

DEALING WITH ALLEGED CONTRADICTIONS IN THE BIBLE

A. General Principles

1. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21).
2. The seeming difficulties in the Bible are exceedingly insignificant when put in comparison with its many excellencies and evidences of divine inspiration.
 - a. The Bible gives a realistic view of man, neither idolizing nor dragging him through the gutter.
 - b. It discusses with harmony and continuity from Genesis to Revelation hundreds of controversial subjects.
 - c. It includes many quotations by the Lord Jesus of Old Testament Scriptures and events.
 - d. It includes hundreds of Old Testament prophecies concerning the birth, life, sufferings, death, and resurrection of Christ that were fulfilled in the New Testament.
 - e. It is a book of real people with real names who lived in real geographical places at specific times in the history of mankind.
 - f. It is consistent with many archaeological findings.
 - g. It is consistent with many scientific findings (sphere of the earth, number of stars, importance of blood and of low fat diets, public health measures, safe sex, physical forces, etc.). True science will never contradict God’s Word.
3. Many of the seeming difficulties arise from God entrusting the transmission of His Word to the hands of finite and erring man (instead of dropping the completed Bible straight from heaven).
 - a. Differing eyewitness accounts.
 - b. Errors in copying the Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) manuscripts.
 - c. Errors and inconsistencies in translating the Hebrew and Greek texts into English.
 - d. Changes in meanings of words over time (for example, between the publication of the King James Version in 1611 until the present).
 - e. Many of the seeming difficulties can be resolved by further study of the Scriptures themselves, and perhaps have been allowed by the Holy Spirit to force us to study the Scriptures more diligently.

4. God is infinite and we are finite; thus some seeming difficulties (such as the doctrine of the Trinity) may have to await heaven.

B. How Should We Deal with the Difficulties of the Bible?

1. Deal with them honestly, humbly, determinedly, fearlessly, patiently, scripturally, and prayerfully. Again, always keep the seeming difficulties and contradictions of the Bible in the perspective of the many, many positive evidences (see above) of divine inspiration.
2. When challenged by others who say, “The Bible is full of contradictions,” ask them to read the Bible all the way through and make a list of all the contradictions they find and give them to you (see Heb. 4:12).

C. Possible Reasons for Supposed Contradictions

1. Differences of time. Conditions true at one time may not be true at another. For example, in the Old Testament, God promised His people physical prosperity if they would remain faithful to Him (Deut. 28-30). But in the new Testament, the emphasis of blessing shifts from earth to heaven. God now promises believers that He will reward their obedience in eternity (Rom. 8:18-25; 2 Tim. 4:8; Jas. 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4).
2. Differences of authorship. Statements made by men speaking in behalf of God often conflict with statements made by men speaking only in their own behalf. For example, in the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon said things out of the bitterness of his own heart that conflict with eternal truths spoken by others who said their words were from God.
3. Differences of perspective. “Truth is many-sided, flinging back from each of its countless facets a ray of different hue” (Haley). Consider the different descriptions of an elephant given by four blind men of different heights who had approached the animal from different directions. So instead of contradicting each other, scriptures complement each other to give a complete picture.
4. Differences of arrangement. Certain Biblical passages may appear to conflict with one another if one author arranges his content chronologically while another author uses a topical arrangement.
5. Differences of computation. Numbers will sometimes differ when the kind of calendar or standard of measure used is different. Note that the value of π of 3 implied in 1 Kings 7:23 is not significantly different from the true value of 3.1416 when taking rounding error into account.
6. Differences of language. Eastern language and thought may be misinterpreted and seen as contradictory by a Western mind not acquainted with Oriental custom, setting, and style. Eastern language tends to be poetic and rich with emotions and metaphors that must be

properly understood or they will appear to be in conflict. For example, in one passage David described God as a rock (Psa. 18:2), but in another place he described God as One who had wings and feathers (Psa. 91:4).

7. Differences of names. Eastern custom allowed for giving the same person different names. For instance, one of the apostles was referred to as: Simon, Simeon, Peter, Cephas, Simon Peter, Simon Bar-Jona, and Simon son of Jonas. Frequently, the names of persons and places were changed after an important event.
8. Differences of word meanings. The same word might mean entirely different things depending on the context or usage. Try to imagine the initial confusion of an international traveler who is unfamiliar with the way Americans use the terms hot, cool, sharp, or awesome.
9. Differences of manuscripts. Some discrepancies are due to errors that have crept into the copying process. We can be thankful that these doubtful passages do not involve more than a small percentage of the total text, and none of them threatens any essential doctrine or truth.
10. Differences of author and reader. Many alleged discrepancies are due to the imagination of the critic who is more interested in finding problems than in finding solutions.

D. Examples of Apparent Contradictions in Doctrine (see Appendix)

God is three—God is one.

Jesus is God—Jesus is Man.

We should not judge others—we should judge others.

With faith we can do everything—even with faith we may not be able to do everything.

We are saved by faith alone—we are saved by faith plus works.

Christ came to bring peace—Christ came to bring division.

Jesus Christ was equal with the Father—Jesus Christ was less than the Father.

Governments are controlled by Satan—governments are controlled by God.

The Word of God hardens—the Word of God softens.

The Jews are God's special people—Christ died for Jews and Gentiles alike.

E. Some Apparent Contradictions among the Four Gospels

1. According to Matt. 2:13-23, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt with the infant Jesus and from there to Nazareth; but Luke 2:21-39 says that they went to Nazareth after Jesus' circumcision.
2. The name of Joseph's father is Jacob in Matt.1:16 and Heli in Luke 3:23.
3. Jesus met and healed two demon-possessed men at Gadara in Matt. 8:28; but only one is

mentioned in Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-39.

4. Jesus drove the sellers and money-changers from the temple during the last week of His earthly life (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45,46); but according to John 2:13-17, this occurred at the beginning of His ministry.
5. In three gospel accounts of Peter's denial of Jesus, the cock crowed once (Matt. 26:74,75; Luke 22:61,62; John 18:24-27); Mark 14:68-72 says twice.
6. The superscription posted on the cross was "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Matt. 27:37), "THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Mark 15:26), "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Luke 23:38), "JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS" (John 19:19).
7. The women who went to Jesus' tomb on the morning of the resurrection saw one angel (Matt. 28:1-7), a young man (Mark 16:1-8), two men (Luke 24:1-8), and two angels (John 20:11-13).
8. Resolution: God gave the writers of the gospels freedom to tell the story as they saw and heard it, but He so guided them that their statements often included different elements of the same event. In that sense, they complement rather than contradict one another.

F. Does the Bible Contradict Us?

This might be the most important question of all. Is it possible that the real issue is that we know down deep that the Bible contradicts us? Is it possible that we're critical of the best book in the world because we don't want to be captured by its wisdom? Is it possible that an otherwise objective person might have lost some objectivity along the way? The fact is that when the Bible contradicts us, calls us wrong, and points us to Christ, it is only to bring us the good news that He loves us, died for us, and rose from the dead to show that our rescue is possible. Therefore, let us agree with God and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved (Acts 16:31). Only then will we resolve the one contradiction that is as real as it seems to be.

G. Further Reading

1. Archer, Gleason L. *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, Zondervan, 1982.
2. DeHaan, Martin R. II, *Studies in Contrast*, Radio Bible Class.
3. Haley, John W. *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*, Whitaker House.
4. Torrey, R.A. *Difficulties in the Bible*, Fleming H. Revell, 1907.

APPENDIX

STUDIES IN CONTRAST or ALLEGED CONTRADICTIONS IN THE BIBLE

(Abstracted from a Series of Radio Bible Class Publications)

GOD IS THREE (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14).

GOD IS ONE (Deut. 6:4).

Resolution: God is three in one—blessed Trinity.

JESUS IS GOD (John 1:1-18; 5:23; Col. 1:15-18; Heb. 1:1-4).

JESUS IS MAN (Luke 1:31; 2:1-21,41-52; 22:39-46; 23:46; 1 Tim. 2:5).

Resolution: Jesus is fully God *and* fully man—Son of God and Son of Man.

JESUS CAME TO LIVE FOR US (1 Pet. 2:21-23).

JESUS CAME TO DIE FOR US (Isa. 53:4-12; John 12:24,32,33; 1 Cor. 15:3).

Resolution: As you can see, the Bible teaches that Christ came both to live for us and to die for us. Neither His life without His death nor His death without His life would be adequate for our complete salvation.

WE SHOULD NOT JUDGE OTHERS (Matt. 7:1,2,5; Rom. 2:1).

WE SHOULD JUDGE OTHERS (Matt. 7:6; 18:15-18; Gal. 6:1; 2 Pet. 2:1-22; 1 John 4:1-3).

Resolution: Judging others is wrong when it stems from a self-righteous attitude, reveals a critical spirit, or presumptuously interprets motives. But judging is right and helpful when God's Word is the standard, when it flows from proper motives, and when it leads to corrective action.

WITH FAITH WE CAN DO EVERYTHING (Matt. 17:20; Mark 11:24; Phil. 4:13; 1 John 3:21,22).

EVEN WITH FAITH WE MAY NOT BE ABLE TO DO EVERYTHING (2 Cor. 12:7-10; 1 Tim. 5:23; Heb. 11:36-40).

Resolution: Through faith we can do anything we want to do or receive anything we want to receive—as long as it is in harmony with God's will.

WE ARE SAVED BY FAITH ALONE (Rom. 4:1-5; 5:1; Gal. 3:1-14; Eph. 2:8-10).

WE ARE SAVED BY FAITH PLUS WORKS (Matt. 7:15-20; John 15:1-8; Jas. 2:14-26).

Resolution: Faith in Christ alone saves. But the evidence of that faith is good works. Without outward evidence, the reality of one's faith is questionable.

WIVES ARE TO SERVE THEIR HUSBANDS (Eph. 5:22-24; 1 Pet. 3:1-4).

HUSBANDS ARE TO SERVE THEIR WIVES (Eph. 5:25,28,29; 1 Pet. 3:7).

Resolution: Although the Bible gives the man the headship in the home and commands the wife to be submissive, it makes demands of the husband that can only be fulfilled as he serves his wife.

CHRIST CAME TO BRING PEACE (John 14:27; Rom. 5:1; Col. 1:20).

CHRIST CAME TO BRING DIVISION (Matt. 10:34-36).

Resolution: Jesus Christ made it possible for us to be at peace with God and to have the inner peace of God. But following Him puts us at odds with those who reject Christ's rule over their lives, causing division and conflict.

JESUS CHRIST WAS EQUAL WITH THE FATHER (Matt. 9:1-8; John 1:1; 10:30-38).

JESUS CHRIST WAS LESS THAN THE FATHER (Matt. 24:36; 26:39; John 5:30; 14:28).

Resolution: Since Jesus is God, He is equal with the Father. But in becoming a member of the human family, He temporarily laid aside the independent exercise of His divine rights and powers.

THE SPIRIT DOES NOT USE SINFUL MEN (Judg. 16:15-21; 1 Sam. 16:14; John 12:35-41).

THE SPIRIT USES SINFUL MEN (2 Sam. 11,12; Ezra 1:1-4; Isa. 44:28; 45:1; Phil. 1:15-18).

Resolution: Although the Holy Spirit finds pleasure in abiding with and working through people who trust and obey, He sometimes accomplishes His divine purposes by working in and through the disobedient or unbelieving.

GOVERNMENTS ARE CONTROLLED BY SATAN (1 Chron. 21:1-17; Rev. 16:13-16).

GOVERNMENTS ARE CONTROLLED BY GOD (Gen. 11:1-9; Exod. 7-12; Prov. 21:1; Dan. 4:28-37; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1-4).

Resolution: Satan and his followers are indeed a powerful army who wield tremendous influence on the minds of national leaders (Eph. 6:12). God, however, is in ultimate control, setting limits beyond which Satan cannot go.

THE WORD OF GOD HARDENS (Exod. 7:13,22; 8:15,32; 9:12; Matt. 13:14,15; John 12:37-41).

THE WORD OF GOD SOFTENS (2 Sam. 12:1-23; Neh. 8,9; Job 38:1-42:6; Acts 2:37-41).

Resolution: The Word of God hardens those who, through pride or love for sin, refuse to consider it. It softens those who listen, believe, and submit to it.

SATAN CAN HURT GOD'S PEOPLE (Job 1,2; Acts 5:1-11; 2 Cor. 12:7; 1 Tim. 3:7; Rev. 2:9).

SATAN CAN BE USED BY GOD TO HELP HIS PEOPLE (Job 42; 1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; 1 Tim. 1:20).

Resolution: Satan can inflict physical pain on obedient believers, and he can bring suffering and loss into the lives of those who either yield to him or become careless about their walk with God. However, he cannot bring eternal destruction to a child of God. With God's permission, Satan initiated terrible physical and emotional distress in the lives of Job and Paul. But from an eternal perspective, Satan helped rather than hindered these men. In the sinning Corinthian church member (1 Cor. 5:5), the final outcome of the devil's activity was the man's restoration to fellowship. With Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20) the aim of the satanically inflicted pain was remedial—"to teach them not to blaspheme." Yet, in the process, Satan was able to bring suffering into the lives of these men.

THE JEWS ARE GOD'S SPECIAL PEOPLE (Gen. 12:7; 17:7,8; Deut. 32:9,10; Psa. 135:4; Isa. 2:1-4; Jer. 31; 33:14-16; Ezek. 36,37; Rom. 9:4,5; 11:1-3,25-29).

CHRIST DIED FOR JEWS AND GENTILES ALIKE (John 4:21-24; Acts 10:44-48; 15:1-29; Eph. 2:11-3:6; Gal. 3:28).

Resolution: The Jews are still God's special people, in that they have a unique role in God's program for the earth. But they are equals in the Church, living under the same laws of divine justice as the rest of mankind. God loved the Jews uniquely when He chose them to be His special people, but He doesn't love them more than others. They live under the same principles of sowing and reaping. Their suffering, therefore, is not to be seen as a sign that they have lost their special status. They can be saved only through Christ and then are on an equal level as others in the Church. But they are still God's special people with a distinctive destiny. God expects the world to deal with the Israel-Arab situation in a just way. He does not want Israel to be helped if she is unjust or unfair. He dispersed her because of her unbelief, and He will bring about her repentance and restoration in His own time.