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BLIND BARTIMAEUS CRIES OUT AGAIN

by H. W. PARROTT

A FAMILIAR problem in Synoptic relationships is examined anew, and a fresh solution is suggested.

MUCH may be learnt by a comparative study of parallel records in the three Synoptic Gospels, and the present study is intended to be an illustration of the value of this method of study for the intelligent understanding of the narratives.

The three accounts of the healing of blind Bartimaeus outside the city of Jericho have occasioned a great deal of comment in view of a number of remarkable divergencies between the three records. Matthew tells of two blind men in a joint appeal to Christ. Mark and Luke speak of one only, the former giving his name, no doubt because he became a distinguished figure later in the Christian Church. There are differences in the manner of healing, by touching the eyes of the blind men, by word of command, by statement of fact; but the most puzzling difficulty, and that which has occasioned the most discussion and given rise to so many suggestions in an attempt to reconcile the statements, is the locality in which the incident is said to have taken place. Matthew and Mark say it happened as Christ and His company were leaving Jericho, Luke as they approached the city.

These divergencies have led to a number of unwarrantable conclusions by commentators.

- (1) That the records relate to two or even three separate miracles.
- (2) That they relate to two cities of Jericho—old and new.
- (3) That they contain irreconcilable contradictions.
- (4) That such conflict in detail is of no moment, and does not affect the integrity of the record.

To have the issues clearly before us let me quote a number of significant references to the problem.

These are obviously slips of memory¹.

¹ David Smith, *In the Days of His Flesh*.

Only those who have a narrow view respecting inspiration and its effects will be concerned to reconcile these differences, and make each of the three verbally exact².

The inspiration of the Evangelists did not extend to minutiae of this sort³.

In the present instance the statement of Mark which is in every way fuller and more precise is probably to be preferred to that of Luke⁴.

These differences between the three accounts are of little moment, except for the instruction of those who think that they are bound to believe that every statement in Scripture must be historically true⁵.

But perhaps most significant of all is Farrar's statement in his *Life of Christ*:

Those who have a narrow, timid, superstitious and unscriptural view of Inspiration may well be troubled by the obvious discrepancies between the Evangelists in this narrative . . . but no reasonable reader will be troubled by differences which do *not* affect the truthfulness—though of course they affect the *accuracy*—of the narrative; and which without a direct and wholly needless miraculous intervention *must* have occurred, as they actually *do* occur in the narratives, as in those of all truthful witnesses.

And then he undermines the whole of his argument by adding this obviously true statement:

I believe that if we knew the exact circumstances, the discrepancy would vanish.

Other writers suspend judgment. Thus Edersheim:

It is better to admit our inability to conciliate these differing notes of time than to make clumsy attempts at harmonising them.

But the majority of the well-known commentators seem to have resigned themselves to the belief that the statement of Luke is irreconcilable with that of the others, and must be a mistake that has crept into his source.

To revert to the four conclusions enumerated above, the first two look like devices to avoid admitting a clear contradiction. The last two, in my opinion, result from a failure to examine the evidence adequately, and from a readiness to admit error in the records, which is the inevitable consequence of a theory of inspiration which can distinguish between "plenary" and "verbal" and between "truthfulness" and "accuracy."

I plead for an even closer examination of the words of the Evangelists with less preoccupation with the Synoptic Problem and our ability to solve it, and a little more appreciation of the fact that

² A. Plummer, *Luke* (I.C.C.).

³ Sadler on Mark 10:46.

⁴ H. B. Swete, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 242.

⁵ A. Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew*.

these writings are in a very real sense the Word of God and that the writers did indeed experience the help of the Holy Spirit in bringing to their remembrance the things that Jesus spoke.

Let us examine the verbs describing Action or Movement used by the three writers, for the matter largely turns on the meaning and use of these words.

Matthew uses six: ἐκπορεύομαι, ἀκολουθέω, κάθημαι, παράγω, ἵστημι, ἀπτω.

Mark uses nine: ἔρχομαι, ἐκπορεύομαι, κάθημαι, ἵστημι, ἐγείρω, ἀναπηδάω, ὑπάγω, ἀκολουθέω.

Luke uses eleven: ἐγγίζω, κάθημαι, διαπορεύομαι, παρέχομαι, προάγω, ἵστημι, ἄγω, ἀκολουθέω, εἰσέρχομαι, διέρχομαι.

In these three parallel records, then, only three of these words, those for "sitting", "standing" and "following" are common to all three.

Only two of them, those for "going out" and "passing by" are common to two. The other eleven words are used by one author only, i.e., the words meaning come, arise, leap up, go, draw near, pass through, pass by, go before, lead to, enter, come through.

What more evidence does one require of the independence of the three writers or of the most careful selection of words and their exact use to describe the appropriate action or movement? We have no scissors-and-paste treatment here, or substitution of favourite words, or elimination of unnecessary words.

A study of these words in their various contexts will disclose certain important facts. First of all, that it was Christ's purpose to pass right through Jericho without stopping and without delay. Secondly, that He actually did this. And thirdly, that after He had passed through the city something happened to cause Him to alter His purpose, and in consequence the whole company turned about and proceeded back into the city.

That it was the Saviour's intention to press on to Jerusalem is clear from many indications. From the beginning of the last journey "He set His face stedfastly to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9 : 51), and as they approached Jericho, the intense preoccupation of His mind was evident in His manner as He went in advance of His disciples, as if impelled by a powerful impulse, so that they were amazed, and those that followed were afraid—the very record of it fills us with amazement (Mark 10 : 32). And Mark implies that He went right through Jericho, mentioning the arrival and departure in one breath, as it were, "And they come [Historic Present] to Jericho [not an unnecessary statement], and as they

went out of Jericho [Genitive Absolute]" . . . Luke does the same: "And (now) entering He was passing through Jericho."

The Greco-Roman city of Jericho, fresh from the hands of Archelaus, would have no appeal to the Saviour, with its grand palaces, temples and amphitheatre; and He passed through it only because the Roman road to Jerusalem passed through the city. That He actually carried out His purpose can be inferred from the fact that the interview with Zacchaeus took place outside the city, and not, as usually taken for granted, inside the city. Reasons for this inference, which amounts almost to a certainty, can be drawn from the narratives and from what Josephus and other contemporary writers tell us of the city and the surrounding country.

Luke immediately follows his account with the story of Zacchaeus, and introduces it in such a way as to suggest that it actually took place beforehand and was the reason for the return to Jericho, and thus wishes us to understand that Zacchaeus was a witness of the miracle of healing of Bartimaeus, who returned with Jesus to the house of Zacchaeus to hear words of the Saviour, "forasmuch as he *also* (Zacchaeus as well as Bartimaeus) is a son of Abraham" through faith. His story begins: "And (or now) entering He was passing through Jericho"—Jericho having here the article, indicating previous mention and referring the reader back to the former mention, which we find commenced with the adversative *δέ* as if in explanation of how it happened (*ἐγένετο*) that it was in the approach to Jericho that the miracle took place, and not when they were finally leaving the city.

Zacchaeus must have known, or guessed, the intention of Jesus to pass through the city; he had to be certain of the route which He would take, and the obvious place would be on the road to Jerusalem, leading from the gates of the city. But Matthew states specifically that "as they departed from Jericho a great multitude followed Him"; he would therefore have to run well ahead up the road to take up his position. The mention of the *great* multitude was not necessary to Matthew's brief account, but it *was* necessary to the story of Zacchaeus, and no doubt he makes this specific statement with the knowledge which he must have had (being an eye-witness) of Zacchaeus.

Mark too, "the interpreter of Peter", speaks of the multitude in the same connection, and uses the word *ικανός*, ("sufficient"), not a favourite word of Mark's as it is of Luke's. It may be a colloquial use, meaning "large enough," or "fairly large," but may it not suggest that it was large enough for the purpose for which he mentions the fact—*i.e.*, to prevent Zacchaeus from having

a sight of Jesus? It is of interest that the Bordeaux Pilgrim (A.D. 333) was shewn the sycamore tree of Zacchaeus on the right of the road leading to the town from the West (F. J. Bliss in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. II, p. 581). It is unlikely that a tree of the size of the sycamore (and one that was grown in groves) would be inside the city walls. In fact Josephus, who speaks so glowingly of the extensive plain, 70 furlongs long by 20 furlongs broad, watered by the fountain Es-Sultan, "affording nourishment to those most excellent gardens that are thickest with trees", tells us that these extensive groves of palm trees, balsam, cypress and no doubt sycamore also, from which the Romans derived so much revenue, were outside the city. In all probability Zacchaeus was in charge of the collection of these very revenues, and he was on his own ground.

One final point, I would suggest that it was the "long and loud unanimous" murmurs of the crowd (πάντες διεγόγγυσον) which Bartimaeus heard and which puzzled him, as the returning company passed him; and now it was "those that went before" (οἱ προάγοντες) that rebuked him, for the crowd had followed Jesus out of the city, but had now turned about and were before Him.

I have tried to give the words of the narratives their simple and ordinary meaning, and it seems that they are carefully selected and used with great precision.

The following conclusions seem therefore justified:

- (1) The three records are entirely independent of one another, which does not mean that they were unknown to one another —there is evidence to the contrary.
- (2) The records supplement one another, and the whole picture can only be seen by combining them.
- (3) The words used to describe the movements are carefully chosen and exactly suit the connection in which they are used.
- (4) It is presumption to assume contradiction without adequate examination of the evidence, and without knowledge of all the circumstances.
- (5) Luke is again proved to be an accurate historian in matters of detail.

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