

I mentioned yesterday that one of the quotations of the Gospel of the Ebionites, as preserved in the writings of Epiphanius, appears to represent some kind of harmonization of the Gospels, an attempt to explain how the three different versions of what the voice from heaven says at Jesus' baptism can *all* be right (since the voice says different things in each of the three Gospels). Solution: the voice spoke *three* times, saying something different each time. (!)

This way of solving discrepancies in the Gospels has persisted through the ages. Most people don't realize that it goes way back to the early church. I'll say more about that eventually. For now I want to say something about it in modern times.

When I was in college - as a good hard-core fundamentalist who did not think there could be any real discrepancies in the Gospels (since they were inspired by God, which means there could be no mistakes, which means there could be no contradictions) - I was an expert at reconciling differences among the Gospels. This was years and years before I had ever heard that there was such a thing as the Gospel of the Ebionites! But I took a very similar approach.

Many people still do (including many of my undergraduate students). So what does one do with the fact (it *is* a fact!) that in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus "cleanses the Temple" (when he goes in and overturns tables of money changers and drives out those selling sacrificial animals) during the last week of his life - this is what ultimately leads to his opposition by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, which led him to be crucified - but in the Gospel of John, it is virtually the first thing that he does at the beginning of a two or three year ministry? Which is it? Well, back in my college days, the answer was: it is both! Jesus cleansed the Temple at the beginning of his ministry and he cleansed it at the end. He did it twice!!

It never occurred to me at the time that there might be problems with this view (like: why didn't he get in trouble the first time?): it was only "logical" to me.

I bought a book at the time that took great pleasure in reconciling *all* the discrepancies of the Gospels in this way. The book was written by a man named Johnston Cheney, and was called The Life of Christ in Stereo (get it? You have *four* speakers? Stereo?!? I guess today we would call it "Surround Sound," but I'm not sure that existed in 1973). It's still in print. All the problems of the Gospels are smoothed out if you simply place all the Gospels together into one BIG Gospel; the differences then disappear.

And so, for example, what does one do with the fact (another fact) that in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus predicts Peter's denial by saying that "he would deny him three times before the cock crows", but in the Gospel of Mark he predicts that he would deny him three times "before the cock crows *twice*"? It's very simple. Peter denied Jesus *six* times: three times before the cock crowed and three times before the cock crowed twice!

Today I look on this way of approaching the Gospels as rather humorous. But in a more serious vein, I have to say that I find it highly objectionable. The reason is this: those who take what one Gospel says, combine it with what another Gospel says, and thereby create the "true" and "real" story/Gospel have not interpreted the Gospels as they have come down to us. They have instead created their *own* Gospel, writing a new one that is completely unlike any of the Gospels of the NT.

Of course anyone and everyone is free to do this - it's a free country! But realize that once

you do that, you're refusing to read the Gospels as they were produced, and have produced an alternative version of your own, one that isn't in the Bible and one that never existed before you created it. The real problem with that is that this destroys the integrity of each of the Gospels as they stand, and in the process robs each of the authors of these Gospels of his own unique understanding of who Jesus was and what he said and did.

Surely it is not the best way to read a book to make it say something other than it says in order to understand it better. We don't do this with other literature. No one would take a book that *I* have written, combine it with a book that Jerry Falwell, or Dan Brown, or even N.T. Wright or Dominic Crossan has written, and then claim that *that* is what I really meant all along. So why do it with the Gospels? Why pretend that Luke has to be interpreted in light of John, or Mark in light of Matthew, and so on?

The reason people do this is because the Gospels - separate books - come to us as a collection within the same covers as *one* book. But again, we don't do that with other anthologies of texts. We don't take a collection of American short stories and pretend that the way to understand a story by Mark Twain is to combine what it says with a story by Steven Crane. We *could* read books that way. But we don't. And why? Because we assume that Mark Twain has something different to say from Steven Crane.

But the same is true of the NT Gospels. Each author has his own point of view, and we rob him of his perspective - and his integrity as an author - when we pretend otherwise.



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