

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 Feeding of the Multitude

I have written several messages now on "Contradictions in Scripture" dealing with supposed discrepancies between the various gospels. Some claim that these discrepancies prove the fallibility of the Bible, but I have argued that these contradictions are actually caused by the improper interpretations of the one claiming the discrepancies. I have demonstrated that these differences are caused by the fact that each gospel details similar but different events, and in trying to make these into the same event a "contradiction" is created.

Yet at this point some might argue that I have overstated my case. Supposing, they might say, that a spectacular event like the calming of the sea could have happened twice is stretching my argument to extremes. Such an event, they might argue, is too singular and outstanding to have happened more than once. I will deal with this argument in this message.

Certainly there are miracles of Christ that are so spectacular that they stand out from all the rest. Yet I do not agree that even such miracles as these could not have been repeated. For I do not believe that Christ simply "got lucky" and these miracles just happened to occur as He hoped they would. No, I believe that these miracles were enacted by the One Who had created this world through His Own power, and thus could be repeated as often as He liked.

But what if one should argue that my words are just my own opinion? He might say that there is no proof that these events given are different rather than the same, or that I am just claiming this because it fits my theory, and thus it is more wishful thinking on my part than fact. Yet this can clearly be demonstrated to be false. For there is a miracle of our Lord, seemingly singular in its spectacularity, which was nevertheless clearly repeated. That is the miracle of the feeding of the multitude.

In Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-14, we read of the sensational event of Christ feeding a multitude consisting of five thousand men, excepting women and children. The details in all four gospels seem to coincide:

1. Christ goes to a deserted place to be by Himself with His disciples, but the multitudes hear where He is and follow Him. Matthew 14:13, Mark 6:30-33, Luke 9:10-11a, John 6:1-4.
2. Christ has compassion on them, and heals their sick and teaches them. Matthew 4:14, Mark 6:34, Luke 9:11b.
3. When evening comes, the disciples express concern that there is nothing to feed the people, and urge Jesus to send them away. Matthew 14:15, Mark 6:35-36, Luke 9:12.
4. Jesus urges them to find the people something to eat. Matthew 14:16, Mark 6:37, Luke 9:13a, John 6:5-6.
5. The disciples argue that they only have a young boy's lunch of five loaves and two fish. Matthew 14:17, Mark 6:38, Luke 9:13b, John 6:7-9.

6. The Lord commands the people to sit down in groups. Then He takes the loaves and the fish, looks up to heaven, blesses them, breaks them, and gives them to the disciples to give to the multitude. Matthew 14:18-19, Mark 6:39-41, Luke 9:14-16, John 9:10-11.

7. The multitude eat and are filled, and twelve baskets of fragments are left over. The number that ate is given as five thousand men, besides women and children. Matthew 14:20-21, Mark 6:42-44, Luke 9:17, John 6:12-14.

As you can see if you examine each of these passages, the details of this event as given in each gospel are basically the same. A gospel may add details that the others don't, but no detail is in contradiction. Thus we would call this a clear example of one event repeated in all four gospels. There are no contradictions between the gospels, and so the events given in each gospel are clearly one and the same.

However, two of the gospels, Matthew and Mark, tell of another feeding of the multitude! In Matthew 15:29-38 and Mark 8:1-9 this event is set forth. The details of this second feeding differ from the first as follows:

1. The Lord Jesus goes up on a mountain near the Sea of Galilee with His disciples and the multitude follow Him there (Matthew 15:29), whereas in the previous story He was said to be in a deserted place.

2. Christ heals their sick (Matthew 15:30-31) just as in the previous story.

3. The Lord calls His disciples to Him and explains to them that He has compassion on the multitude because they have been with Him three days with nothing to eat and may faint on the way if He sends them home (Matthew 15:32, Mark 8:1-3,) whereas in the previous story it was the disciples who brought the problem to His attention. The disciples complain that they cannot get enough bread to feed such a multitude in the wilderness (Matthew 15:33, Mark 8:4,) whereas in the previous story, since the multitude had not been there for such a long time, they urged the Lord to send the people away to find food.

4. The Lord asks them how many loaves they have (Matthew 15:34a, Mark 8:5a,) whereas in the previous story He merely told them to find the people something to eat.

5. The disciples respond that they have seven loaves and a few little fish (Matthew 15:34b, Mark 8:5b,) whereas in the previous story they had five loaves and two fish.

6. Jesus commands the people to sit down, but there is no mention of groups, as in the previous story. Then He takes the loaves and the fish, blesses them, breaks them, and gives them to the disciples to give to the multitude (Matthew 15:35-36, Mark 8:6-7,) as in the previous story.

7. The multitude eat and are filled, and seven large baskets of fragments are left over, whereas in the previous story it was twelve baskets. The number that ate is given as four thousand men, besides women and children (Matthew 15:37-38, Mark 8:8-9,) whereas in the previous story the number was five thousand.

Thus it can be seen that these two stories differ. They are very similar, and yet the details are different. If the story of the feeding of the other multitude was not in Matthew and Mark but remained in Luke and John, then we might assume that these stories are one and the same and that there are contradictions between these gospels. And yet BOTH feedings are mentioned in Matthew and Mark, which seems to clearly indicate that these events are not contradictory but did indeed happen twice!

But some might still say that this is the same story, and that for some reason Matthew and Mark repeated it twice with some slight inaccuracies. But we can put such an argument finally to rest by looking a little further into these gospels. For in Matthew 16:5-12 and Mark 8:13-21, we read

that Jesus and His disciples departed in a boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Upon arriving there, the disciples find that they had forgotten to bring any bread, and had only one loaf with them in the boat. The Lord tells them, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." The disciples mistakenly reason that the Lord had said this because they had no bread, so He explains further, "O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments did you take up?" They said to Him, "Twelve." "Also, when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of fragments did you take up?" And they said, "Seven." So He said to them, "How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?- but to beware of the doctrine of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Matthew 16:8-12 and Mark 8:17-21 in my combined version.)

Thus we see that Christ actually taught a lesson based on the fact that He had worked this miracle twice. He pointed out to them that in the first case He had fed more people with fewer loaves and had more baskets left over, and in the second case He had fed fewer people with more loaves and had fewer baskets left over. Thus the result of His miracle was not dependent upon the material He had to start with, but only on the power of God. Christ was not following some magic formula that was expanding the food, or depending on some undiscovered law of science to produce such a great feast from so little food to start with. If He had been, then the food would have expanded in proportion to how much He had to start with. No, what He had done here was dependent only upon the power of God. To the Lord, one loaf was as good as a thousand, and He could work a miracle with either one. Thus the disciples had no reason to be concerned with the fact that they only had one loaf when they had the Giver of bread Himself there with them. Rather they should be concerned with the Lord's enemies and the false doctrines they taught. These, not lack of bread, were the true threat they faced.

So we see that there can be no mistake. This miracle of the feeding of the multitude was performed twice. Moreover, there was a reason it was performed twice. Through its repetition, the Lord taught an important lesson about Himself and His power to the disciples that He couldn't have taught them if He had worked this miracle only once. Working this miracle twice served a Divine purpose, and that is the reason it was repeated.

Thus we would claim that this is the reason that so many other miracles of Christ were repeated. God had a purpose in doing so, and therefore saw to it that similar circumstances would arise so that similar miracles could be performed. And through the performing of these miracles, valuable lessons could be taught. Yet, as we saw with Luke and John, not every gospel writer has to record both miracles. Often, one of the accounts will suffice in a gospel. Yet the other account is not lost to us, for it can be found in a different gospel. This is God's choice and selection in placing different stories in different gospels. We must not see these as contradictions, but as the hand of the Lord working to give us as complete a picture as possible of the work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So the miracle of the feeding of the multitude provides an important pattern for us in examining other supposed discrepancies. Its lessons can be applied to other miracles, and can help us to see that there are in fact no real contradictions in Scripture.

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