

Did Matthew (27:9) Falsely Attribute a Prophecy to Jeremiah that Came from Zechariah (11:12-13)?

by Bodie Hodge and Paul S. Taylor on April 27, 2009

Many skeptics and liberal scholars have suggested that Matthew's gospel contains an error:

Mt. 27:9-10 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 priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, and gave them for the potter's field, as the LORD directed me."

The quotation about the thirty pieces of silver is highly reminiscent of Zechariah, and it is, therefore, assumed that Matthew made a mistake. If Matthew did make a mistake, then the concept of scriptural inerrancy is undermined. The most significant error that the skeptics make is to approach this passage deliberately looking for an error. If we look at the passage, while assuming scriptural inerrancy, we can see that there are several rationalizations of the alleged problem that have been discussed over the years. In short they are:

1. Said by Jeremiah but later written by Zechariah
2. Zechariah's second name is Jeremiah, like "Simon Peter" for Peter
3. Copyist mistake, but the Syriac and Persian versions have no prophet listed and all the Greek versions do
4. This is quoting from an apocryphal work of Jeremiah, like Jude quoting from Enoch
5. The last four chapters of Zechariah were actually written by Jeremiah
6. Due to a different order of books in the Jewish canon, Jeremiah could be given proper credit for any of the minor prophets
7. This passage refers to both sections of Jeremiah and Zechariah, and only Jeremiah is mentioned

The first five are less likely, with the last two being the more common explanations (6 and 7). Let's take a closer look at them.

A Collection of Prophetic Books (6)

This possibility is that Matthew is using a well-established rabbinical formula of referring to a collection of books by the name of the first book in the collection. Jesus used a similar formula in Luke 24:44, where He referred to the Writings section of the Old Testament as Psalms—even though this could include the other writings, such as Proverbs.

In the Jewish Tanakh, the prophetic books were in a different order than the order of the Christian Bible—even though they are all there. The first listed book in the collection of the Prophets was Jeremiah, not Isaiah. Therefore, a citation of Jeremiah could conceivably cover an actual quotation from Zechariah.

The Context of Jeremiah (7)

This explanation involves the way that New Testament writers frequently allude to more than one Old Testament passage, providing an overall context. For the quote by Zechariah, there is a lot of foundational information that is necessary. First, Jeremiah 18 is the famous portion of the Old Testament that discusses God being the Potter and we the clay. And the Lord warns of a disaster to a nation that turns to evil. Israel had just rejected the Son of God, and the spiritual leaders just purchased His death for 30 pieces of silver.

(over)

The message of the gospel then also went out to the Gentiles. And Israel, particularly Jerusalem, was soon left in ruin.

Also, Jeremiah 19:1-4 gives a more precise placement of the potter's field, outside the Potsherd Gate of Jerusalem, and the catastrophe that will happen there. The verse mentions that Israel has forsaken God here, and mentions the blood of innocents there to – Christ's even being the ultimate innocent blood.

Then, of course, Jeremiah 32:9-12 discusses the land and purchase agreements. Although the first quotation in Matthew 27:9-10 is somewhat similar to the passage in Zechariah, the second quotation – “and gave them for the potter's field, as the LORD directed me” – alludes to Jeremiah 32:6-9, which refers to the potter's field.

So, these three aspects are Jeremiah's, and Zechariah seems to build on them. In that respect, it is not an error to refer to the prophet Jeremiah at the point, as the whole passage – including the allusion to Zechariah – is in the context of the potter's field, as related in Jeremiah.

Another Possible Explanation (8)

If we look carefully at these two verses in Matthew and Zechariah, though they have similarities, they simply do not match up:

Zec. 11:12-13 Then I said to them, “If it is agreeable to you, give me my wages; and if not, refrain.” So they weighed out for my wages thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD for the potter.

Mt. 27:9-10 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 priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, and gave them for the potter's field, as the LORD directed me.”

One quote says that they “weighed out” the wages, the other says “and they took.” One says “throw it to the potter,” and this was already fulfilled in Matthew 27:5. One does not mention that it was for a potter's field, and one does. One could find other differences, but this should suffice. The point is, this is not a quote from the book of Zechariah.

One cannot say this quote was misattributed to Zechariah, since Zechariah, said no such thing – his quote had a few similar aspects, but that is as far as it should go. So, if Matthew, speaking with the Holy Spirit, quotes this and attributes it to Jeremiah, then it was indeed something Jeremiah said, and it was merely not recorded in his writings. Recall John speaking about Jesus:

Jn. 21:25 And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen.

So, the answer could be as simple as this quote by Matthew is not by Zechariah but is merely an unrecorded quote by Jeremiah. Note also that Matthew does not say that the quotation was *written* by Jeremiah, but rather *spoken (rheo)* by Jeremiah. It is possible, therefore, that the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to report a spoken prophecy of Jeremiah, just as Jude was inspired to include previously unwritten information about Michael in his book (Jude 9). After the spoken prophecy given to Jeremiah, the Holy Spirit could later have inspired a similar prophecy to Zechariah as part of his *written* account.

Regardless, there are eight possible explanations given for this, and these last three easily answer the alleged contradiction.