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Matthew 27:9 - 27:10



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg offers a reflection on Matthew 27:9-10, which places significant importance on prophecy from Zechariah 11. Gregg proposes that the identification of the prophecy in the New Testament is of little concern, and what is important is that Christians accept the teachings of the Bible. While some readers may interpret Matthew's citation of the prophecy as a mistake based on his inadvertent use of the wrong prophet, Gregg believes that overall, the accuracy of the Gospel account should not be called into question.

Transcript

Today we'll be taking another look at a portion of Matthew 27, which causes some difficulties, but not insurmountable difficulties. You know, there are people who are continually trying to find fault with the Bible, because if they can find fault with the Bible, they believe that they are justified in rejecting its message. They believe that if they could find one mistake in the Bible, this would prove that it was not of divine origin, because God would certainly make no mistakes.

And therefore, they delight to find passages which they think represent errors in the Bible, because that then gives them the freedom in their own conscience to reject the message of the Scripture and to live their own lives the way they prefer, and to ignore God and to ignore Christ. One of the places that unbelievers have sometimes felt that they can find such a fault is here in the story in Matthew chapter 27. After we read of Judas hanging himself and having betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, he throws this money, before he hanged himself, he threw this money on the temple floor.

And the chief priest took the money and bought a field from a potter. And Matthew says this in Matthew 27, 9, Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of him who was prized, whom they of the children of Israel prized, and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me. Now, there is a problem here, and that is that Matthew attributes this quote from the Old Testament to Jeremiah.

He says, This fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet. So, he attributes a prediction to Jeremiah the prophet. But then the quote he gives appears to be not from the book of Jeremiah at all, but from the book of Zechariah in chapter 11.

There is reference to 30 pieces of silver. And some of the words in this passage are taken from that prophecy in Zechariah chapter 11. Now, the problem here is that Matthew appears to be quoting Zechariah, but he says he's quoting Jeremiah.

Now, this would be an easy mistake for a person to make. Many of the prophets said similar things, and the books of the prophets are often confused with each other. I've had many people say to me, Well, as it says in Isaiah, and then they quote something they thought was in Isaiah, but it's actually maybe from Jeremiah or something like that.

Or people say, As it says in Micah, but they accidentally quote Amos. It's an easy mistake to make. And it would not be a hard mistake for a man like Matthew to make, or any other man to make, to quote one prophet and think he was quoting another.

The problem this raises, however, is that most of us believe that Matthew did not make such mistakes. There is the view, widely held among evangelicals, that Matthew wrote under inspiration. And inspiration from God would mean that he presented a flawless document.

Because God, who inspired him, can make no mistakes. Therefore, it's not really a question of whether Matthew, as an individual, has the right to mistakenly identify a passage from the Old Testament with the wrong reference. It's more a question of the inspiration of Matthew.

If he did make such a mistake, does that mean that the inspiration of the Gospel of Matthew is in question? Well, that is something we will discuss on this program. First of all, let's start with that very first question. Is the inspiration of the Gospel of Matthew in question, if Matthew made a mistake? Now, I'm going to argue, as this program progresses, that Matthew did not make a mistake.

Alright, I'm going to give you several reasons why I think that Matthew did not make a mistake. But let's just start with this one. What if Matthew did? What if Matthew did think he was quoting Jeremiah, when in fact the verse he was quoting was from a different prophet, Zechariah? Would that mean that Matthew's Gospel was not inspired? Well, that depends on how we understand inspired, you see.

There are many different opinions about how the Scripture was inspired. Christians often have their own favorite opinion, and maybe the one that suggests itself to them is reasonable. And once they've accepted that opinion, they assume that that's what the Bible teaches about itself.

Does the Bible teach, for example, that the Gospels were inspired, the Gospels of

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were inspired, in such a way as to prevent them from making a mistake of this kind? Well, I don't know of anything in the Bible that says that the Gospel writers were inspired in that manner. Now, I do believe that there was inspiration of the Gospels, but nowhere in the Bible is it explained to us what this means exactly. It certainly means that we have in them the Word of God, that God has inspired the writers in some way so as to present to us His message and His Word in a reliable fashion.

But where in the Bible does it say that the inspiration of the Gospels is such that there could never be any kind of a mistaken identity of what verse is being quoted? Frankly, there is no place in the Bible that says that this could not be true. Now, is the Gospel of Matthew inspired? Well, very much so. Matthew is one of the twelve, and Jesus said, when the Holy Spirit comes, He will remind you.

He will bring to your remembrance all things that I have said to you. Well, the principal material in the book of Matthew is the discourses and sayings of Christ. Jesus promised the Apostles that the Holy Spirit would bring those things to their remembrance.

And therefore, Matthew, being one of the Apostles, we accept that the Holy Spirit did bring those things to his remembrance. So, when he recorded what Jesus said, we have reason to believe that the Holy Spirit inspired him to remember and accurately portray what Jesus said. Furthermore, we know that Jesus opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures, meaning the Old Testament Scriptures.

So, when Matthew, for example, quotes an Old Testament verse and says, this is a fulfillment of that, we have reason to believe that that comes from an inspired understanding of those verses. Because Jesus opened his understanding, along with the other Apostles, that they might understand the Scriptures. Now, there's much in there that he wouldn't have to be inspired about, because he's simply recording events that he saw, that is, Matthew was with Jesus much of the time as one of the Apostles, and so much of what he wrote he saw with his own eyes, and it would not be absolutely essential for him to experience inspiration in order for him to write those things.

But whether he was inspired when he wrote those things or not, it really comes down to a matter of opinion, because Matthew does not tell us when or if he was writing under inspiration. We can correctly deduce that since he was one of the Apostles, that when he wrote down what Jesus said, and when he interpreted the Old Testament Scriptures in the light of Jesus' life and so forth, he was acting upon an inspired understanding. But that does not necessarily mean that the man was a flawless person who could never make a personal mistake.

It does not mean that if Matthew wrote personal correspondence to people, that he would never misspell a word, or that he would never misattribute a quote. And therefore, if Matthew, in fact, did make a mistake here, and quoted Zechariah thinking he was

quoting Jeremiah, then it would certainly challenge some people's understanding of what it means for Matthew to be an inspired gospel. That challenge perhaps would be valuable to make whether or not Matthew made a mistake, because I think a lot of times we assume a great deal about what it means to say the Bible is inspired, and we assume far beyond what the Scripture says about itself.

Anyway, I am of the opinion that Matthew did not make a mistake, and therefore all of this consideration does not have to be consuming of our interest. But I do think that if Matthew did make a mistake, it would certainly call into question the way most of us understand the inspiration of Scripture, but it would not necessarily invalidate Matthew's witness, generally speaking. If I'm giving testimony in court, and I saw an event, and I tell it the way I saw it, and it's true, and yet I make some kind of mistake in saying, and the police officer who was there himself observed, verbally said so and so, but it turned out it wasn't the policeman, it was someone else who said it, that doesn't invalidate everything that I've witnessed.

I may make a mistake as to who said what, but as far as witnessing the events themselves, the making of a minor mistake does not invalidate the truth of my general witness. And if Matthew made a mistake, in this case, as many people think he did, it would not translate into an unreliability of his whole account about the life of Jesus. And therefore, an unbeliever who feels that Matthew made a mistake here might take some comfort saying, ah, therefore I can reject the whole Gospel.

Well, that wouldn't be sensible. If a man makes a mistake, it doesn't mean everything he says on every other subject is wrong. And therefore, those who think that Matthew made a mistake really have not thereby gained an opportunity to reject the whole message of Jesus, although they may think they have.

Now, I have said several times, I don't think Matthew made a mistake, but how can we say that? There are certain possibilities that we need to consider. One of them is this, and scholars have brought this up as a possibility, that in the scrolls of the Old Testament known to Matthew, by the way, he didn't have his own copies in all likelihood, scrolls of the Old Testament were very big, very expensive, they had to be handwritten, there were no printing presses, there was no mass production of books in those days, and therefore books were very expensive and tended to be written on very large, at least large books were written on large scrolls, you couldn't carry those around with you most of the time. These scrolls were probably in the synagogue, and Matthew would have gained his knowledge of these Old Testament passages from reading these scrolls in the synagogue.

Now, the whole Old Testament would not be on one single scroll. There would be too much material there, it would be an unwieldy scroll. They would have the Old Testament on several scrolls.

And it has been suggested that perhaps one of these scrolls contained Jeremiah and the Minor Prophets. Now, the Minor Prophets would include Zechariah. And this scroll could have been called the Jeremiah Scroll.

And if that is so, then the Minor Prophets, as known to Matthew, might have been found on the Jeremiah Scroll. They might have been found in the book of Jeremiah, as it were. Now, that would not mean that Jeremiah had written the words.

He only wrote the book of Jeremiah. But if the scroll that contained the Minor Prophets was the scroll known to the Jews as the Jeremiah Scroll, because that was the first and major book in that particular scroll, then Matthew might well have attributed something that was in that scroll, namely something from the book of Zechariah, to Jeremiah. And some have argued that that is an explanation of how Matthew might have quoted Zechariah and yet believed he was quoting Jeremiah or simply attributed it to Jeremiah.

Now, there is one problem with that that I can see, and that is that Matthew doesn't say, as it is written in the book of Jeremiah, and then quotes. If he had said, as it is written in the book of Jeremiah, then we might argue, ah, the book of Jeremiah means the Jeremiah Scroll, which contains not only the book of Jeremiah, but other books too. And he's talking about where he found it written.

But the actual wording of Matthew is, Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet. So, Jeremiah is said to be the man who spoke the words. Now, so we look for another explanation.

The Jeremiah Scroll might work for some people, but it's not the explanation of choice, in my opinion. Some people feel that what Matthew had done was combine prophecies from two different prophets. We know of this being done by Mark and also by Matthew elsewhere.

Namely, that an event that is being described is spoken of in more than one place in the Old Testament. And the writer in the New Testament simply combines both records from the Old Testament as if it was one. For example, in Matthew chapter 21, verse 4, it says, All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell the daughter of Zion, behold, your king is coming to you, lowly and sitting on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Well, the wording of this quote here in Matthew 21 5 is actually a combination of two different prophecies. One of them is from Isaiah and one is from Zechariah. And the two are actually merged into one quote.

So that partly what Isaiah said and partly what Zechariah said are put together and made one composite quotation. Now, Isaiah is a major prophet. Zechariah was a minor prophet.

But we have a combination of their words melded here together. And Matthew doesn't tell us which prophet he sees himself as quoting, but he just says it was the prophet who said this. And we see him combining prophecies of Isaiah and Zechariah into one.

We see Mark doing a similar thing in Mark chapter 1 and the opening verses. It says the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God. Verse two, as it was written in the prophets, behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight. Now, this is presented in Mark as if it's one quote. However, it's two quotes.

It's one from Malachi chapter three, verse one and one from Isaiah chapter 40. So, we've got a quote from a minor prophet and a major prophet combined here. One from Malachi, one from Isaiah, and they're combined as if it's one extended quote.

Now, what's interesting is the way that the King James and the New King James read it, it says, as it is written in the prophets. But in the Alexandrian text, which is followed by most modern versions, it literally says, as it is written in the prophet Isaiah. Now, that's interesting when you think about it, because the quotation that is given is partly from Isaiah and partly from Malachi.

And yet, in the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament that we have, Mark is represented as saying, as it is written in the prophet Isaiah. And then he quotes these two prophets, but only mentions Isaiah. This raises the possibility that the New Testament writers saw it as a valid thing to do to combine various prophecies of the Old Testament together, as if they were one.

And if one of them came from a major prophet and one came from a minor prophet, it would be customary just to mention the major prophet. If you're quoting a combination of Isaiah and Malachi, to say it's Isaiah who said this because he said part of it, part of it's from Malachi, may be simply a literary device that the New Testament writers used. If so, then it is possible that Matthew is doing the same thing in the passage that we're considering today.

He quotes, he says he's quoting Jeremiah, but much of the quote that he gives is from Zechariah chapter 11. Now, he doesn't quote Zechariah extensively. In fact, the quote is not exact.

It is more like a paraphrase. And it talks about taking 30 pieces of silver and casting them to the potter for his field. And that, of course, literally happened.

But in Zechariah 11, the passage that most closely resembles this quote, that's not quoted exactly the same way. I mean, the basic essential details are the same, and they're there in the prophecy. But it's not a direct quote here.

And because of that, many have thought that Matthew might conceivably be thinking of two prophecies at the same time. One from Jeremiah, and one from Zechariah. And he simply only mentions Jeremiah.

This is a possibility, just like Mark quotes from Malachi and Isaiah, and he only mentions Isaiah. The major prophet is mentioned, the minor prophet is not named. But both are consulted, and both are quoted.

Now, there's no exact resemblance to this quote anywhere in the book of Jeremiah. But there was a passage in Jeremiah where Jeremiah was told to purchase a field. And it was in view of the coming destruction of Jerusalem.

He was to buy a field from his uncle. And so he did purchase a field. And it's possible that Matthew saw that action as resembling the action of buying this field shortly before Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D. And that the action of Jeremiah, and the prophecy to him that he had to buy a field, was combined with that in Zechariah, about buying a field for 30 pieces of silver.

And in the mind of Matthew, these two things both had a correspondence to what Judas had done. And since one of these prophecies is in Jeremiah, and one is in Zechariah. And Jeremiah is the major prophet, Zechariah is the minor prophet, that Matthew only mentions Jeremiah, not Zechariah.

Whether this is what Matthew has done or not, we cannot be sure. But it is entirely possible. It is possible that in Matthew's mind he is combining two prophecies, one from Jeremiah, one from Zechariah, and he's only mentioning the one, Jeremiah, not the other.

Now, there is another slight consideration, it's actually a separate problem to consider. And that is that in Zechariah, where it talks about 30 pieces of silver, it's not exactly a prediction that the Messiah would be betrayed for that amount. Although Matthew uses it, and Christians often use it that way, actually it does not say in Zechariah that the Messiah would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver.

What it says in chapter 11 of Zechariah is that the prophet himself played a role. This may have been literally done, or it may have happened in a vision, but he played the role of the shepherd of Israel. He was the shepherd, and as such he really represented the Messiah.

And because he was hated by Israel, he quit his job, and he broke his shepherd's staffs, and he gave up the task to others. And he said when he quit, he says, give me some severance pay, what do you think my services are worth to you? And he says, they gave me 30 pieces of silver. Now, in Zechariah 11, the 30 pieces of silver is not the price of betrayal, it is more like a severance pay given to the prophet by those who do not

appreciate his ministry.

And it's actually considered to be an insultingly low amount of money. And so, it's sort of an insult. Now, the prophet in that whole acted parable represents the Messiah.

And the fact that they gave him 30 pieces of silver for his efforts suggests that they valued his ministry, they valued him at that price. He was not worth more than that to them, in other words. They devalued the Messiah at 30 pieces of silver.

Well, that's how it worked out in Zechariah 11. When Judas said, how much will you give me that I can deliver him into your hands, they gave him 30 pieces of silver. There is a correspondence there in this respect.

The chief priests wanted to get Jesus, but they had to pay for him. The price they were willing to pay for him was 30 pieces of silver. And that suggests that that was the value they placed upon him.

That's what he was worth to them. Just as when Zechariah was paid that amount by the people of Israel, that exhibited that that was the value that they placed upon him. Not better than that.

And so, in both cases, the case of Judas betraying Jesus and the case of Zechariah playing the role he did, the Messiah was valued by the people of Israel at 30 pieces of silver. And that's the correspondence. It is not exactly a prediction about the betrayal of the Messiah.

At least, if it is, it's very veiled. What Matthew brings out is not so much that Jesus was betrayed for the same amount, but that that amount was given to a potter to purchase a field. And Zechariah does predict that.

And that did happen, as Matthew records, in this place. We'll come back to these passages and read on further next time.