



QUESTION

Please explain the apparent discrepancy between the Matthew/Mark accounts of the healing of the blind men at Jericho, and that of Luke.



The brother who submitted the question we are to consider this month describes it as 'a knotty problem'... He points out that the accounts of the healing of the blind men at Jericho as recorded by Matthew and Mark on the one hand, and Luke on the other, reveal 'an apparent discrepancy'. The verses that you should read are, Matt. 20:29, Mark 10:46 and Luke.18:35.

This is what we find:

1. Matthew tells us that as the Lord was 'leaving Jericho' there were *two blind men* sitting by the roadside.
2. Mark's account also states that, as He was 'leaving Jericho' Jesus healed a *blind beggar*, who Mark identifies as 'Bartimaeus'. He translates this name for his readers as 'son of Timaeus'.
3. Luke describes the healing of a *blind man* occurring as Jesus 'approached Jericho'.

There are two questions that call for answers, and they are:

- i) Were *two* blind men healed, or only *one*?
- ii) Did the healing occur on *leaving* Jericho or on *entering* Jericho?

It is sometimes suggested that in order to resolve the perceived 'conflict' in these accounts we should assume that these verses record *two separate events*, but I believe that not only is this explanation unnecessary, it is also erroneous.

1st. How many blind men were there?

I have no difficulty accepting that there were, as Matthew states, *two* blind men healed. This is stated so plainly that there can be no argument. The reason why Mark specifically names just *one* of them, Bartimaeus, is that he was apparently well-known in the Jericho region. This is suggested by the fact that the Greek text of Mark 10:46 translates quite literally as '*the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus the blind beggar*'.

The naming of the father in this way probably indicates that he was a man of some standing in Jericho. Notice, also, the use of the definite article: '**the** blind beggar' – not 'a blind beggar'. There would be little point in naming the father and son in this way, if they were unknown in the community.

This also suggests that the healing of Bartimaeus was given more prominence than that of his blind, anonymous companion, because he was a familiar figure in Jericho. It was quite common for beggars, whether blind or otherwise disabled, to become familiar figures in the towns and cities in which they lived. We have examples of this in John 9, which records the healing of another blind man, and also in the account of the curing of the lame man, mentioned in Acts 4. Both were clearly very familiar figures. Again, it may even be that Bartimaeus was the more vociferous – more vocal – of the two blind men in clamouring for the attention of Jesus. This seems to be suggested in Mark's account.

2nd. Where did the miracle occur?

Remember that Matthew and Mark say 'leaving Jericho', whilst Luke says, 'approaching Jericho'. Now this appears to be a very clear contradiction. Is it possible to reconcile the two accounts? Well, I suggest that, if we spend a short time looking at Jericho's history and geography, we shall find it easier to resolve the problem...

3rd. 'Old' Jericho

Although this event is one of only two references to Jericho found in the Gospels, we must remember that it was a city which, by that time, had already existed for many centuries. This is a fact firmly established by archaeological research. The first excavation of the Jericho site was carried out by a team of German archaeologists in the years 1907 to 1909, and their work was followed by an expedition by the British School of Archaeology led by Professor John Garstang, which lasted from 1929 to 1936, and which was followed in 1952 by that of the American archaeologist, Kathleen Kenyon.

The latest – (and I believe the last) – work on what is known as '*The Garstang Trench*' was done in the mid-1950's, after which the political climate in Palestine virtually ended the archaeological work of foreign nationals.

Many 'Jerichos'

However, the most important result to emerge from this work was the discovery of *the earliest stratified levels revealing human occupation, ever found at any archaeological site anywhere in the world*. The mound at Ancient Jericho has revealed periods of human occupation down to a level of 45 feet, and scholars now believe that the top-most evidence of human occupation of the site occurred about 1700 B.C., whilst the lowest remains, found on the bedrock of the trench, are thought to date from 7000 B.C.

Remember, that the current site of *ancient Jericho* is actually a mound that 'grew' through thousands of years. It 'grew' simply because when the original settlement, built on the bedrock, was abandoned, those who later resettled the site did not clear it but merely built upon it. In this way the level of the occupied site was raised, strata upon strata, until it became the mound it is today. I can testify, from personal observation, that the various levels can be clearly seen on the sides of the 45-foot deep trench.

This means that Jericho was an ancient Canaanite city long before being destroyed by Joshua (Josh.4; 24) and there is evidence that, after its destruction by the Israelite army, in the course of its long history, the city was destroyed several times. After the city had been conquered it was given to the *tribe of Benjamin* (Josh.18; 21).

Later, during the time of the Judges, it was occupied by the *Moabites*, led by their King Eglon, at which time it was known as '*The City of the Palms*'. (Jud.1:16 ; 3;13) Later still, we read in 1st Kings 6:14, that it was '*rebuilt*' by Hiel of Bethel, in the time of *King Ahab*. And it was yet again destroyed at the time of the Babylonian Captivity, and later rebuilt once more.

Between the Testaments

It was during the Inter-Testamental Period that Jericho came under *Roman* control and was governed by a 'Captain' – ('*Strategos*'; in Latin), - and during its time under the Romans, the city was given to Cleopatra, by Mark Anthony, and she 'leased' it to Herod the Great for 200 talents.

King Herod then built a new city south of the old one, complete with a castle, an amphitheatre, a hippodrome, and beautiful gardens with various water-features, and Jericho became his winter-residence. In fact, this is where he died in 4 B.C. This city, known as '*Herodian Jericho*', later suffered the fate of earlier cities. It was destroyed by the Emperor *Vespasian*, in 68 A.D. But the important fact is that this city, virtually adjoining the old site, was *the city that Jesus knew*.

We could continue to follow Jericho's turbulent history through succeeding centuries – turbulent, because it was destroyed and rebuilt several times. Moslems destroyed it in 638 A.D. Egyptian soldiers destroyed it in 1840. In 1871 it was destroyed by fire. And, after each destruction, it was rebuilt.

Jesus and Jericho

But, although it would be interesting to study this later history, what concerns us at the moment is the fact that the miraculous healing occurred when Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem for the last time, after leaving Galilee in the north. (Matt.19:1) Jericho was the last halt for pilgrims when they travelled to The City of David from Galilee and Perea.

They came by way of Jericho, to avoid passing through Samaria, and Jesus, descending from the north, would first enter and pass through what archaeologists call '*Canaanite Jericho*', that is our '*old Jericho*', where the '*Garstang Trench*' has been excavated, and he would then enter '*Herodian Jericho*'. In other words, there was a point at which he left the ruins of the *ancient city* and passed into the *modern city* built by Herod.

When we take into consideration the geographical proximity of the 'old' and the 'new' cities, it is not difficult to reconcile the statements made by the Gospel writers. He was '*leaving*' Canaanite Jericho and '*entering*' Herodian Jericho.

The Gospel records, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, contain no contradictions when we take into consideration such matters as their geographical and historical setting.

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