

Aren't There Contradictions in the Bible?

(by Bob Pulliam)

The search for contradictions in the Bible is not new. People have done so for hundreds of years, yielding what they believe to be a mountain of evidence against the Bible. The effort is never waged with a concern to reconcile passages that seem to contradict each other. Once what seems to be a contradiction has been found, the searcher travels on to find another.

I'm sure many of us have been taken out of context by others bent on finding "dirt." That is much of what "Bible contradictions" are all about. Here are a few of the more popular cases:

The All-Knowing God Who Didn't Seem to Know...

The Bible presents God as knowing everything. There is nothing beyond the scope of His knowledge (Ps 139:1 - 12; Heb 4:13). While God is capable of knowing all, He is presented as not knowing the outcome of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22:12 - "now I know..."). If God is so all-knowing, why didn't He know the outcome ahead of time? For this I offer two plausible answers.

The first involves the nature of omniscience (capability of knowing all). Many times we think of the nature of God in absolutes where we shouldn't. God's nature enables Him to know all, but it doesn't demand that He know all lest He cease to be God. In order for God to be God He must simply be capable of knowing all. If He does not exercise that power He does not cease to be God. God could have chosen not to know the outcome of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. For the purpose of allowing Abraham's free moral agency to act unhindered, God could have blocked that knowledge from Himself and watched the results. This is the time honored explanation used for generations. But I believe there is a better explanation.

The second answer involves the word Moses used for "know." This Hebrew word would make the sentence literally read, "now I have known." This does not make sense in English (mixing present tense with past), so it is rendered "now I know." It should be obvious that "now I have known" does not mean God didn't know before that point in time. Hebrew scholars have suggested that the phrase was used of an experimental knowledge. To actually see the results, although they were already known. The full importance of this experimental knowledge would have been for the benefit of others. For thousands of years Abraham's example of faith has been an important example. But it wouldn't be if God had kept it to Himself.

Whether you choose the first or second answer, this incident is far from being a contradiction with the remainder of God's word.

Did Saul Die Two Different Ways?...

I Samuel 31:3-5 tells us that Saul took his own life. However, II Samuel 1:6-10 tells us that an Amalekite killed him. There are two plausible explanations. One is that Saul had not actually died when he fell on his sword. When the Amalekite came upon him, he had revived consciousness, and made his request for relief from pain.

Probably a better explanation might be that the Amalekite's word is not to be accepted as true. The divinely inspired historian is only telling us what the Amalekite told David, whether or not it was true is beside the purpose of the account. This would make the Amalekite a liar for the purpose of serving his own selfish purpose of getting a reward. He knew that Saul was David's enemy, and might have thought to stir David's favor with a tale of killing his enemy.

An Error in Quotation?...

In Matthew 27:9 & 10, Matthew quotes a passage from Zechariah (11:12) while attributing it to Jeremiah. Many have relied on this "error" for showing the unreliability of the Bible.

The Jews organized and divided the Old Testament differently than we do today. They had three major divisions: The Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets (cf. Lk 24:44). The division of "the prophets" is referred to many times in the gospels (e.g. Mk 1:2; Lk 16:16; Jn 6:45), and is very clearly noted by Stephen in Acts 7:42 ("as it is written in the book of the prophets"). Stephen quoted from Amos 5:25 - 27; yet he calls it "the book of the prophets."

At the head of this "book of the prophets" was Jeremiah. Although the Old Testament prophets begin with Isaiah in our Bibles, the Jews began their book of the prophets with Jeremiah. The use of the term "Jeremiah" could easily have become synonymous with the phrase "book of the prophets," and much easier to write. Today, we call this figure of speech a synecdoche. Putting a part for the whole. Taking the first element from a list and using it to stand for the entire list. The New Testament does this a great deal with requisites for salvation. Faith is the first element demanded of a person. Without it repentance, confession of Jesus, and baptism will not result. Rather than citing the entire list over and over, the first element is used (e.g. Eph 2:8 - 10; Acts 16:30 - 33).

Many quotations of Old Testament passages in the New Testament do not give the specific origin. Readers were to already be familiar with this. Why, therefore, should we think it strange that Matthew's intention was to note the location of the passage as being from the book of the prophets, not to give the specific author.

Leaving, or Arriving?...

Luke tells us that Jesus was coming near Jericho when He encountered the blind man by the road (Luke 18:35). Matthew and Mark, however, tell us that He was departing Jericho (Mt 20:29ff; Mk 10:46ff). Surely He couldn't have been doing both at the same time!

Actually, He was. There are, in fact, three Jericho sites. Two of these were quite active in New Testament times. It seems that Luke has chosen a different Jericho for his reference point. Could it be because he is about to relate an event that the other two gospels do not touch upon (*i.e.* Zacchaeus)? Whatever the reason, there is no reason to assume a discrepancy here.

But then there are the number of blind men in this account. Matthew has two blind men, while Mark and Luke only have one. It is important, however, to remember that Mark and Luke do not discount the possibility of another one unmentioned. But why would they only speak of one? Could it be because they knew one of the men and not the other? Mark's account would bear this out, for he actually names the blind man he mentions (*i.e.* "blind Bartimaeus"). This would not be unlike you or I speaking of an event involving two people

where we only knew one of the two. We would be very likely to speak of the one we knew rather than both (*e.g.* "Did you hear about so-and-so? He was in a wreck last week!").

Conclusion...

There are a lot of people calling themselves "Christians" who look for these "contradictions," and continually point them out to others. They believe in God and think they are following His word.

The purpose of these "contradictions" is to discredit the Bible as a fully inspired, sufficient, binding guide for people's lives. If you can find contradictions in the Bible, then you can pick and choose the passages you will apply to your life and throw the rest away. That's a very convenient approach to something that might be demanding "inconvenient" things of you.

Now consider the implications of this subject further with me. If the Bible truly contradicts itself, how do I know the passages I believe and follow are reliable? How do I know there is a heaven? And how do I know that I may one day attain it? Perhaps heaven is there, but I am not meant to go there! If the Bible contradicts itself, how do I know that any part of it is reliable?

Contradictions in a witness' testimony destroys his credibility before the jury. They conclude that this witness cannot be trusted. Contradictions in the Bible would leave it totally untrustworthy. Skeptics know this to be so, and people who call themselves "Christian" should wake up to the danger of discrediting the Bible.

But there are no contradictions in God's word (other than a few numbers and names that were merely copyist's errors and not errors in the original manuscripts... these were not errors in God's word, they were minor errors in the copying process). God's word is reliable, trustworthy, and binding.

If we want the blessings God promises in its pages, we must take it as God gave it, not any way we want to receive it!