

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Contradictions in Scripture: Introduction

There are many people who hold that the Bible is full of discrepancies and contradictions. Such assertions can try the faith of the young believer, and can even disturb one whose faith has been tried by time and trouble. It is necessary for believers who truly wish to know what God has said and who believe that His words are perfect words to deal with such proclaimed “contradictions” and expose the truth about them.

I first started considering writing messages such as these during my job making funnel cakes. Some of my readers may not know that I used to work at for a family friend making funnel cakes at county fairs. I would travel around all over Wisconsin working at various fairs. It was a hard job, but in many ways it was a lot of fun. Some of those places were so interesting! I am still much more familiar with small towns in Wisconsin as a whole now than I am with those in Minnesota, where I live.

It was at one small town fair that I first got to thinking hard about contradictions in Scripture. I had gone on break from making funnel cakes and, as I had only arrived at this fair that day, I walked around amongst the various stands checking the place out. I happened upon a religious stand and, as I am likely to do, I stopped to page through some of their material. I picked up a couple of pamphlets that caught my eye, and I scanned through one that caught my interest. It was on various contradictions in Scripture. I decided to take one of those pamphlets back with me. Before leaving, I talked to a man who was there at the stand, and we discussed baptism a little bit. He obviously equated baptism with the washing away of sins, and discussed with me why he thought Christ, being sinless, needed to be baptized. He was misguided but seemed very enthusiastic about discussing such things, and that kind of passion always warms my heart whenever I see it.

I took that pamphlet back with me, and read it on my breaks from funnel cake making. It was covering various discrepancies and errors in Scripture, and the writer was arguing that Scripture is not infallible. Some of his arguments were fairly good, such as discrepancies among the gospels. Others were rather ridiculous, such as making fun of the antiquated language in the King James or of Hebrew expressions that he thought were not refined enough. He was also very much against the “fundamentalists,” as he called them, who believe in the absolute authority of Scripture, yet seem willing to interpret it however they feel like interpreting it. I disagreed with his premise that the Bible contains errors, but had to admit that he might have a good point about how it is sometimes interpreted.

Later in the fair, I went back to that stand, and this time I talked to the man who was the pastor of this particular church that had set out the literature I had read. I told him that I had read the pamphlet about contradictions, and started to question him about it. It immediately became clear to me that here was a man who had little or no respect for the Bible. Apparently, this man was a committed higher critic, and even had taken part in the “Jesus Seminar,” that misguided group of individuals who set out to determine which parts of the gospels they thought Jesus had actually spoken and which he had not. They did not determine this by any sort of historical evidence, but just by a vote taken by the seminar members based on their own opinions! It seemed clear that this man I was talking to was right in line with this kind of thinking. He told me quite proudly that he could show me which parts of the gospels really occurred and which were just Hebrew myths!

I asked him on what basis we should then believe if we cannot trust the Scripture. He answered that we must follow the practices and doctrines of the church. When I started to point out that many of his arguments against the validity of Scripture were forced upon it by his own interpretation of the passages, he immediately asked me if I was a "fundamentalist." I started to reply that I supposed I was by his definition, although I did not think I qualified for all of the scathing criticisms he had leveled against them. He did not even let me finish my statement, interrupting me to ask if I then believed the Bible was without error. I replied that I did, and again did not get to finish my sentence before he started pointing out to me what he felt were obvious errors in the Scripture. I tried to point out facts that he had missed in his assessment of these passages, but he only laughed at my explanations like I was the biggest idiot in the world. Then he told me that I was a Bible idolater. I suppose I was getting to be less than happy with this gentleman at that point, and responded that I supposed I was if it meant that I believed that the Bible in its original form contained no errors. He seemed to get some satisfaction from my admission, grunting and then going on to make some sort of comment on the fact...I no longer remember what he said. At any rate, this man had begun to anger me, and there seemed to be little I could do to change his mind. As my break was about over, I excused myself and headed back to making funnel cakes.

This man I met at the fair was not unusual. There are many such higher critics around, and many who ascribe to their thinking. Over the years since that time I have met more of them. Moreover, I have heard the statement made that "the Bible is full of errors." Usually this statement is made confidently by the person making it, as if he or she had studied the matter out and knew it to be a fact. I do not believe that most people who say this have studied the issue, however, nor do they have the facts to back up such a statement. I have made a careful study of many of the issues upon which these people base their claims, and I have found that there are few if any legitimate arguments which can be made in favor of the Bible contradicting itself. Most of the supposed errors in the Scriptures are caused by errors that the criticizer himself has made. These errors may be of many types, but we may list a few of them. They are:

- 1.) Failure to note the context of a passage, such as the circumstances in which the passage took place or the people to whom the passage was written.
- 2.) Failure to discriminate between two similar events which may have contained similar circumstances but which took place at different times or in different places.
- 3.) Failure to note obvious figures of speech used to express an idea different from that which a literal reading of the passage would convey.
- 4.) Failure to recognize the purpose for which a statement was made in a passage and instead analyzing it apart from the passage in which it was given as if it were an entity in itself instead of part of a larger passage written to convey a larger thought.

This is not even taking into account "errors" which are really examples of the Bible contradicting commonly accepted theology, rather than contradicting Itself. I have seen higher critics site these as problems with the Bible, when really the problem, of course, is with what is commonly believed. These are only a few of the possible problems of interpretation which can be made to mistakenly cause a "contradiction," but many "errors" found in the Bible are the result of one or several of them.

Overall, I think the part of the Bible that is criticized the most for containing errors is the four gospels. This is true for several reasons. One is that the gospels are the part of the Bible that is most studied by the average Christian. The second is that the gospels tell more or less the same story of the ministry of Christ on earth in four different books, and so the books can easily be compared to see if they agree or seem to contradict. Thirdly, because these gospels speak of Jesus, the "Author and Finisher of our faith," they are looked to with great eagerness by those who wish to prove that the Scripture is at war with Itself rather than being the unblemished record of God which those of us who believe claim that it is. So I think it would be beneficial to all who look to the Bible as the source of all truth to get an idea of what these supposed discrepancies are and to have an answer for them. This I will attempt to do in this series of studies.

When considering supposed “contradictions” and my view that the Bible is, in fact, inerrant (does not contain errors,) it is important to explain exactly what I mean. I am referring to the Bible in Its original languages and original manuscripts. That is, there were no errors in the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures as they were originally written. This does not mean that any particular translation of the Bible into English or into any other language does not contain errors. Mistranslations might easily create an untrue statement where one did not occur originally. I recall the story of a misunderstanding that took place when the United States was negotiating a treaty with Panama. The US told Panama that they were willing to “negotiate.” However, when this word was translated, it was translated using a word that typically meant “settle on your terms” in their language. There was much rejoicing in Panama when they read this translation. Later, when the United States refused to settle on their terms, they angrily claimed the US had gone back on what they said. The whole problem, however, was in the translation. The same thing can happen with Bible translation. A statement that was quite true in Hebrew or Greek may give an idea that is wrong when translated.

When I speak of the Bible being inerrant, I also mean in the original manuscripts in which it was written. Immediately, when it began to be copied, this opened up the possibility of copyist errors taking place, or of “editors” acting in human arrogance to change what was written. I believe the instances of this have been few and far between, as the evidence has clearly shown, and that we can usually trace the original reading with a good deal of confidence. However, we cannot always be certain our current reading was the original reading, especially in a small number of disputed passages. This does not affect the greater majority of Scripture passages, however.

What I am not saying by claiming the Bible is inerrant is that the *King James Version* is inerrant. Of course it is not! It was written long after the dispensation of grace began, and long after the Lord had withdrawn the gift of interpretation of tongues. The men who translated it were just men, doing the best they could, but still affected by their own, limited knowledge, as well as their own ideas and biases. I would not want to defend every translation of the Bible that anyone has ever made. Some are quite bad, others are okay, and others are quite good. Even the good ones are sometimes questionable in certain passages. Ultimately, we must go back to the original languages to get to what really was written as God intended it, and without errors.

So my argument is in favor of the Bible as God wrote it, and not just as it was handed down to us. We always must keep in mind that the translation needs to be settled and the manuscripts considered as possible sources of error. Yet with these things settled, there are still plenty of issues left that are handed down faithfully and translated correctly that we need to interpret and consider.

The first most obvious conflict we can find to examine, at least when we choose to start with the gospels, is that between the book of John and the other three gospels. The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are often called by men the “synoptic” gospels because of the obvious similarity between them. Anyone who has read through the three of them back-to-back cannot fail to note that he is reading many similar stories in Luke to the ones he has already read in Matthew and Mark. But when he gets to John, he finds a far different book entirely. This, the higher critics say, is proof that John was written at a much different time period than the other three. They will claim that John was written in the second century, when Christ had been dead for some time and traditions had had the opportunity to grow up around Him. Those who believe this do not believe that John actually wrote it, of course, but that a group of writers who never met Christ in the flesh were the ones who penned the book.

But when we properly understand the book of John and the purpose for which it was written, we will see that it could not have been any different than it is. John was written, according to the words of the author, **“that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”** John 20:31. This is an amazing purpose. If this is true, then the purpose for which this book was written was to produce actual believers in Jesus Christ. No other book in the Bible makes such a claim, including the other three gospels. Luke may have thought **“to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us”** (Luke 1:1,) but His account was to let believers know the exactitude of the things they believe, not to produce believers in the first place.

Nor were the accounts of Matthew or Mark said to be written exclusively to produce believers. No, only John was written for the very purpose of producing believers in Christ. Therefore if it did NOT differ greatly from the other three gospels, this then would be an argument against its Divine authorship, and not its actual, dissimilar form.

Moreover, the stated purpose of John, to present Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God,” differs from Matthew, which presents Him in His relationship to Israel as the “Son of David, the Son of Abraham.” This clearly shows that Matthew presents Christ in His relationship to Israel. Mark briefly labels his book as being “**the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,**” (Mark 1:1) but he never states a purpose like John does in John 20:31. Mark seems more interested in presenting Christ as God’s servant, whereas John presents Him over and over as God Himself. Luke introduces his book in Luke 1:3-4 by declaring his intentions in writing it: “**3 it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, 4 that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.**” Luke sought to set forth an orderly account so we could know the certainty of the things which we have already been instructed in. This instruction could come from other, more introductory books, like John. Yet Luke assumes we already believe, and just need more information. Only John contains a clear statement that it is written to produce believers from those who have not yet believed. This makes John’s message stand out, and again it would be stranger if it did not.

But what of the arguments of the higher critics that it was written in the second century? Even most Bible-believing scholars think it to be the latest written of the gospels, moving it back to late in the first century to please their skeptical counterparts. But John answers such theories definitively for those who make it a habit to read their Bibles and believe them. It says in John 5:2, “**There is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool.**” Now we know that Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, so that not a stone was left upon another. Therefore anyone writing from the second century or even late in the first century would have used the term “was by” not “is by.” If we would believe the Bible we would let this statement settle the issue for us once and for all. Jerusalem had not been destroyed yet when John wrote, so he must have written early, before 70 AD. The differences between John and the other gospels are caused by the difference in John’s theme and purpose for writing, not in time that had passed in order for legends to grow up around the Lord. He was God, and that is no legend!

So having settled the question of John, let us move on to more specific internal “discrepancies” which men have claimed take place in the gospels. We pass over the convoluted accounts of Christ’s early life given in Matthew and Luke, for these while complicated may be traced out satisfactorily by anyone who has a mind to as to what happens when. So we come to the temptations of Christ, one of the major points of “discrepancy” between two of the gospels and the first passage which those who claim no divine authority for the words of Scripture turn to for proving their claims. This passage, being the first that we will examine, will be a good pattern for how these difficulties should be handled by those who take the Scripture as their first and only source of truth. I will take up this passage in my next study.

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