

May 28, 2017

WHEN A QUOTE ISN'T A QUOTE

(Mark 1:2-3) ~ Patrick Swayne

When I was in high school, several of my teachers drilled into my head the importance of properly citing my work. In fact, I was forced to learn several different methods of citation. For those who might have been blessed to miss out on this study, citations are notes that you add to your written work to give credit to the author(s) you have been influenced by or are quoting from. The reason citation was stressed in high school is that 1) some form of citation is required by most college teachers, and 2) it is the only sure way to avoid plagiarism (stealing someone's work by failing to give them credit).

Coming to the Bible with a background of citation study can produce a bit of frustration at times. The New Testament contains many quotations of Old Testament books and many more allusions (veiled references as opposed to quotes) to Old Testament texts. Sometimes, frustration comes because the authors don't tell us when they are quoting and when they are not. Sometimes it comes because we don't know which version of the Old Testament they were quoting from – our Old Testament was translated from Hebrew texts, but sometimes the New Testament authors appear to have been quoting from the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew text. Sometimes though, frustration comes because the author claims to be quoting from someone when we have a record of someone else saying it.

If you read Mark 1:2 in most versions besides the KJV or NKJV (including ASV, ESV, and NASB), you're going to see Mark claim to draw a quote from the prophet Isaiah. There's a problem with this: while we know Isaiah said Mark 1:3 (Isaiah 40:3), verse 2 appears to be a quote taken from Malachi 3:1. Did Mark make a mistake?

It's important to pause at this moment to remember a couple of things. Before we accuse the Bible of an error of this nature, we need to remember that we are not the first audience of the Bible. While citations are important to us (at least on an academic level; misquotations and plagiarism abound on social media), citations were clearly not as important to those who lived in the first century. Further, we need to realize that all that it takes to defend the Bible is at least one plausible explanation for what we see in the text. And, in this instance, there are several plausible explanations.

First, let's consider why the KJV and NKJV say "the prophets," when the other versions for the most part say, "Isaiah." For the most part, the KJV/NKJV translators translated the New Testament from what is known as the *textus receptus*, a line of Greek manuscripts that was passed down through the western (i.e. European) churches. However, the early church made many copies in part or in whole of the New Testament besides what is reflected in the *textus receptus* – well over 5000 in fact. Modern translators (besides those behind the NKJV) tend to favor a method of translation that takes into account those 5000 plus copies, preferring 1) what is said most often among the various copies, and 2) what is said in the oldest copies. At times this causes them to ignore what is found in the *textus receptus*. The first possible explanation then is that the *textus receptus* was right, and Mark really said, "the prophets," which would make sense given his intention to quote more than one prophet.

The above explanation works in the case of Mark 1:2-3, but it doesn't *seem* to work in the case

of Matthew 27:9-10. There, all the major versions of the Bible agree that Matthew is taking a quote from Jeremiah (the KJV keeps its old English “Jeremy,” but it’s still Jeremiah). The problem is that we have no record of Jeremiah saying this, but we do have a record of Zechariah doing so (Zechariah 11:12-13).

Notice how I said seem in the above paragraph? Even though all of the translations agree that Matthew said Jeremiah, there are ancient copies of the book of Matthew that contain the reading “by the prophet” instead of “by Jeremiah.” However, for the sake of argument, what if Matthew really did say Jeremiah and Mark really did say Isaiah?

Following the quote in Mark, here are at least two other explanations: 1) Not all the words of the prophets are recorded in the books that bear their names. It could simply be that Isaiah spoke what Malachi later wrote, and that Mark revealed through inspiration that Isaiah was the first one to prophesy this fact. 2) Perhaps Mark drew attention to Isaiah because the following events relate to Isaiah’s prophecies regarding the beginning of the gospel (consider Mark 1:2-15 in light of Isaiah 40:3; 42:1; 52:7; 61:1). More possibilities no doubt could be offered upon reflection and study.

Christianity had its opponents from day one. The simple fact of the matter is that if Mark did say Isaiah, it didn’t cause a problem for either the original audience or the enemies of the truth. People often “discover” these so-called “contradictions,” assuming that they are the first people to have ever actually read the Bible! Even when the Bible doesn’t follow our 21st rules regarding quotations and citations, its truth still stands.