

REPEATED STORIES DON'T AGREE IN DETAILS

Have three different people tell the same story, and chances are they won't agree in all the details. In fact, at some points they may be 180 degrees out of kilter. And if the stories have been passed down over the years, they're liable to get a new shape every time they're told.

That's pretty much what seems to have happened in the case of some of the stories in the Bible. When the same story is told in two or three different spots, chances are all the details won't mesh together neatly.

A good example in the Christian scriptures is the account of how Jesus healed a blind man near Jericho.

Here's how it goes: Jesus is walking along with his students and a larger crowd of followers. A blind beggar is sitting on the curb. When he finds out who is coming, he starts to call for mercy. The other folks try to shush him up, but he keeps at it louder and louder.

Finally Jesus stops and asks what he wants. "I'd like to be able to see," says the beggar. "OK," answers Jesus. "Open your eyes and take a look." With that the blind man discovers he can see, so he joins the crowd and follows after Jesus.

So far, so good. What we have here is the encouraging story of how Jesus heals a blind beggar. But it gets more complicated. The story is told three times, in each of the first three gospels. And each one—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—offers a different slant on the story.

In Mark, generally thought to be the earliest of the three gospels to be written, the beggar is named as Bartimaeus.

According to Mark 12:46-52, he accosts Jesus as the rabbi is leaving the city of Jericho. When the man refuses to keep quiet, Jesus asks somebody to bring him over.

Bartimaeus gets the message, throws off his coat, and jumps up. "Your faith has healed you," Jesus suggests, as blind Bart regains his sight. And off they go.

Matthew 20:29-34 tells the same story. But in this account there are two blind beggars! Neither of them is named, but the same sequence of events is played out. They call for help, the crowd tries unsuccessfully to quiet

them, Jesus asks what they want, and he eventually heals them.

Two extra touches are added: We are told that Jesus felt sorry for the men and that he touched their eyes.

In Luke 18:35-43 the healing of a blind beggar occurs as Jesus and Co. are on their way *into* Jericho, not on their way out, as in Mark and Matthew. After the man, who is not named, regains his sight, we are told that he and the crowd show their thanks by praising God.

In all three cases the sequence of events is roughly the same, but in each case there are notable differences. Those who are determined to do so can reconstruct the stories in a way which makes all the details harmonize.

Perhaps Jesus treated blind beggars two or three times that day: once on the way into Old Jericho, once on the way out of New Jericho, and once on the road between the two sites.

Perhaps the first man to regain his sight ran ahead to find other members of his beggars guild, who then followed exactly the same procedure which worked the first time. Perhaps.

But that's not the point. The author of each of the gospels wanted to tell his story in a way which would emphasize a specific idea.

Mark's lively account accents Bartimaeus' personal trust in Jesus. Matthew underscores Jesus' sense of compassion and pity. Luke's rendering zeroes in on the thankful response of the beggar.

All of them, no doubt, wanted to leave the impression that divine sight-giving power was working through Jesus. But by picking up on different details, each could flavor that impression in a distinctive way.

The lesson for modern readers is to look for those unique perspectives. For the peculiar twist to each story is what makes them fun to read.

Perhaps that's why so many different accounts of Jesus' career were included in the official collection of Christian scriptures.

In any event, don't expect all the details to agree perfectly when the same story is told several times. Each author had his own pious bias, and it's by respecting each one's distinctive slant that you can catch what he was driving at.