

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 Reviling of the Thieves

There is a common idea in Biblical scholarship that the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the so-called “synoptic” gospels, share a similar source. Those who postulate this will often point to Mark as the “original gospel,” no doubt due to its brevity, assuming that the later books would have added to the source material. Still further back, some surmise, Mark had its origins in a still more ancient text, often called the “Q” manuscript. It is amazing to me that these scholars will put more faith in this “Q” manuscript, a document that no one has ever seen and for whose existence not a shred of evidence can be found, than they will in the actual gospels that are testified to by hundreds of ancient manuscripts!

Yet this teaching is accepted by many, and one who wishes to study the Word must face up to it and decide what to do with ideas such as this. The similarity of these gospels cannot be denied. Yet from the time I first heard this argument it has always struck me what careless scholars the writers of these gospels must have been if they were as incapable of following their source document as they appear to be. For although the similarity between these gospels cannot be denied, the profound differences in things that seem to be basic fact leave one marveling that such errors could be allowed to slip by on the part of one ingenious enough to write these books in the first place. Perhaps no better example of this can be given than that of the reviling of the thieves on the cross.

First let us examine the details given of the thieves on the cross in each of the four gospel records.

I realize that no one claims that John is synoptic, but since this author believes that all four of the gospels are inspired and thus must be dealt with on an equal plane, we will consider this gospel as well.

1. In Matthew, we read that after the Lord was crucified, His clothes were divided among the soldiers, and the accusation “This is Jesus the King of the Jews” was placed above His cross, “Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left.” (Matthew 27:38) Their behavior is described in verse 44, “Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing.” (In other words, the same thing as said in verses 40-43.) No further conversation with the Lord Jesus on the part of the robbers is recorded.

2. In Mark, we read that after the Lord was crucified, His clothes were divided among the soldiers, and the accusation “The King of the Jews” was placed above His cross, “With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left.” (Mark 15:27) Mark goes on to say, “So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘And He was numbered with the transgressors.’” (Mark 15:28) Their behavior is described in the latter part of verse 32, “Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.” No further conversation with the Lord Jesus on the part of the robbers is recorded.

3. In Luke, we read that as the Lord was being led to be crucified, “There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death. And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left.” (Luke 23:32) After this the dividing of the garments, the mocking of the rulers, and the placement of the inscription, “This is the King of the Jews” is mentioned. Then finally in verses 39-41 we

read, "Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, 'If you are the Christ, save Yourself and us.' But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.'" Then in verses 42-43 we read of a further conversation between this criminal and the Lord: "Then he said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise.'"

4. In John, we read of the Lord being led to Golgotha, "Where they crucified Him, and two others with Him, one on either side, and Jesus in the center." The behavior of the others is not described, nor is any further conversation with the Lord Jesus on the part of the others recorded.

Thus we see that, although the accounts of the three synoptic gospels are similar, there are obvious differences.

1. Matthew and Mark both claim that the others who were crucified with him were crucified AFTER the dividing of the garments and the placement of the accusation (THEN two robbers were crucified with Him in Matthew 27:38.) Yet in Luke (and John) we read that the two were "led with Him" and were crucified BEFORE the dividing of the garments or the placement of the accusation. The same two men could not have been crucified at two different times. When were they really crucified?

2. Matthew and Mark both claim that the others who were crucified were "robbers." In Greek this is the word "lestai," and indicates literally thieves. In Luke the claim is that they were "criminals." In Greek this is the word "kakourgoi," which means "evildoers" and probably indicates that these two were rebels who had committed acts of treason against Rome. Both classes of men were commonly crucified. Which were these?

3. Matthew and Mark both claim that the robbers mocked Him along with the unbelieving rulers. In Luke, however, we read that only one of them reviled Him, whereas the other pled His cause, and then demonstrated faith by requesting of Him a place in His Kingdom, which request the Lord granted. One cannot revile and not revile at the same time. Did they both revile Him, or just one?

These difficulties cannot be ignored. Moreover, if these gospels be gleaned from the same source document, then we would have to blame the author of Luke for having made a serious blunder in reading his source. Can it be that the man who claimed to have "perfect understanding of all things from the very first" (Luke 1:3) could have made such a serious mistake? And yet if he didn't, are Matthew and Mark then guilty of disparaging a man who demonstrated such impressive faith in our Lord?

I believe the key to these difficulties can be found in the book of John. There in chapter 19 right after the Lord dies we read in verse 31, "Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day,) the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away." A "high day" Sabbath was not the usual Saturday weekly Sabbath, but rather a Sabbath that started a feast, in this case the Feast of Unleavened Bread. According to Leviticus 23:7, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread was always to be a Sabbath day. This very special day would be observed by all the Jews in Israel, and even criminals on crosses were not to be excepted. Thus, since hanging on a cross involved doing very much work indeed just to breathe, it was common in Israel that those crucified would have their legs broken before the Sabbath. Since they then couldn't push themselves up to breathe, they would suffocate, bringing a quick and probably merciful end to their suffering. This was not done out of mercy, however, but out of deference to the law of the Sabbath.

Thus we read on in verses 32-33, "Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs."

Now we come upon a puzzle. If the crosses were all lined up on the hill and Jesus' was in the middle, as we read in all the gospels, then why would the soldiers break the legs of the other two before they came to Jesus? It would seem most logical for them to break the legs of all those crucified in order. Thus whatever side they started on they would have broken that man's legs, then come to Jesus in the middle, and then gone on to the one on the other side of the hill. But it makes it most clear in verse 32 that they broke the legs of two men before they "came to" Jesus. How could this be, if Jesus was in the middle? For then they would have had to break the legs of the one, cross the top of the hill bypassing Jesus, go down to break the legs of the other one, then come back up the hill to Jesus. This doesn't make any sense. Why would the soldiers act in this way?

I believe the answer can clearly be seen. Of course they would have gone down the line, breaking the legs of each man as they came to him. Thus there must have been two men on the one side of the hill before they came to Jesus! There were five men on crosses on the hill that day, not three. Five crucifixions took place. The first three were those of the Lord and the two evildoers as recorded in Luke and John. These crucifixions were done together, and Jesus was in the middle of these two men. Then later in the day the two robbers were led out to be crucified. Since these crosses already had to be farther down the hill, the Roman soldiers again crucified one of these robbers on each side of Jesus further down the hill next to the evildoers who were already hung there. Thus these five hung on the cross on Golgotha that day.

Now having established this we can easily see why the record of the revilings is given in the various gospels as it is. The rebels were crucified with the Lord Jesus and thus were in easy speaking distance from Him. They could have carried on an extended conversation with Him and with each other, as we read they did. One of these two men reviled Jesus, but the other rebuked him and expressed faith in the Lord. This man was promised by our Lord that he would be with Him in paradise. The robbers, however, were farther down the hill away from Jesus. They may have been able to have a conversation with the rebels, but actually speaking with the Lord or with each other would have been more difficult for them, and thus no actual conversation is recorded. These two men both reviled the Lord, and neither one demonstrated any faith whatsoever, as is recorded in Matthew and Mark.

Thus we see that once again our difficulty in figuring out a "contradiction in Scripture" comes about by assuming that two similar things are the same. The crucifixion accounts of these two sets of men are similar, yet we can establish by the differences that they are not the same. Thus the gospels are once again justified in their teaching and their words are proved correct.

Thus we can see how foolish are the assertions of the synoptic gospels having had a similar source document or having been written using Mark as a source. These gospels in many key points do not give the same details or tell about the exact same things. As I wrote earlier in my message on "The Denials of Peter" they each record a different set of three of his six denials. And here likewise we see that Luke tells of a different set of two crucified with Him than do Matthew and Mark. If they were using the same source then they should have listed the same crucifixions as their source. The fact that they list these two separate crucifixions shows that their source was not a dead document but a living God Who knew exactly what went on at the time He was writing about and was able to give different details of the same event in each of the gospels He was writing.

Thus the gospels are not a confusing set of scrambled versions of the same event. Rather they are a complicated puzzle giving in each gospel different details of events that when pieced together reveal to us one, single, congruous whole. There are no "contradictions" between them, but rather only complementing accounts. Thus categorizing the first three gospels as "synoptic" hides our eyes and minds from the truth. But once we realize that these gospels may appear similar on the surface but in fact often record different events, we can see that each gospel is valuable in its own right, not just repeating what is said in the other synoptic gospels but rather giving us details and accounts without which the Bible picture would be incomplete.

Let us thank God for each of the accounts of the ministry of Christ on earth that He has given us. Each one is invaluable for the truth it reveals of our Lord. And each one is perfectly harmonious with all the others down to even the most specific detail. Thus there are no “contradictions,” but only the truth of God waiting to be revealed to the honest seeker. Let us each strive to be such.

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