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Q&A#13 How Do We Reconcile the Differing Accounts of Judas' Death?

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Today's Question: "How do you deal with the seemingly contrasted accounts of how Judas dies?"

I've discussed some of this in a recent piece here: <https://politicaltheology.com/the-habitation-made-desolate-acts-115-26/>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, how do you deal with the seemingly contrasted accounts of how Judas dies? The first account of these is found in Matthew chapter 27. When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death.

And when they had bound him, they led him away and delivered him to Pontius Pilate the governor. Then Judas, his betrayer, seeing that he had been condemned, was remorseful, and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned by betraying innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? You see to it.

Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself. But the two priests took the silver pieces and said, It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood. And they took counsel and brought with them the potter's field to bury strangers in.

Therefore that field has been called the field of blood to this day. 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 priced, and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me. The second account is found in Acts chapter 1 and verse 15 following.

And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples. Altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty, and said, Men and brethren, this scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry.

Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his entrails gushed out. And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem. So that field is called in their own language, Echeldamma, that is, field of blood.

For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no one live in it, and let another take his office. So we have two different accounts here that are significant both in their differences and in their similarities. And it's important to notice that their similarities are more significant because of their differences, because the differences suggest that these are independent accounts.

So where they agree, we can see a commonality of witness to a common historical event. Now what are some of the details that are recorded here? First of all, that Judas is the betrayer. The significance of buying a field, that a field is bought by Judas, that there is a grisly end to Judas.

He dies either by hanging or in the Acts account that he falls headlong, bursts open in the middle, and all his entrails gushed out. So you have those two accounts. And then you have the name of the field that's given, field of blood or Echeldamma.

You have the fact that there's a common knowledge of people about this particular field, that it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem or in the story of Matthew, that people are calling this field, the field of blood, to that day, that there is a continuing tradition that associates that field with the death of Judas. And so the significance of these similarities should not be missed, but nor should the significance of the differences. There are two significant differences that jump out.

The first is how was that field bought? Was it bought directly by Judas, as one would think if one just had a surface reading of the account of Acts? Or is it something that's bought by the priests using Judas's money, as we see in the book of Matthew? Now, that difference is readily resolved. It's resolved by just taking the account of Matthew and seeing that Luke gives an elided, brief, condensed account of what actually took place. The priests did not accept the money of Judas.

It was just thrown down. And so the money is Judas's, but the field is bought. And so the field is bought with that money, is bought in the name of Judas.

It's bought with Judas's money, even though Judas is not actually spending the money for it. In the second account, he buys the field, but there's a, it misses out the details of exactly how that purchase takes place. The second difference, which is the more significant difference, is the difference between the way that Judas dies.

The difference is between Judas going out and hanging himself and Judas falling headlong and his body bursting open in the middle and his entrails gushing out. Now, both of these are fairly gruesome, but it's significant to recognize the differences and then to think why they might be there. We know that there is a common report, tradition about this event that connects Judas with that field.

This is not an isolated tradition to a few people within Jesus' group. No, this is well known to people in Jerusalem, this story. This is a common story.

So the fact that there is a difference on this particular story is perhaps surprising. If something was so widely reported, why would there be such discrepancies between these two accounts? We also need to look at these accounts and see what the writers are doing. When the New Testament or the Old Testament, for that matter, engages in history, often it is not just giving us a blow by blow account of what actually happened.

It gives us an account of the historical events that happened, but its intent is to give us a sense of the significance of what happened, not just the actual events seen there and in their own raw form. No, it wants us to see the significance, what was important about what happened. And both of these accounts present them as the fulfillment of prophecy.

So Acts introduces his account with Peter's words, And then it goes into the Psalms that are referenced. Within Matthew, it's a different scripture that is alluded to. It's the scripture of Jeremiah and Zechariah with the 30 pieces of silver that are taken.

And so you have in both of these cases, fulfillment of different prophecies that are being highlighted. Another thing to notice is that both of them present the story of Jesus and Judas against the background of another story. In both cases, we see the background story being one of David.

David and the rebellion of Absalom. Now, if you look at the story of Absalom, you have these two key figures of Absalom. And you have Ahithophel.

Ahithophel, who is the counselor, who was one of David's most trusted men, his wise counselor, who then betrayed him. And so the reference in the book of Psalms to such a person is, And in the story of Matthew and elsewhere, we have Judas being compared to Ahithophel. That Judas is the one who is the familiar friend of Christ, the one who is trusted, the one who eats bread with him.

The one who dips his hand in the dish with Christ is the one who will betray him. And so the significance of that connection is one that highlights Christ's role as the new David. And just as David, after he flees from Jerusalem, he crosses over the Brook Kidron weeping and goes up the Mount of Olives, is met by Ziba, who ministers to him at the top.

Then Shimei curses him and then his right-hand man seeks to attack Shimei and he prevents him. So we see a replaying of these events in the story of Christ. As he goes up, crosses the Brook Kidron, ascends the Mount of Olives, is weeping and is ministered to by angels, is met by opponents at a stone's throw, and then he has his disciple, his chief disciple, Peter, seek to kill the high priest's servant and he heals the high priest's servant.

So we have a very similar pattern of events playing out here. The point being that Christ is the new David. Christ is the son of David, David's greater son.

And the parallel is one that is accentuated in various ways by the connections between these other characters. Now, Christ's story does not just follow the pattern of David's here. Christ also ends up hanging on a tree.

Now that would seem to remind you more of Absalom, the son of David, who is hanging on the tree, this unfaithful son, the one who is bearing the judgment of David in part, and he ends up hanging on a tree. But then alongside this character, you have another character who is Ahithophel, who I mentioned, who also ends up hanging on a tree. So when Ahithophel's counsel is rejected, he goes and he hangs himself.

Now, when Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and arose and went home to his house, to his city. Then he put his household in order and hanged himself and died and was buried in his father's tomb. And so Judas hanging himself is a replaying of the story of Ahithophel.

It's paralleling his story with the earlier story of Ahithophel because that's part of the broader paralleling of the story of Christ with the story of David, Absalom, and these other characters and the coup. And so there's a coup against David. There's the hanging of the son of David on the tree.

And then there's this other man who hangs on a tree, who's the unfaithful counselor, Ahithophel. And so we see these themes being reconfigured and appearing again within the Gospel of Matthew and elsewhere in other Gospels. So there's a significant parallel there.

And the details that are highlighted within the story are the details that help us to see that parallel. Now, why might we find different details being highlighted in the story of Acts? I think it's helpful to think about where Acts' account is found. The account of Acts

is not found in the parallel between Ahithophel and Absalom, these two people hanging on a tree, or between Jesus and Judas, these two people hanging on a tree.

Rather, it's between... it's as Judas fits into this story of this period as this new kingdom has been set up, as this new regime, this new administration is being instituted. And so I think the best place to go to understand why Acts tells the story in the way that it does is to the beginning of 1 Kings. And in the beginning of 1 Kings, we find the end of David's kingdom.

David is about to die, and he's handing over the reins to Solomon. And he instructs Solomon in what he must do. And in the same way, at the very beginning of Acts, we have Christ just about to disappear from the scene.

And then, giving his disciples instructions, they're supposed to set things up, and then they will receive the Spirit. In the same way, in the story of David and Solomon, David gives instructions to Solomon. Solomon sets the kingdom in order at the very beginning, and then he receives the Spirit of Wisdom.

And so there's this very similar pattern taking place here. There's a new kingdom being established. The Spirit of Wisdom is being given to the church so that it might rule like Solomon.

And here, in this intervening passage, we have some significant events that parallel with that intervening period at the very beginning of Solomon's reign. So in David's instructions to Solomon, we read, And then, at the beginning of Solomon's reign, we have a number of different events occurring where he puts things in order. And Joab is one of the characters that has to be dealt with at the beginning of the reign.

And because you were afflicted every time my father was afflicted. So Solomon removed Abiathar from being priest to the Lord, that he might fulfil the word of the Lord which he spoke concerning the house of Eli at Shiloh. Then news came to Joab, for Joab had defected to Adonijah, though he had not defected to Absalom.

So Joab fled to the tabernacle of the Lord and took hold of the horns of the altar. And King Solomon was told, Joab has fled to the tabernacle of the Lord. There he is by the altar.

Then Solomon sent Benaniah the son of Jehoiada, saying, Go, strike him down. So Benaniah went to the tabernacle of the Lord and said to him, Thus says the king, Come out. And he said, No, but I will die here.

And Benaniah brought back word to the king, saying, Thus said Joab. And thus he answered me. And the king said to him, Do as he has said, and strike him down and bury him, that you may take away from me and from the house of my father the innocent blood which Joab shed.

So the Lord will return his blood on his head, because he struck down two men more righteous and better than he, and killed them with the sword. Abner the son of Ner, the commander of the army of Israel, and Amasa the son of Jetha, the commander of the army of Judah. Though my father David did not know it, their blood shall therefore return upon the head of Joab, and upon the head of his descendants forever.

But upon David and his descendants, upon his house and his throne, there shall be peace forever from the Lord. So Benaniah the son of Jehoiada went out and struck and killed him, and he was buried in his own house in the wilderness. The king put Benaniah the son of Jehoiada in his place over the army, and the king put Zadok the priest in the place of Abiathar.

So we see a number of significant details here that would seem to be similarities between the character of Joab and the character of Judas. First of all, Judas has to have his offers taken by another. Joab has to have his offers taken by another.

Benaniah the son of Jehoiada takes his place. We see a grisly end for both characters. We have his place, Joab is placed in his wilderness house, buried in his wilderness house.

And in the account of Acts, let his place be made desolate. I'll read exactly what it says. Let his habitation be desolate or deserted and let no one live in it.

So just like Joab is buried in the wilderness, so the burial place of, so the demise of Judas occurs in a wilderness location. Beyond that, there are other details to remember that Joab is associated with blood, blood guilt, blood guilt against David and against his kingdom. And in the same way, Judas is numbered among the apostles, but is the bearer of blood guilt.

And so the field of blood is a significant name. Joab is connected with blood very strongly within both of these accounts at the beginning of 1 Kings. He is the one who embodies the blood guilt of David's kingdom and the sins that were committed.

He was involved in many of those. But beyond that, what else can we learn from the story of Joab? If we look back further in the story of 2 Kings, we find some very significant parallels. Amasa is placed, set up as commander of David's men and Joab attempts an internal coup.

And then Joab meets Amasa and he says, are you in health, my brother? And Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him. But Amasa did not notice the sword that was in Joab's hand and he struck him with it in the stomach and his entrails poured out on the ground and he did not strike him again. Thus he died.

Then Joab and Abishai, his brother, pursued Sheba, the son of Bichri. Meanwhile, one of Joab's men stood near Amasa and said, whoever favors Joab and whoever is for David, let him follow Joab. But Amasa wallowed in his blood in the middle of the highway.

And when the man saw that all the people stood still, he moved Amasa from the highway to the field and threw a garment over him when he saw that everyone who came upon him had halted. When he was removed from the highway, all the people went on after Joab to pursue Sheba, the son of Bichri. And so we have a very significant set of events taking place here.

Joab, the one who deceives and betrays with a kiss, the one who betrays the one who has been appointed by the king. He is the one who betrays with a kiss and then he stabs Amasa and Amasa, his entrails gush out. And then as he's wallowing in his blood, his body is moved to a field and all the people stop and look upon this body.

And so we see a number of significant parallels between the death of Judas as recorded in Acts and the death of Amasa at the hand of Joab. And likewise, we see a significant parallel between Joab's betrayal, Joab's betrayal of Amasa, which was also a betrayal of David. The betrayal with a kiss and the betrayal of Judas later on.

Would you betray the son of man with a kiss? And so these two characters are set up next to each other. And at the beginning of Solomon's reign, he has to deal with this character, Joab. And Joab's blood guilt has to be handled.

And at the beginning of the administration of the church, the blood guilt of Judas is spoken of and he has to be replaced by another. And so there's a fulfillment of prophecy. Note that the words of Peter where he says, men and brethren, this scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas.

David spoke concerning Judas. David also spoke concerning Joab and Hithophel and these other characters who were serpents within his kingdom, who were treacherous, who were people who betrayed and undermined his kingdom and brought blood guilt upon it. In the same way, David speaks of the enemies of the greater David, of his greater son.

And in this period at the very establishment of the kingdom, we see then this parallel being drawn. And so what happens to Judas is an allusion in part to the death of Amasa. There's a sort of poetic justice that the demise of Judas is very similar to the demise of Joab.

That he's buried in a wilderness place, his place is made a wilderness habitat. His habitation is a wilderness and another takes his office. But the manner of his death is also reminiscent of the man that Joab significantly betrayed and the man whose blood guilt was meted out upon him.

And so we see a sort of poetic justice here, a poetic justice that helps the writer of Acts to draw attention to the parallels between the kingdom of David and the kingdom of Christ, between the work of Solomon and the work of the early church. And so the details

that are highlighted within the stories are not just historical facts that are recorded purely for their own sake. They are facts that are designed to foreground certain details of the story, certain things that are salient theologically, that help you at this particular juncture in the story to recognize the significance of particular characters, the significance of particular events, and where we are within the greater scheme of things.

Who is connected with whom? But that still leaves us with the question of what to do with the fact that we have two very different records of Judas's death. What do we do with that? Now, the first thing to recognize is that Matthew's account speaks about Judas dying at his own hands, Judas dying by an act of hanging. In Acts, Luke's account, we do not actually see that the manner of... we're not explicitly told that this is the manner of Judas's death.

There are occasions when things happen to people's bodies after they have died. So, for instance, Haman's sons are hanged, but they've already died, but they're hanged for a purpose, to give a message to people so that they know what side the king is on. In the same way, what I believe is happening here is something that happened to Judas's body after he had died.

And just in the same way as the fate of Amasa's body after he had died, wallowing in blood and the body being moved and placed in the field, that is significant. It's something that happens with the dead body, the corpse of Amasa, not with his living body. It's not the manner in which he dies, but it is the means or it's the events that before the body afterwards.

And so I think that what we have here is probably the account of what happened with the corpse of Judas, a grisly account of a body falling down. Now, this falling might be as people tried to cut down the body of the body hanging on the tree and hitting the ground and hitting rocks and gushing open. Now, that could be a possibility, could swell and just break open itself.

And so whatever it is, I think that Luke wants us to see the parallel with the body of Amasa and the parallel through that between Joab and Judas. And so he recounts the events that before the corpse of Judas after his death. And so the significance of these two different accounts is not primarily to be found as we try and reach behind to see what really happened in the history.

Those questions are not insignificant because scripture is a true record of what happened. But it's a true record, not just in that sort of blow by blow account of this happened and that happened, etc. But it's a true account in that it helps us to understand the meaning of what happened.

And if we want to understand this event, if we want to understand the meaning of this event, then the differences between these two accounts are highly significant. Because

the difference between the account on the details of the buying of the field are those very details that enable Matthew to give us a clearer sense of the events as the fulfillment of the prophecies of Zechariah and Jeremiah. Whereas the details concerning the death on the one hand, they enable Matthew to parallel the story of Jesus's death with the coup of Absalom and the death of Judas with the death of Ahithophel.

On the other hand, the story of Acts is based upon a different set of parallels. And the features that he brings to the foreground, particularly the features of the fate of the body, enable us to see another set of parallels. Now, we don't have to have these sets of parallels and competition with each other.

Both of them are true. Both of them help us to understand part of what is going on, part of the theme, certain of the themes that God is fulfilling through these events. All of these things are the fulfillment of prophecy.

In Luke's account, he is giving us a different set of prophecies, a different set of things that have been fulfilled. David's words concerning Judas. And David's words concerning Judas are given in the Psalms that are referenced.

It's given in his words to Solomon. And the new David, Christ, gives words to the church to prepare for the day of Pentecost. And in the same way, Solomon is preparing the kingdom before he receives the gift of wisdom.

So bringing these things together, I think it gives us a better idea of how scripture works more generally. If we're constantly trying to harmonize accounts, we can often miss their meaning. Because the meaning is found in the very particular details that are foregrounded.

The very particular details that help us to see the theological emphases that the authors want to bring out. Whereas if we just go to the harmonized account, trying to think about what really happened in bringing these accounts together. And I think these accounts should and can be brought together.

If that's all we're focusing upon, we will miss a lot of what is taking place. I hope that this helps. And if you have any further questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account.

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Thank you and I hope to see you again in the next couple of days.