Mark 12:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

> Now there were seven brethren: and the first took a wife, and dying left no seed.

Analysis

Now there were seven brethren: and the first took a wife, and dying left no seed (ἑπτὰ ἀδελφοὶ ἦσαν· καὶ ὁ πρῶτος ἔλαβεν γυναῖκα, καὶ ἀποθνῄσκων οὐκ ἀφῆκεν σπέρμα). The Sadducees begin their hypothetical with seven brothers—the number of completion in Hebrew thought, chosen to maximize the scenario's complexity. The first brother married but died childless (ouk aphēken sperma, οὐκ ἀφῆκεν σπέρμα, "left no seed")—the exact condition triggering levirate marriage obligation.

This test case resembles the story in Tobit 3:8; 7:11 (deuterocanonical book, c. 200 BC) where Sarah's seven husbands die before consummating marriage. The Sadducees' hypothetical may allude to this known story, though their version has each brother fulfill the levirate duty before dying. The scenario's improbability is deliberate—they're constructing a reductio ad absurdum argument: if resurrection were true, this situation would create impossible complications, therefore resurrection must be false.

Historical Context

The number seven appears throughout Scripture as symbolic of completion or perfection (creation week, Genesis 2:2; seven days of feasts, Leviticus 23; seventy weeks in Daniel 9:24). While the Sadducees' scenario was hypothetical, ancient Near Eastern cultures practiced levirate marriage, and cases of multiple brothers dying childless, though rare, could occur. The book of Tobit (accepted as canonical

by Catholics and Orthodox) contains a similar story where the demon Asmodeus kills Sarah's seven husbands. Whether the Sadducees alluded to Tobit (which they wouldn't accept as Scripture) or created an original hypothetical, their point was clear: resurrection creates marital chaos. Jesus will demonstrate they fundamentally misunderstood resurrection life.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. What does the Sadducees' use of an extreme hypothetical reveal about attempting to disprove biblical doctrines through logical puzzles?
2. How might we similarly construct unlikely scenarios to avoid accepting difficult biblical teachings?

Interlinear Text

ἑπτὰ	ἀδελφοὶ	ἦσαν·	καὶ	ὁ	πρῶτος	ἔλαβεν
seven	brethren	Now there were	and	G3588	the first	took
G2033	G80	G2258	G2532		G4413	G2983

γυναῖκα	καὶ	ἀποθνήσκων	οὐκ	ἀφῆκεν	σπέρμα·
a wife	and	dying	no	left	seed
G1135	G2532	G599	G3756	G863	G4690