

Harmonizing the accounts of the crucifixion

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The relevant passages are: Matthew 27:31-56, Mark 15:20-41, Luke 23:26-49 and John 19:16-37.

1) The soldiers lead Jesus away to be crucified, wearing His own clothes (Matthew 27:27-31, Mark 15:20, John 19:16).

2) On the way they conscripted Simon, a man of Cyrene, to follow Jesus, carrying His cross (Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21,¹ Luke 23:26). The soldiers had already mistreated Jesus so badly that He probably was weakened and having trouble carrying the cross, which was probably heavy.

3) Only Luke mentions Jesus' message to the 'daughters of Jerusalem' (23:27-31), which I will transcribe here:

27 A considerable crowd of people followed Him, including women who were also mourning and lamenting Him. 28 So Jesus turned to them and said: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; rather weep for yourselves and for your children.

29 Because indeed, the days are coming in which they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, even the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!'² 30 Then they will

begin 'to say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!"'³ 31 For if they do these things in the 'green tree', what will happen in the 'dry'?"

If Jesus were still carrying the cross, He would not be able to 'turn' (verse 28), which is why I place this after the transferal of the cross to Simon.

4) They arrived at *Golgotha*, a Hebrew word meaning 'place of a skull' (Matthew 27:33, Mark 15:22, Luke 23:33, John 19:17).

5) The soldiers offered Him sour wine mixed with myrrh to drink, but He tasted it and then refused to drink it (Matthew 27:34, Mark 15:23).⁴ That was a small humanitarian gesture—myrrh is a crude anesthetic, and would deaden the pain. But Jesus refused it, so He remained fully alert on the cross and felt it all; the myrrh would have diminished the suffering.

6) The soldiers nailed Jesus to the cross and set it up. After taking care of Jesus, they also crucified two criminals, one on each side of Him (Matthew 27:35, Mark 15:24-25, 27-28, Luke 23:32-33, John 19:18). Mark specifies that "it was the third hour when they crucified Him"; he

¹ After carrying the cross, Simon doubtless stayed around to see what happened. In consequence he was no doubt converted, as were his two sons.

² For Jews to say this, things would have to get really bad.

³ See Hosea 10:8.

⁴ In the NKJV, Matthew 27:34^a reads like this: "they gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink." And Mark 15:23^a reads like this: "Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink." That Mark used a generic term, 'wine', for the more precise 'sour wine' (or 'wine vinegar'), need not detain us. But what was the mixture? 'Gall' is one thing, an animal substance, and 'myrrh' is another, a vegetable substance; it was either one or the other, but which? Was Matthew influenced by Psalm 69:21? "They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." (Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience, and seems to have mentioned fulfilled prophecy whenever he could.) More to the point, perhaps, is Acts 8:23, where Peter says to Simon (the ex-sorcerer), "for I see that you are in a gall of bitterness" (so the Greek Text). Evidently 'gall' was used as a generic term for any bitter substance. I take it that Matthew, perhaps influenced by Psalm 69:21, used the generic term. I conclude that the precise substance used was myrrh, as Mark indicates.

was using Jewish time, which means it was 9 a.m. With reference to the two criminals, Mark adds: So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And He was numbered with transgressors”.¹

7) John 19:19 says that the board with the statement of Jesus’ ‘crime’ was put on the cross, above His head, and the time to do that would be while it was still on the ground. When the cross was placed upright, the board was already nailed on. All four Gospels mention the ‘accusation’, but each one gives it slightly differently (Matthew 27:37, Mark 15:26, Luke 23:38, John 19:19-22). Piecing them all together, the complete statement was: THIS IS JESUS THE NATSOREAN,² THE KING OF THE JEWS, and it was in three languages: Hebrew, Greek and Latin.³ John adds some important information:

20 So many of the Jews read this notice, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; further, it was written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin! 21 So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Don’t write, ‘The king of the Jews’, but that the fellow said, ‘I am the king of the Jews’.” 22 Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written!”

The chief priests had gotten all they were going to get out of Pilate; he was making a statement, but he was also getting back at them a little bit. (We don’t know just when the Jews saw the notice, nor when the conversation took place. The board would have been prepared before the soldiers started out. It is likely that the Jews had ‘observers’ watching all that went on.)

8) The soldiers had to remain on the scene to prevent anyone from helping the victims, and of course they would sit down—they would be there for many hours. One of the things they did was to divide up Jesus’ clothes (Matthew 27:35-36, Mark 15:24, Luke 23:34, John 19:23-24). John gives some interesting detail, so I will transcribe it:

23 Now when the soldiers had crucified Jesus they took His clothes and made four parts, a part for each soldier.⁴ They also took His tunic, but the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. 24 So they said among themselves, “Let’s not rip it, but toss for it, to see whose it will be”, so that the Scripture might be fulfilled which says: “They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast a lot.” That is why the soldiers did these things.

The reference is to Psalm 22:18. John seems to be affirming a cause/effect relationship. The centurion could have claimed the tunic, or whatever, but casting a lot had been prophesied. Luke 23:34 deserves special notice: Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”;⁵ while they were dividing up His clothes by casting a lot. Only Luke

¹ See Isaiah 53:12. Around 11% of the Greek manuscripts omit this verse entirely, to be followed by NIV, NASB, LB, [TEV], etc.

² That Pilate put “the Natsorean” (not Natsarene [Nazarene]) indicates that he had researched Jesus. The reference is to Isaiah 11:1; Jesus was David’s Branch, the Messiah. Pilate was making a statement. For an explanation of ‘Natsorean’, please see the appendix at the end of this article.

³ To put all of that in three languages would require a board of fair size. But why did Pilate use three languages? One would have been enough (it was customary to put the crime over the victim’s head). I take it that Pilate was **not** happy, having been bested by the Jews; and I think he was personally convinced that Jesus was a king. By putting ‘this is the king of the Jews’ he was making a statement, one that virtually any literate person would be able to read, given the three languages.

⁴ This probably means that Jesus was left without any; one final bit of humiliation.

⁵ The eclectic text currently in vogue (following less than 1% of the Greek manuscripts, of objectively inferior quality) places within double brackets the first half of verse 34: “Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’”. In this way they deny that Luke wrote it, surely a perverse proceeding.

records this important statement by Jesus; I take it that the Greek grammar at this point indicates that Jesus said it while the soldiers were dividing up His clothes. I suppose that Jesus was referring precisely to those soldiers; they were simply obeying orders, and had no personal responsibility for what was happening.

9) Only three of the Gospels mention the taunting by the spectators (Matthew 27:38-44, Mark 15:29-32, Luke 23:35-37). The accounts separate the spectators from the religious leaders, who evidently did most of the taunting, but the soldiers and the two criminals are also mentioned. The religious leaders were especially nasty: “He saved others; himself he cannot save!”¹ “If he is ‘King of Israel’ let him come down from the cross now and we will believe him!”² “He trusted in God; let Him rescue him now, if He wants him; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son’.” However, they were probably demonized at the time.

10) The criminals require special mention. Matthew writes: “Even the bandits who were crucified with Him were reviling Him in the same way”, and Mark says much the same. But Luke adds an important item:

39 Then one of the hanged criminals started berating Him, saying, “If you are the Christ, save yourself and us!” 40 But the other reacted and rebuked him, saying: “Don’t you even fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward for our deeds; but this man did nothing wrong.” 42 Then he said to Jesus, “Please remember me, Lord,³ when you come in your kingdom”.⁴ 43 Jesus said to him, “I tell you assuredly, today you will be with me in Paradise.”⁵

Evidently they both started out by reviling Him, but later one of them repented—they were on the cross about three hours before the supernatural darkness, so there was time to observe Jesus, which caused one of them to change his mind.

11) Only John records Jesus providing for His mother:

25 Now Jesus’ mother and her sister, Mary of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene were standing by His cross. 26 So Jesus, seeing His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He says to His mother, “Woman, there is your son!” 27 Then He says to the disciple, “There is your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

Notice that Jesus is still perfectly lucid. As Mary’s oldest son, He was responsible for her well-being (we understand that Joseph was gone by now), so He passes that responsibility over to the apostle John (the author of this Gospel); and John accepts it.

¹ This was precisely true, but not in the sense they intended. To save us, He could not save Himself.

² This was a lie; they already knew that Jesus was the Messiah but had deliberately rejected Him. However, if Jesus had descended from the cross (as presumably He had the power to do) we would be without hope. The people were being satanically nasty, but Jesus was totally committed to the Father’s will and thus the redemptive program was not aborted.

³ Instead of “to Jesus, ‘Please remember me, Lord’”, perhaps 3% of the manuscripts have ‘Jesus, remember me’ (as in NIV, NASB, LB, TEV, etc.), which seriously weakens the man’s statement.

⁴ I find this statement to be impressive: the man is declaring that Jesus is the Messiah and will indeed inaugurate His Kingdom. Evidently the man knew the Bible; and his request was honored!

⁵ For Jesus to say ‘today’, He knew the man would die before sundown, so He knew the man’s legs would be broken—otherwise he would most likely have lasted well into the night, which would have been ‘tomorrow’. ‘Paradise’ here refers to that half of Hades (Sheol in the OT) reserved for the righteous dead. Hades is the ‘half-way house’ where departed spirits await the final judgment. In Luke 16:22 it is called “Abraham’s bosom”.

12) Only three of the Gospels mention the three hours of supernatural darkness (Matthew 27:45, Mark 15:33, Luke 23:44-45). Matthew's statement will do: "Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour a darkness came over all the land." Matthew uses Jewish time, so it was dark between noon and 3 p.m. The darkness could not have been a solar eclipse, as some have ignorantly argued. The Passover always occurs at full moon, and a solar eclipse only occurs at new moon. Further, even a total eclipse only lasts for a few minutes, not three hours. Why the darkness? I believe the Father was protecting the Son, so no one could observe His anguish as He was "made sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21).¹

13) At 3 p.m., when the darkness was removed, Jesus gave a very loud anguished cry: "My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?"² I take it that the Father turned His back on the Son during those three hours—to be separated from the Father is spiritual death. For Jesus to pay for my sin and yours He had to take our wages: "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23)—both physical and spiritual. The Hebrew text of Isaiah 53:9 refers to His deaths, using an intensive plural.

14) That shout gave rise to a curious situation (Matthew 27:47-49, Mark 15:35-36). Comparing the two accounts, we have an apparent discrepancy: Matthew records that others told the man to stop, while Mark records that the man told them to stop! So which is it? What I imagine is this: as both accounts state, a certain man [could it possibly have been John Mark himself?] decides to offer Jesus a drink of wine vinegar; several others, supposing that Jesus had just called on Elijah, tell him to stop; to which he retorts, "You (pl) stop!" and repeats their statement with sarcasm [anyone who really understood the language would have known that Jesus wasn't calling Elijah at all]. However, it does appear that the man stopped his action before Jesus could drink, since a bit later Jesus says, "I'm thirsty" (John 19:28).

15) The shout of victory is recorded by all four Gospels (Matthew 27:50-52, Mark 15:37-38, Luke 23:46, John 19:28-30), but they record a variety of details. I begin with John:

28 After this, knowing that everything was now accomplished so that the Scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus says, "I'm thirsty!" 29 Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; so they filled a sponge with sour wine, placed it on a hyssop, and put it to His mouth.

30 Then, when He had received³ the sour wine, Jesus said, "Paid in full!!" And bowing His head He dismissed His spirit.⁴

Matthew, Mark and Luke all affirm that Jesus gave a great shout, but without giving the content. I take it that John supplies that information, although he does not mention that it was a shout. "Τετέλεσται"—that was what they wrote on bills and promissory notes when they

¹ As a side benefit, it was a mercy for the mother and close friends who were right there—how could they stand to see such suffering?

² See Psalm 22:1.

³ From the word 'received' it appears that He did swallow some. Since sour wine was not used at the Passover, this does not conflict with the Lord's statement in the upper room (Matthew 26:29) that He would not drink of "this product of the vine". All four Evangelists mention the sour wine. There was evidently a pot/vessel full of it (the soldiers were in for many hours of vigil and that was what they drank). The mocking offer mentioned in Luke 23:36 happened before the darkness; the other three accounts after. The offer recorded in Matthew 27:48 and Mark 15:36 was triggered by Jesus' cry, "My God, my God, . . ." The one in John 19:29-30 by His saying, "I'm thirsty". I venture to suggest that there was an interval between His despairing cry and His statement—after the cry He may have lapsed back into silence for a bit; He was trying to make contact with the Father. It may be that the sour wine sort of 'wet His whistle' so He could let out His shout of victory.

⁴ That is right—the cross did not kill Jesus, He just told His spirit to leave. In John 10:17-18 he was very clear: no one could take His life from Him, but He could lay it down.

were paid off = 'paid in full'. When something is shouted the individual sounds can be distorted, but John was right there and could read His lips, if necessary. It was a shout of victory: "We did it!" "Finished!" "Paid in full!"¹

However, after that shout, Jesus did one more thing, as recorded by Luke: "Then, after giving a loud shout, Jesus said, 'Father, it is into your hands that I will commit my spirit'. And having said this, He breathed out His spirit." Jesus had the authority to dismiss His spirit, but this statement indicates that He had reestablished contact with the Father; it also constitutes a declaration of His confidence in the Father, in spite of the terrible suffering He had just been through. Matthew, Mark and Luke record that at that point "the veil of the temple was ripped in two from top to bottom!" The Father Himself ripped the veil (or ordered it done); it was His declaration that the **Price** had indeed been paid! Access to God's presence is no longer limited to one man once a year. See Hebrews 10:19-22.

Only Matthew records that: "And the earth was shaken, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened. (And many bodies, of the saints who had fallen asleep, were raised; and coming forth out of the graves after His resurrection, they entered the holy city and were made visible to many.²)" The earthquake was added confirmation that something supernatural was happening; even the hardened centurion was convinced.

16) Mention is made of a variety of reactions: "And the whole crowd that had gathered for the spectacle, when they saw what actually happened, went away beating their breasts"—this was a cultural expression of sorrow and distress. A number of His followers were watching from a distance. But the centurion requires special attention. Matthew writes: "Now when the centurion and those with him guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that happened they were scared stiff and said, 'This *Man* really was the Son of God!'" And Mark writes: "Well when the centurion, who was standing opposite Him, saw that He breathed out His spirit after giving such a loud shout,³ he said, 'This man really was God's Son!'"

Any centurion would be a hardened soldier, who had seen no end of crucifixions. He knew that a cross killed by asphyxiation. Hanging from the hands pushes the diaphragm against the lungs so you can't breathe. Nailing the feet, with the knees bent, was a sadistic procedure to prolong the agony—even though painful, the victim would push up so he could get a breath, until finally too worn out to do so. Breaking the legs would put an end to that expedient, and the person died within a few minutes, asphyxiated. Someone who is dying asphyxiated does not shout. Since Jesus gave a loud shout, but then immediately died, the centurion knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that the cross had not killed Jesus (later, when Joseph asks for the body, Pilate is surprised that Jesus could already be dead). But who can just tell his spirit to leave? Putting two and two together, the centurion concluded that Jesus was a supernatural being. Just so!

17) Only John offers the following information:

31 Now then, because it was Preparation Day, so that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews requested Pilate that their legs might be broken and they be removed. 32 Then the soldiers came and

¹ Oh praise God!

² Wow! How would you like a departed saint to knock at your door?! It would be tremendous confirmatory evidence for Christ's resurrection. The Text does not say what happened to these resurrected saints, but to be sent back into the ground would be a real drag. It is more likely that they went with the risen Christ to heaven.

³ A mere handful (0.4%) of the Greek manuscripts, of objectively inferior quality, omit 'after giving a loud shout', to be followed by NASB and LB.

broke the legs of the first man and of the other one who had been crucified with Him. 33 But upon coming to Jesus, they did not break His legs, since they saw that He had already died. 34 But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. 35 And the one who saw has testified, and his testimony is true (yes, he knows he is telling the truth), so that you may believe. 36 Because these things happened so that the Scripture should be fulfilled: “Not a bone of His will be broken.”¹ 37 And again another Scripture says: “They will look on Him whom they pierced.”²

John, the author of this Gospel, was right there, so he could see very clearly what came out of Jesus’ side—that the blood had separated was a clear sign of physical death.³

APPENDIX

The Natsorean

Every version that I remember seeing misleads the reader by obliterating one of the Lord’s titles, a title that the glorified Jesus Himself used when dealing with Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road. When Saul asked, “Who are you, Lord?”, He answered, “I am Jesus the Natsorean, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 22:8). Most versions at this place render ‘Jesus of Nazareth’, while some have ‘Jesus the Nazarene’. For an explanation of why I use ‘ts’ instead of ‘z’, please see “‘Prophets’ in Matthew 2:23”, in chapter II.

The familiar ‘Nazarene’ [Ναζαρηνός] occurs four times: Mark 1:24, 14:67, 16:6 and Luke 4:34. ‘Jesus the Nazarene’ would appear to be another way of saying ‘Jesus of/from Nazareth’, and some versions so translate the phrase. Unfortunately, the versions do the same with ‘Natsorean’ [Ναζωραῖος], which I consider to be a serious error. Just looking at the two Greek words, they are obviously different. The Hebrew root is *netser*, ‘branch’, a reference to Isaiah 11.1 (‘Nazareth’ is a transliteration of the Hebrew name). Going back to Acts 22:8, why would Jesus waste time with the name of a town? He was dealing with a highly instructed Pharisee; He introduced Himself as David’s Branch, the Messiah—a reference that Saul would immediately understand.

‘Natsorean’ occurs fifteen times: Matthew 2:23, 26:71; Mark 10:47; Luke 18:37, 24:19; John 18:5,7, 19:19; Acts 2:22, 3:6, 4:10, 6:14, 22:8, 24:5 and 26:9. All have the definite article, except the first one—the Natsorean; except that in Acts 24:5 Felix speaks of ‘the sect of the Natsoreans’. Speaking of Felix, his use of the term ‘sect’ is instructive. Aside from Acts 22:8, that I have already discussed, I consider that John 19:19 deserves special comment. The title above the cross read: This is Jesus the Natsorean, the King of the Jews. Pilate had evidently researched Jesus quite well (anyone with a large following is a potential problem); I believe that he knew precisely what he was doing when he used ‘Natsorean’, just as he knew precisely what he was doing when he put ‘the King of the Jews’. For more on the subject of Pilate, please see “Poor Pilate—wrong place, wrong time”, above.

¹ See Exodus 12:46, Numbers 9:12 and Psalm 34:20.

² See Zechariah 12:10.

³ I guess we do not need to know, really, just how the separation came about, whether by purely natural processes or with supernatural intervention; in any case, John is emphatic about what he saw.

Whatever version of the Bible you are using, I would urge you to correct it at the references mentioned above, so you know when a title is being used. 'The Natsorean' needs to be added to any list of the Lord's titles.