

THE FATE OF JUDAS ACCORDING TO ACTS 1: 18

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WE welcome another new contributor to THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY. Mr. Gordon, a graduate in Law and Divinity of the University of Edinburgh, has recently become Minister of Fintray, Aberdeenshire. The relation of Luke's account of the death of Judas to that included in Matthew's passion narrative has presented a problem from early Christian days, one which from time to time calls for further consideration.

PERHAPS of all the so-called "contradictions" in the New Testament Scriptures the most frequently cited is the fate of Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of the Lord. Curiously enough, however, this apparent contradiction does not always seem to be taken seriously. The New Testament mentions the fate of Judas only twice—in Matt. 27: 3-8 and Acts 1: 18-20. It is, of course, easier to find apparent contradictions where there are only two accounts.¹

At the turn of this century any attempt to harmonize the two would have been quickly dismissed by a large number of scholars. A good example of this may be found in Bartlet's comments in the Century Bible²: "The many attempts to harmonize the story of Judas's end, as given in Acts, with that in Matt. 27: 3-8 must be pronounced fruitless. The plain fact is that the two are different versions in which the story that the bad man came to a bad end became current". In fact, Bartlet goes even further and quotes with approval an article by Rendel Harris,³ whose thesis is that both versions of Judas's death go back "to a conventional type of the bad man's ending, as given in the Jewish story of Ahikar." He further adds that he believes that "Acts is nearer to its original form, according to which its villain, Nadar, swelled up and burst."

Is this, then, the end of the story? Perhaps many would say "yes". In Peake's Commentary,⁴ for example, Professor G. W. H.

¹ For a minute examination of all the difficulties, see Kirsopp Lake in "The Beginnings of Christianity" (1933), I, v, pp. 22-30.

² J. Vernon Barlet, *The Acts*, Century Bible (no date), p. 383.

³ *American Journal of Theology*, Vol. IV, pp. 490ff. See also R. H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the O.T.*, Vol. 2, pp. 715ff., for sources.

⁴ (1962) p. 887.

Lampe simply says that the Acts account differs from that of Matthew—the presumption apparently being that the *onus* of proof would lie with any would-be harmonizer.

The present writer would suggest:

- (1) that the two accounts need not be seen as at variance and
- (2) that the *onus* of proof should, in any event, lie with those who deny this.

One early extra-Biblical witness is a gruesome one of Papias⁵ who suggests that Judas's body swelled up to an enormous size, that he died on his own land and thus rendered it uninhabitable. The actual account is so horrible and garbled that it is of little use for critical historical research but it might help to cast some light on the meaning of *prēnēs* in Acts 1: 18. The word is generally understood to mean "falling headlong" or "falling face-downwards" or "becoming prone", but some scholars have suggested that it could mean "swelling up" and there is ample authority for such a proposition.⁶ There might, after all, be a more simple explanation of Acts 1: 18 than Jewish folk-lore! It may be that the solution lies in an intended double-meaning for the word. This is, of course, very question-begging and hypothetical but linguistically seems at least possible.

Augustine's harmonizing suggestion is well-known. He suggests⁷ that Judas did attempt to hang himself (as in the Matthew account) but that he was actually killed when the rope broke and he fell headlong (as in the Acts account). This suggestion is ingenious, but does it fit the facts? Matt. 28: 5 leads one to assume that Judas died as a result of hanging. Now this does not rule out Augustine's suggestion but perhaps it does bear slightly against it. Obviously this is a matter of opinion. On the other hand there is nothing inherently to suggest that Judas might not have hung himself, died and subsequently fallen headlong when the rope broke. The fate of Judas as recorded in Acts does not seem to rule out the fact that he could have been already dead when he fell. One could take this a stage further and suggest that Judas hanged himself and died, that his body hung for several days (during which time it was decomposing) and then (perhaps due

⁵ Papias: Fragment 3 quoted by Apollinarius of Laodicea. See *Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. J. A. Kleist (1957), VI, p. 119.

⁶ See discussion and references, particularly to the N.T. versions, in F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (1952), p. 77. See also Arndt-Gingrich, *sub voc.*

⁷ *C. Fel. 1: 4*. Augustine's suggestion is adopted by J. A. Alexander, *The Acts of the Apostles* (1857, ri. 1963), p. 27.

to the rope breaking) the swollen body fell headlong and burst open. One hesitates to go into morbid and unpleasant details, but it seems clear that the word *elakēsen* denotes "a loud report" and/or "a rupture" after which "all his bowels gushed out". It is tentatively suggested that, although Augustine's version is perfectly possible, Judas could well have been dead when he fell. The splitting open of a dead body in the manner described is pathologically more feasible if the body is in a state of decomposition.⁸ The meaning of *prēnēs* is still somewhat in doubt but this need not be too great an obstacle. If the idea of a double meaning in the word seems just too question-begging (as the present writer is inclined to think) the above theory need not be set aside; whether one takes the meaning to be "falling headlong" or "swelling up" the sense remains the same with only slight differences. If one accepts the former translation, Augustine's theory is still possible but, for the reasons outlined above, the present writer is of the opinion that he was dead when he fell. If the latter translation is accepted it could mean that the corpse burst open when it was still hanging. It should be noted however, that even if one does not accept a double meaning for *prēnēs*, the two possible meanings are not necessarily co-exclusive.

Another major difficulty is usually taken to be that of whether it was Judas who bought the field or the priests (as in Matt. 27: 7). The most usual explanation is that it could have been bought by the priests in Judas's name and this seems quite feasible. It does not seem necessary to take the view that Judas made his purchase of a field some time before the crucifixion, whereas the priests made their own separate purchase after that event. Whether or not the Acts account implies that Judas's death took place on the field is a matter of opinion. As regards his suicide, there is nothing in the Acts account to suggest that he could not have killed himself. The Matthew account is clear that he did.

There is no doubt that there are difficulties in this question but none of these seems irreconcilable. One could agree with the great Princeton scholar, J. A. Alexander, when he points out⁹ that Matthew wrote "for a wide circle of readers, many of whom had no previous knowledge of the case; he therefore states the main fact, and according to his usual custom passes over the minute details. Peter, orally addressing those who knew the facts as fully

⁸ The present writer does not imply that this idea is in any way original but his thesis is that it has not received the serious consideration it merits.

⁹ *Supra cit.*, pp. 27, 28.

as himself and less than six weeks after their occurrence... assumes the main fact as already known, and naturally dwells upon those very circumstances which the Evangelist, many years later . . . leaves out altogether". In magisterial tones Alexander concludes¹⁰: "there is scarcely an American or English jury that would scruple to receive the two accounts as perfectly consistent, if the witnesses were credible, and any cause could be assigned for their relating two distinct parts of the same tradition."

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¹⁰ *Supra cit.*, p. 28.