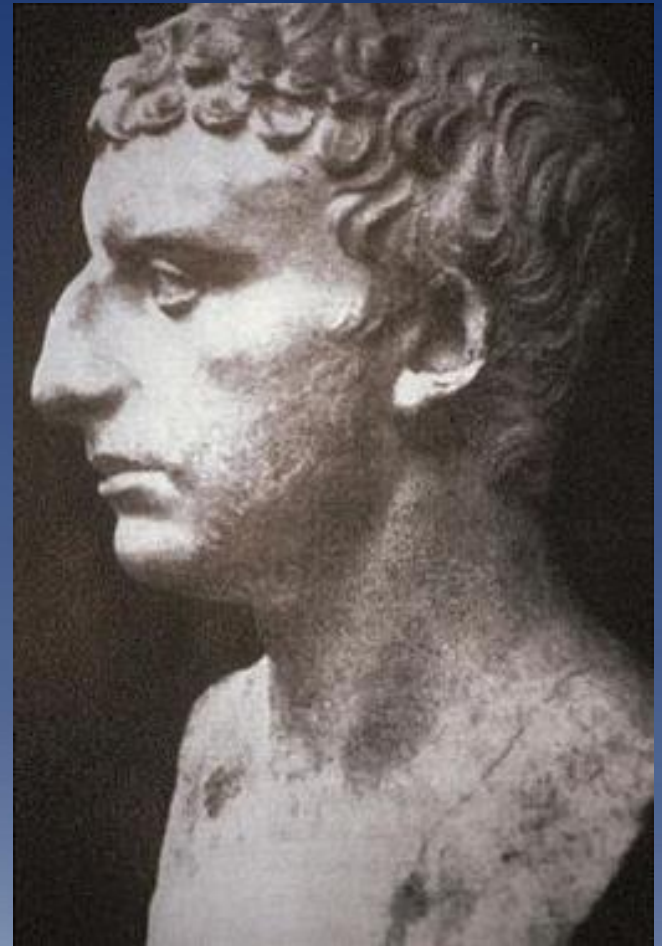
Was Mark a gentile who here betrayed his ignorance of Jewish law? Or is he deliberately changing Jesus' teaching to make it relevant for a Roman audience?

Two critics state the objection

- “This sentence is generally regarded as an addition to Jesus’ teaching that was made to address situations related to Roman legal practice whereby a woman could initiate divorce proceedings.”
 - John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, vol. 2 (2002), p. 295, note 12, emphasis added.

A Jewish historian sheds some light

- Herodias “took it upon herself to confound the laws of our country” and divorced her first husband in order to marry Herod Antipas.
 - Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.4
- Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee, *the very place where Jesus was then teaching.*



Third moral

- Before concluding that an author who is supposed to have lived in Palestine in the first century made errors regarding Jewish customs and Jewish law, *find out what those customs were*. Consider the possibility that someone might use a Roman law to do what Jewish law would not allow—particularly since the wife of the current ruler in Galilee was a Jewess who had done exactly that.

Check the historical and cultural context

Two objections against Matthew

1. Matthew's story of the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem is not historical (Matthew 2)
2. Matthew places the scene of the demoniac and the Swine in Gadara, seven miles away from the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:28)

Objection #1: Matthew 2

- The story of the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem is found in no other Gospel; it is also unmentioned in the works of Josephus, who gives a very lengthy and detailed account of the life and death of Herod the Great.
- How much weight should an “argument from silence” like this carry in our assessment of Matthew's account?

How the argument from silence runs

1. If the slaughter of the innocents had really happened as Matthew describes it, we would have other first century sources that mention it.
2. We do not have other first century sources that mention it.

Therefore,

3. The slaughter of the innocents did not happen.

Premise 2 is true.

But is premise 1 reasonable?

Why *this* argument from silence is weak

- Most of the literature from Palestine in the first century has been lost. If someone else wrote about this event, there is little reason to think we would still have his work.
- Bethlehem was an obscure village, and probably no more than a dozen children were killed. This was not an event of civic or military importance; there is no particular reason to think that Josephus would record it if he were aware of it.

Similar silence outside of the Gospels

- Josephus and Philo both pass over the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius in silence, though it is mentioned by the second century Roman historian Suetonius (*Life of Claudius* 25.4).
- We have just *one* passing mention of the event in a first century source—in Acts 18:2.

Despite Josephus's silence, all historians acknowledge that the event took place

Another bad argument from silence

- Mark **15:33**—**At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.**
- “[A] distinct chapter of Pliny is devoted to eclipses of an extraordinary nature, and unusual duration,” but Pliny does not mention this darkness.
 - Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 2 (Dublin, 1781) ch. 15, p. 312

***If there really was such a darkness,
how could Pliny have missed it?***

Assessing Gibbon's argument from silence

- Pliny did not live in Judea at the time.
- The darkness could not have been due to a solar eclipse.
- The entire “chapter” is just *eighteen words long* in Latin:
“Unusually long, portentous eclipses of the sun also take place, as when Caesar the dictator was slain; and in the war against Antony, the sun remained dim for nearly a year.”
 - Pliny, *Natural History* 2.30

This is hardly a comprehensive record of unusual periods of darkness everywhere in the Roman Empire

Fourth moral

- An argument from the silence of ancient authors is almost never a good reason to disregard the direct positive testimony of a contemporary author.

Distrust arguments from silence

Objection #2: Matthew 8:28

- And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, ...
- Matthew (it seems) places the event in Gadara, not in Gerasa, as Mark did.
- But Gadara is still seven miles away from the Sea of Galilee. What is going on?

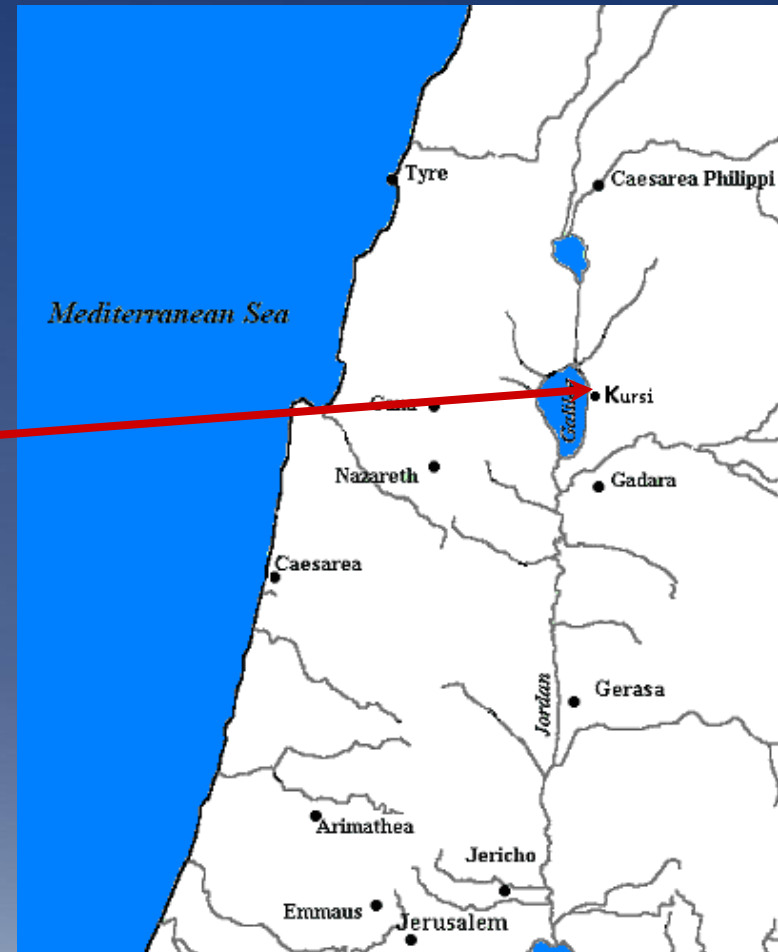


Checking the text

- There are several significant variants in the Greek text of Mark 5:1 and the parallel texts, Matthew 8:28 and Luke 8:26-27.
- In Mark and Luke, the best-attested reading is “Gerasenes,” an attempt to represent the adjective corresponding to the place name.
- The Aramaic version of the place name would be written without vowels: Gerasa = GRS or KRS.

Checking the map

- The identification of “the region of the Gerasenes” in Mark with Gerasa (modern day Jerash) is doubtful.
- A plausible identification is with Kersa, modern Kursi, on the eastern shore, where a steep hill runs down almost directly into the water.



The hillside at Kursi



Another view of the hill at Kursi



A third view of the hill at Kursi



But what about “Gadarenes”?

- It seems probable that some early copyist of Matthew's Gospel either misspelled the term “Gerasenes” or mistook it for “Gadarenes.”
- The copyists of manuscripts are not immune to making errors of spelling or to “fixing” what they are copying if they think it is a spelling mistake.

Summary of the morals drawn

Check a good map

Read the text for yourself

Check the historical and cultural context

Distrust arguments from silence

Do your historical homework

historicalapologetics.org



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Two objections against Luke

1. According to Luke, Caesar Augustus ordered a taxation of the whole Roman empire during the reign of Herod the Great; but Augustus never did this, and he could not have ordered a census just in Herod's domain (Luke 2:1)
2. Luke confuses this supposed census with one under Quirinius that took place about 12 years later (Luke 2:1-2)

Objection #1: Luke 2:1

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.
(In the NIV, “... the entire Roman world”)

- Objection: Caesar Augustus never ordered all the world (or all the Roman world) to be registered.

Answer to objection #1

- What this verse says is that the whole οἰκουμένη – the whole “land” – was to be registered.
- Luke uses this term, and nearly this same construction, in Acts 11:28: . . . **there would be a great famine over all the οἰκουμένη** . . . But here, it clearly means the land of Judea, not the whole Roman empire.

Pressing objection #1

- Judea was under the control of Herod the Great, and as a client king in good standing, Herod would have been allowed to levy taxes himself. So Augustus would not have issued this decree.

But was he “in good standing”?

Answering the further objection

- Near the end of his reign, Herod fell out of favor with Augustus, who sent him a sharply worded letter telling him that whereas he had treated him before as his friend, he would from that point on treat him as his subject (Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.9.3 (#290)).
- Formally or in effect, Herod was demoted from *rex socius* to *rex amicus* (or worse) and thus lost the authority to conduct his own taxing.

Answering the further objection

- From Josephus we learn that at this time the Romans required an oath of allegiance to Caesar from the citizens of Herod's domain (*Antiquities* 17.2.4). This would be a step in the reduction of Palestine from a kingdom to the status of a Roman province.
- But within a year or so, as Josephus reports, Herod managed to get back into Augustus's good graces.

Summary of the answer to objection #1

- The registration was probably only in Herod's dominion, not empire-wide.
- It may have been ordered when Herod fell out of favor with Augustus around 7 BC.
- This explanation covers the oath of loyalty to Caesar that Josephus mentions, which is otherwise unexplained.

Objection #2: Luke 2:2

This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

- But Quirinius didn't become governor of Syria until AD 6, ten years after Herod the Great was dead. How can a chronological blunder of ten to twelve years be explained?

Before we answer this objection ...

- Luke knows that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great (Luke 1:5)
- Luke also knows about the taxation under Quirinius in AD 6 (Acts 5:37)

Any explanation of Luke's language in Luke 2:1-2 must be compatible with these facts

Two possible answers

1. The Greek can be taken to mean that there were two taxations, and this one came *before* the one under Quirinius.
2. The Greek in this text does not actually claim that the well-known taxation under Quirinius took place in 6 BC.

The first explanation

- We could take πρωτη as a term of comparison, on the model of John 1:15 (... πρωτος μου ην ...), reading, “This census took place *before* Quirinius was governor of Syria.”
- Such a reading does require that we take the Greek as idiomatic, constructing a genitive of time with adverbs of comparison; but this sort of construction is found in the Septuagint, e.g., Jer. 29:2.

The second explanation

- Reading αὐτή for αὕτη, per Ebrard, Godet, etc.,
The ἀπογραφή itself was first made ...
- The term ἀπογραφή can mean (1) a registration or (2) a taxation involving a registration.
- An admissible reading of Luke's Greek here is that Quirinius, a decade later, picked up where the matter was dropped in 6 BC and brought the taxation itself to pass.
- Luke uses the verb ἐγένετο this way in Acts 11:28.

Consequences of the first or second reading

- Luke's passing mention of the ἀπογραφή in the time of Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37) does not have to be explained away.
- Luke's brief reference to the registration corresponds to Josephus's allusion in *Antiquities* 17.2.4 to an oath of allegiance to Caesar in Judea near the end of the reign of Herod the Great—which would be taken at the time of a registration.
- All apparent chronological discrepancies disappear.

Summary of the response to objection #2

- Luke intends to convey either that this census was *before* the one under Quirinius, or else that, although the census was aborted in 6 BC, it was picked up and carried through to its logical completion—the taxation *itself*—under Quirinius.

Fifth moral

Do your historical homework

A review of the objections to Mark

1. The geography around the sea of Galilee (5:1-13)
 - Dubious geography; Kursi answers to Mark's description both in location and in topography
2. The geography of the coast of Palestine (7:31)
 - Bad geography; a topographical map reveals the rationale that Mark leaves unstated
3. The locations of Bethphage and Bethany (11:1)
 - Serious misreading of the text; simple examination of the text shows that there is no problem here.
4. The Jewish custom of hand washing (7:2-3)
 - Bad history; refuted by modern archaeology.
5. The law of divorce (Mark 10:12)
 - Shockingly bad history; refuted by reading Josephus

A review of the objections to Matthew

1. Matthew's story of the slaughter of the innocents is not found in other first century sources
 - But this is merely an argument from silence and is not a serious reason to doubt Matthew's account
2. Matthew's reference to the region of the "Gadarenes" (8:28)
 - Probably just an early scribal error

Was Quirinius governor of Syria twice?

- We know that Quintilius Varus was the governor of Syria from about 6 - 4 BC, and Gaius Sentius Saturninus was governor before him. So if Quirinius was a governor in Syria at the time when Jesus was born, he was there on an extraordinary appointment from Caesar.
- Such extraordinary legates were known in Syria about this time. Josephus mentions a man named Volumnius, an associate of Saturninus, who was *not* the Senate's appointed governor, but he calls them both “governors” (*Antiquities* 16.9.1, 2, 5).

Archaeological evidence

- An inscription found at Tivoli describes someone (the name is lost at the beginning) who, “being a legate of Augustus for the second time received Syria and Phoenecia.”
- If this were a reference to Quirinius, it might indicate that he had been imperial legate earlier than AD 6.
- But the grammar of the inscription indicates that it is this person’s second time as imperial legate, not his second time as governor of Syria.
- So while this explanation is *possible*, it does not have any direct support.

Objection #4: Mark 7:3

- “Mark 7:3 indicates that the Pharisees ‘and all the Jews’ washed their hands before eating, so as to observe ‘the tradition of the elders.’ This is not true: most Jews did not engage in this ritual.”
 - Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* (2010), p. 287



What is the evidence that Mark is wrong?

- In Exodus 30:18-21; 40:30-32 and Leviticus 20:1-16, the *priests* are called to observe hand washing practices, but the *people in general* are not.
- But *did* the Jews of Jesus' time, who were heavily influenced by the Pharisees, engage in the practice even though the written Law did not require it of them?

Some Jewish evidence

- “And *as is the custom of all the Jews*, they washed their hands in the sea and prayed to God, ...” —Letter of Aristeas (~200 BC), sec. 305
- The law “does not look upon those who have even touched a dead body, which has met with a natural death, as pure and clean, until they have washed and purified themselves with sprinklings and ablutions; ...” Philo (~AD 30), *The Special Laws* 3.205
- See also the Mishnah, tractates *m. Yadayim* 1.1-2.4, *m. Hagigah* 2.5-6, etc.

Modern scholarly opinion

- “The centrality of impurity to Jewish life in the Second Temple period is supported by archaeological evidence. The discovery of *mikvaot* in such diverse places as Gamla, Sepphoris, Herodium and Massada suggests that in Palestine *the removal of impurity* was not a rite reserved only for approaching the sacred precincts of the Temple, but *was common practice for Jews of all walks of life.*

Modern scholarly opinion

- “... [T]he textual evidence suggests that the Jews of the Diaspora also purified themselves, if not through immersion, then by sprinkling, splashing or *hand washing*.”
 - Susan Haber, “*They Shall Purify Themselves*”: *Essays on Purity in Early Judaism* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), pp. 130-31 [emphasis added]