

## Dealing with Apparent Contradictions in Scripture

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We have all faced it – someone with whom we are sharing the good news of Christ says, “I don’t believe the Bible! It is so full of contradictions!” It is easy to allow that to take the wind from our sails. How does one answer a person who claims that the Bible is full of contradictions? Perhaps even more difficult than the objections of another person is the nagging doubt created within ourselves when we read two passages of Scripture that appear to be beyond reconciliation. Too often we shake off the question and bury it under a resolve to return at a later time to study it more thoroughly. Unfortunately we often never return to the matter, perhaps because we are uncertain how to approach such a study.

In what follows it is my intention to present principles that will guide the student of the Bible into how to handle apparent contradictions in Scripture. I say “apparent” because I come to this study with the conviction that the Scriptures are the infallible, inerrant Word of God. The Scriptures are incapable of teaching error or deception; they are not liable to be proven false or mistaken. They very words of God are breathed out by God, individually and in their entirety (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

This stand may open me to accusations of bringing presuppositions to my study. To this charge I answer, “You are right. I do bring presuppositions to this study. But so does the person who claims the Bible is full of errors.” The ultimate question is, after drawing from a thorough study of the Biblical texts and having been guided by sound principles of interpretation, what does the burden of proof tell us? We must also recognize that our study is not simply a scientific and factual pursuit. Ours is also a philosophical and moral quest. It is philosophical because we must answer larger questions such as, are miracles possible? Does God exist? Is the Spirit capable of breathing forth the very words of God? It is also a moral quest because our will enters the picture long before we would like to suppose. Jesus said, “If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from myself” (John 7:17). Ultimately my knowledge of the Divine intent of Scripture depends upon my prior willingness to bow submissively to whatever God may say there. Am I willing to do whatever God tells me to do? That is the first question that must be answered in all Bible study.

How, then, can we approach what appear to be contradictory statements within Scripture? Consider the principles that follow. Not all apply to every question we wrestle with, but thorough mastery of them all will aid us in choosing which principles do apply to our specific questions.

### **1. Be certain you are dealing with identical events in both passages.**

Jesus said and did similar things on different occasions. On two different occasions Jesus cleansed the temple (John 2; Matthew 21). There are many similarities between the two accounts, which could lead a person to believe they describe the same event. If it is not recognized that they occurred at two different times a person may believe the differences in the accounts to be

contradictory. However, if they are distinguished as two separate events, the differences present no problem.

There appear to be two different records of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7; Luke 6). Yet one is significantly shorter than the other. It is quite likely, as commentators have demonstrated that the shorter record in Luke 6 is actually a description of a second delivery of the same basic message delivered by Jesus previously.

Robertson McQuilkin is certain that if Jesus did not specifically refer to the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000 as separate events, someone would have concluded there was an error in recording the numbers.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Carefully study the context of each account.**

Do you know that the Bible says "there is no God"? In fact the Scriptures make the declaration twice (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). Does that frighten you? It shouldn't because, if you look at the context, that phrase is part of a larger sentence: "The fool has said in his heart 'There is no God.'" In any study of Scripture the context must be king! We use this principle when we read any piece of writing. It is only logical to interpret words in their context. Not all issues of context are as simple as the one just cited, but all are just as important.

Every passage of Scripture has a context in which it must be read. There is a historical context that must be examined. There is a cultural context as well. We must also consider the physical context in which it was written. Also there is a literary context that cannot be passed by. Any given assertion is made in several contexts, all of which aid in informing the reader as to the intent of the writer. Sometimes hard work is required to determine which of these contexts is most essential to understanding the passage.

Perhaps you have heard the old story about the man who was discouraged and decided to look to the Bible for guidance. He prayed and asked God to guide him in what to do. "I'll open my Bible and place my finger down, whatever it says is what I will do!" he declared. Flipping open his Bible and placing his finger on the text he read, "Judas went out and hung himself." A bit nervous about his findings, he tried again, "Go thou and do likewise"! Once again he tried, "What thou doest, do quickly"!

Context must be king if we are to make sense of anything we read, how much more if we are trying to rightly understand what God intends to communicate to us through His Word.

## **3. Ascertain what the author intended to say.**

When reading the Bible ask, "Did the author intend this to be understood literally or is this a use of figurative of speech? The Bible speaks about "the four corners of the world" and the "setting of the sun." Was the author intending to make scientific statement or simply communicating in phraseology that made sense in the day?

Does the Biblical writer commit himself to agreement with every statement he writes, or is he simply recording a statement or fact? Similarly, does the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 206.

author commit himself to agreeing with or condoning the action that is recorded, or is he simply noting that it happened? 1 Samuel 31 and 2 Samuel 1 record two different reports about the death of King Saul. In 1 Samuel 31:4-6 the author says that king Saul and his armor bearer killed themselves in battle rather than fall into the hands of the enemy. However, 2 Samuel 1:9-10 contains the report of a certain Amalekite who told David he killed Saul and returned with his crown and bracelet. So which is it? Did Saul kill himself or did the Amalekite do it? What did the writer of Scripture commit himself to? The only place the writer of Scripture committed himself to the statement was in 1 Samuel 31, where he records that Saul killed himself. In the account of 2 Samuel 1 the writer is simply reporting the content of what the Amalekite *said* happened. Did the Amalekite have any reason to manufacture a story? Sure, David had been long anointed to be king and Saul had long stood in the way. The Amalekite had reason to believe that, if he reported that he had killed Saul, he would be rewarded. Too bad he misread David's character (2 Samuel 1:11-16)!

Realize that the Biblical writers did not say everything that they could have said, but everything they did say is true. John makes very clear in his Gospel that what he wrote was selective (John 20:31). We must employ the analogy of Scripture – the comparing of Scripture with Scripture – to let it be its own interpreter.

#### **4. Realize the differences in standards for historical recording between the Hebrew and Greek cultures and our own.**

When one Gospel writer calls the dominion of God the “Kingdom of Heaven” and another refers to it as the “Kingdom of God,” do we have an error? Which did Jesus say when He spoke? The standards for recording and quoting people in Hebrew and Greek cultures were not the same as they are in a society such as ours where litigation over alleged plagiarism or slander is a serious threat. So when Matthew speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven and Luke writes of the Kingdom of God, referring to the same statement by Jesus, there is no error—they both mean the same thing. When the Biblical authors write, “Jesus said ...” or “Moses said ...” they were not always trying to record a word-for-word rendering.

When my wife is finishing preparations for dinner, she might instruct one of our children, “Ask Dad if he wants milk or *Pepsi* to drink with dinner.” When the child says, “Mommy wants to know if you want milk or *Coke* to drink with dinner,” is she speaking in error? No, in our house Pepsi and Coke refer to the same thing. In fact the bottle in the refrigerator might bear a label for a generic cola!

Take for example Jesus' prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. First He prayed, “My Father, if it is possible let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt.” The second time He prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done.” Jesus did not say the same thing in prayer both times, but it was perfectly accurate when Matthew wrote, “He left them

again, and went away and prayed a third time, *saying the same thing once more*" (Matthew 26:39, 42, 44).<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, when Matthew, Mark and John record Peter's famous words of confession concerning Jesus' identity, they phrase it slightly differently. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). "Thou art the Christ" (Mark 9:29). "The Christ of God" (Luke 9:20). Is there error here? No, Matthew gives us the more complete record of Peter's statement, Mark records the crucial part of it, and Luke gives us the gist.

We must allow room for the phenomena of language. Again, when the writer of Scripture speaks about the "sun rising" he is not attempting to make a scientific statement. He only wishes to designate the time of day or the phenomena of creation happening at the moment. Similarly, when Jesus said that the mustard seed is the smallest seed (Matthew 13:32) He was not attempting to make a finely tuned horticultural statement.

##### **5. Realize one author's purpose may differ from another's.**

Why do you suppose that when Matthew records the words of the criminals who hung on crosses on either side of Jesus he mentions both as hurling insults at Him, while Luke mentions only one doing the cursing? Does Scripture contradict itself? Not at all. Matthew desires to highlight the opposition to Jesus, so he selects the details of what actually happened and records them according to the purpose the Holy Spirit put in his heart when writing Scripture. Luke, on the other hand, wishes to emphasize the truths of repentance and salvation. With this view in mind he records the events truthfully, though only mentioning one of the thieves as hurling insults at Jesus.

When we read the four Gospel accounts of the New Testament we should take into consideration the audience with which they are seeking to communicate. Matthew addresses a primarily Jewish readership. For this reason you find many more references to and quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures. Luke wished to communicate with a largely Gentile audience, so he does not use as many Old Testament allusions or quotations. Each Gospel writer, moved by the Holy Spirit to address different groups of people, selectively recorded what would be appropriate to their audience. What they wrote is true, though not a recording of every fact. Again consider the self-confessed selectivity of the Apostle John in writing the fourth Gospel (John 20:31).

##### **6. Realize that the rules for quotation vary with culture and situation.**

When recording varied accounts by different writers, realize that one may use direct discourse to record the person's words, another may employ either indirect discourse or make a simple statement summarizing what was said. In today's English language we have use of quotation marks to set off a person's specific words, ellipses to indicate an omission of words, brackets to mark off words that have been added to explain what a person meant, and footnotes to record the exact location from which a statement or idea is cited. The Biblical languages of Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic had none of these devices in their

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<sup>2</sup> McQuilkin, 204-205.

language. It is wrong for us to impose these literary techniques from our age back upon writings from a different age and from different languages.

Realize also that Jesus undoubtedly spoke at least these three languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic). It is likely that Jesus often spoke in Aramaic; therefore His words were translated into the written language of Greek for our New Testament. The questions we need to ask are these: Do the words selected accurately portray what Jesus said? Do they faithfully represent what Jesus in fact spoke?

**7. Realize that most New Testament quotations of the Old Testament are taken from the Septuagint (LXX).**

On occasion someone will cross-reference from the New Testament, where they have just read the Biblical writer quoting from the Old Testament, to the Old Testament reference being cited. They will notice that the quotation may not match exactly what their Old Testament records for that verse. What is going on? We need to realize that the New Testament writer may well have been quoting from the Septuagint. The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that was completed in the mid 200's B.C. This translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was widely used at the time the New Testament documents were being written. So the author of Scripture in the New Testament may have been quoting from a Greek translation of the Old Testament and when we compare that with our English translation of the Hebrew Old Testament it may not be phrased exactly the same.

Beyond that it is more than possible that the New Testament writers did not always attempt to quote verbatim when they referred to the Old Testament. Suppose we would make a tape recording of the conversations taking place during a small group Bible study and then compare what we quoted as Scripture with what our actual English versions say. Would the differences invalidate what we said in the Bible study? Would we be found to be liars when we heard ourselves say, "Psalm 35:4 says ..." and then discovered it did not match exactly with our version of that passage? No.

**8. Realize that when the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament, God, as the ultimate Author, has the right to give His own meaning or interpretation of what He wrote in the first place.**

Scripture makes clear that it is of divine origin. This means that God has the freedom to explain what He has said. "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:20-21). "All Scripture is God-breathed ..." (2 Timothy 3:16).

**9. Use the fuller of two accounts to explain the shorter account.**

Consider the Biblical accounts that describe the conversation of the Apostle Paul. The actual event is described for us in Acts 9:10-19. Paul's testimony of it before the Jews in Jerusalem is recorded in Acts 22:12-16. Upon reading the two accounts it becomes clear that 9:10-19 is the fuller account and

22:12-16 is an abbreviated account (little wonder Paul abbreviated it, read Acts 22 for the context in which he gave this testimony!). It would only make sense to allow the fuller of the two accounts to explain the shorter one.

If we go to the Movie Theater and see a film and then try to relate it to someone who later asks us to tell them about it, we don't tell them the entire story. We give them the bits and pieces of the movie that will explain the basic story line. Although we have only reported small portions of the plot, when that person goes to see the movie they find us later and say, "It was just like you described it!"

### **10. Be certain of the original text.**

The doctrine of inerrancy claims that the original autographs were without error, not the copies made from them. It is quite possible that *copyists* have made some minor errors in transcription. This might account for some variation among numbers reported in the Old Testament. 1 Kings 4:26 says that Solomon had 40,000 stalls for horses and 12,000 horsemen. 2 Chronicles 9:25 says that he had 4,000 stalls and 12,000 horsemen. Similarly, 1 Samuel 13:1 says that Saul reigned for 32 years, while Paul says that his reign lasted 40 years (Acts 13:21). In the Hebrew language numbers were recorded by assigning numerical value to each of the letters of the alphabet. Letters were then used in combination to record larger numbers; this made for greater susceptibility for a scribal mistake because the letters were not grouped according to a logical linguistic pattern (a word they were used to seeing), but randomly, to record a given number.

Though there may be other legitimate explanations for these numerical differences, it is possible that we have a scribal error made in transcription. If such minor errors do exist, they do not harm the doctrine of inerrancy, nor lessen our confidence in the accuracy of our Bibles. There are not many of these kinds of difficulties in the Bible. It is said that our current text of the New Testament is 98.33% pure from copyist error.<sup>3</sup> Of the few slight variations not only affects any major doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

### **11. Face the possibility that you may have misinterpreted one or both passages.**

If it appears that the difficulties of a passage are insurmountable, consider the possibility that you have misinterpreted it. Just after I came to faith in Jesus Christ as a Junior High student, I began to read my Bible regularly. Starting at the beginning of the New Testament, I soon came upon Matthew 5:29, "And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." I was stumped. I wanted to please Christ, but this request seemed too harsh! How could I gouge my eye out? How could I handle the pain? How could I explain to my parents what I had done? Fortunately I waited

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<sup>3</sup> Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 365.

<sup>4</sup> McQuilkin, 207.

for further information and came to see that I was taking literally what Jesus was using as a literary technique to make a point.

Not long afterward I came to Matthew 16:2-3: “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is read.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is read and threatening.’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?” My conclusion? I understood this to mean that it was wrong to attempt to predict the weather; therefore, I thought I had to stop watching the weather forecast with my father each evening before going to bed. I wanted to do what Christ commanded, but the command, as I interpreted it, seemed a bit arbitrary. I sought further input and discovered that I had misunderstood the point of what Jesus said.

### **12. Assume harmony in parallel passages unless you have good reason to do otherwise.**

Both Matthew and Luke record the account of two thieves being hanged on crosses to the right and left of Jesus. Matthew tells us that both criminals were casting insults at Jesus (27:44), while Luke records only one hurling abuse at Him (23:39). Which was it? Common sense says that both criminals had joined in the verbal abuse, but that one had a change of heart and repented, and then began defending Jesus before the other. W.A. Criswell once said, “God gave us five senses: taste, touch, smell, sight, hearing; but we need two more: common and horse.”<sup>5</sup>

### **13. Distinguish between “difficulties” and “errors.”**

There is a vast difference between admitting that there are some “difficulties” in understanding all that the Bible says and conceding that the Bible contains error. I join with the Apostle Peter in admitting that sometimes Scripture is difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:16), but I do not concede that there are errors within its pages. “Difficulties” leave room for further discussion, information, and study. More light on the given “difficulty” will later become available and it would be premature to assume error. The jury is still out on any given alleged discrepancy.

### **14. Realize that no one has ever proven a contradiction.**

Do you realize that no one has ever proven the Bible to be in error? Many have claimed to have found error, but have later been forced to admit their own error by new evidence. Archeology is unearthing much new evidence that sheds light on Biblical texts. It has been said that no archeological find has ever proven an error exists in Scripture, but many times they have proven that those claiming a supposed error were the ones in the wrong.

### **15. Avail yourself of an “intellectual icebox.”**

It is fine—even a mark of integrity—to admit when we do not understand something in Scripture. We should concede that there are “difficulties” in the

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<sup>5</sup> R. Larry Moyer, *Free and Clear* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1997), 201.

Bible. That is the time to place the difficulty in an “intellectual icebox” where we hold it while we await further evidence for the resolution of the difficulty. Always leave room for God to provide more evidence concerning a difficult passage.

What shall we say by way of summary? When others raise what they label as an error in Scripture, we need to realize all that is demanded of us is the ability to put forward a possible, rational conclusion to the difficulty. We are not obligated to prove a possible interpretation is *the* right interpretation. Our task is simply to demonstrate that there is a reasonable solution to the difficulty raised. Since Scripture has proven trustworthy for thousands of years we should declare it innocent until proven guilty of error. Being made up of sixty-six books, having been written over a span of 1,600 years, on three different continents, in three different languages, by more than forty authors, the miracle is that the Bible has such a cohesive, sound text that espouses one singular theme!

Let us remember the burden lies with the accuser of Scripture. They must prove the error they claim exists. Let us never forget that ultimately the real struggle with Scripture is a moral one (John 7:17). Mark Twain reportedly said, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it’s the parts that I do understand!”<sup>6</sup>

***The Preceding has been compiled largely from these sources:***

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<sup>6</sup> Edythe Draper, *Draper’s Book of Quotations for the Christian World* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), 37.