

## BIBLE CONTRADICTIONS—ARE THEY REAL?

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“I cannot have confidence in the Bible, for it is a book filled with numerous contradictions.” I could not begin to estimate how many times I have heard this charge against the Holy Scriptures over the past quarter of a century. One thing, however, has been consistent about the allegation—the critic rarely can name **even one** alleged contradiction that the Bible is supposed to contain. He just “knows” that they are “in there” somewhere.

Those who allege that the Bible contains contradictions basically fall into two classes. First, there is the person who honestly believes this to be the case because he has heard the hackneyed charge repeated frequently; thus, he is sincerely misinformed about the facts. Second, there is that type of person who, from base motives, hates the Bible and so does not scruple to pervert its testimony in order to embarrass the Sacred Volume. In either case, the Word of God is not at fault.

Preliminary to a consideration of this important theme, it should be noted that the principle of “innocent until proven guilty” applies to the Bible as much as to any other book. Books, like people, ought to be considered truthful and consistent until it can be demonstrated that they are not. Great attempts have been made to absolve the Greek and Latin classics of contradictions under the presumption that the authors did not contradict themselves. Surely the Bible deserves at least an equally charitable approach.

### WHAT IS A CONTRADICTION?

It is fairly safe to say that most people have only a superficial understanding of what constitutes a genuine contradiction. An important truth that must be repeatedly hammered home is this: **a mere difference does not a contradiction make!**

What, then, is a contradiction? In logic, the Law of Contradiction is stated succinctly as follows: “Nothing can both be and not be” (Jevons, 1928, p. 117). That is a very abbreviated form of the rule. Aristotle, in a more amplified form, expressed it this way. “That the same thing should at the same time both be and not be for the same person and in the same respect is impossible.”

An analysis of the Law of Contradiction, therefore, would suggest the following. When one is confronted with an alleged contradiction, he must ask himself these questions: (1) Is the same thing or person under consideration? (2) Is the same time period in view? (3) Is the language that seems to be self-contradictory employed in the same sense? It is vitally important that these questions be answered correctly. For instance, let us analyze the following two statements: Robert is rich. Robert is poor. Do these statements contradict one another? The answer is—not necessarily. First, two different people by the name of Robert could be under consideration. Second, two different time frames might be in view; Robert could have been rich but, due to financial disaster, became poor. Third, the terms “rich” and “poor” might have been used in different senses; Robert could be **spiritually** rich but **economically** poor. The point is this: **it never is proper to assume that a contradiction exists until every possible means of harmonization has been fully exhausted.** Now, let this principle be applied to the Bible.

### Same Person or Thing

An infidel once announced that he had discovered a contradiction in the Bible. When challenged to produce it, he suggested that whereas Noah’s ark with all of its inmates must have weighed several tons (Genesis 6), the priests were said to have carried the ark across the Jordan River (Joshua 3). The poor fellow, in his profound simplicity, did not even know the difference between Noah’s ark and the Ark of the Covenant! Slightly different arks—to say the least! Again, the scriptures affirm that faith saves apart from works; on the other hand,

the New Testament declares that faith apart from works cannot save. “Surely,” some contend, “this is a contradiction.” The fact is it is not, since **different types of works** are addressed in the Scriptures. Salvation involves works of obedience to the commands of Jesus Christ (James 2:14ff.; Philippians 2:12), but it cannot be obtained by works of the Mosaic Law (Romans 3:28; 4:2ff.), or by boastful works of human merit (Ephesians 2:9). There is no contradiction in the Bible on this point.

### Same Time Reference

The Bible records: “God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). And then: “And it repented Jehovah that he had made man on earth, and it grieved him at his heart” (6:6). The infidel cites both verses and claims that God simultaneously was satisfied and dissatisfied with His creation—neglecting to mention, of course, that the **fall of man and hundreds of years of history** separated the two statements! Judas, one of the Lord’s disciples, was empowered to perform miracles (cf. Matthew 10:1-18), yet he is called “the son of perdition” (John 17:12). Is there a contradiction here? No, for it was a couple of years after the time of the limited commission (Matthew 10) before Judas commenced to apostatize from the Lord (John 12:6; 13:2, 27). The time element is vitally important in understanding some passages.

Some have charged the Bible with a mistake in connection with the time of Jesus’ trial and death. Mark writes that the Lord was crucified at the third hour (Mark 15:25), while John’s account has the Savior being tried at the sixth hour (John 19:14)—seemingly three hours after His death. John’s time reference, however, was based upon **Roman** civil days, while Mark computed according to **Jewish** time (cf. Westcott, 1981, 8:282). The “contradiction” dissolves.

### Same Sense

If the Bible is to be understood, it is imperative that recognition be given to the different senses in which words may be employed. Normally, words are used **literally**, but they can be employed **figuratively** as well.

In Matthew 11:14, John the Baptizer is identified as “Elijah,” yet, the forerunner of Christ, in John 1:21, plainly denied that he was Elijah. These verses are easily reconciled. Though John was not literally Elijah physically reincarnated, nevertheless he was the spiritual antitype of the great prophet; he prepared the way for the Lord “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17).

Did the apostle Paul contradict himself when he affirmed on one occasion that he was “as touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless” (Philippians 3:6), and yet, at another time, he acknowledged that he was “chief” of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15)? Again, the answer must be “No.” In the former passage, Paul was describing the reputation he enjoyed among his Hebrew contemporaries as a Pharisee, while in the latter verse he expressed the anguish he felt at having been a persecutor of the Christian Way. How sad that some are almost totally ignorant of the principles that resolve Bible difficulties.

### LOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

One of the implications of the Law of Contradiction is the concept that “nothing can have at the same time and at the same place contradictory and inconsistent qualities” (Jevons, 1928, p. 118). A door may be open or shut, but the same door cannot be both open and shut at the same time. Open and shut are opposites, yet they are not contradictory unless they are affirmed of the same object at the same time. Here is the principle: **opposites are not necessarily contradictory.** Let this principle be applied to certain biblical matters.

Does the Bible contradict itself, as is often suggested, when it asserts that God both loves and hates? No, for although these terms are opposites, when used of God they do not express His disposition toward the same objects. God loves every sinner in the world (John 3:16), but hates every false way (Psalm 119:104). He loves righteousness, but hates iniquity (Psalm 45:7), and hence responds toward such with either goodness or severity (Romans 11:22). No contradiction here.

Was Paul both “perfect” and “imperfect” at the same time? Some have charged that he so claimed. In Philippians 3:12, the apostle declared that he had not been “already made perfect,” while in the 15th verse he wrote: “Let us, therefore, as many as are perfect, be thus minded....” How is this problem to be resolved? A careful analysis of the language employed will easily solve this alleged discrepancy. When Paul claimed that he had not been “made perfect,” he used a perfect tense form of the Greek term which literally suggested that the apostle had not arrived at a **permanent state** of perfection. On the other hand, in the latter verse Paul used an adjective that actually means full grown or mature (note how the same term is used in contrast to infantilism in 1 Corinthians 14:20 and Ephesians 4:13). And so, while Paul denied that he was already in possession of permanent perfection, he did claim to possess spiritual maturity. There is no conflict between these passages.

Another important point to be emphasized is this: **one must not confuse supplementation with contradiction**. In a contradiction, two facts are mutually exclusive; in supplementation, two facts merely complement one another. If one says, for example, that John doe is a husband, and then, of the same John Doe, that he is not a husband—this is contradiction. On the other hand, if one says that John Doe is a father—that is **not** a contradiction. It is merely supplementing statement number two. Many alleged Bible discrepancies can be answered by a recognition of this principle.

The case of the healing of the blind men of Jericho presents an interesting study in supplementation (Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43). Two prominent problems have been set forth. First, while both Mark and Luke mention the healing of **one** blind man, Matthew records the healing of **two** blind men. Second, Matthew and Mark indicate that the blind men were healed as Jesus was **leaving** Jericho, whereas Luke seems to suggest that a blind man was healed as the Lord “**drew nigh**” to the city. As I begin a discussion of these passages, let us remember this vital consideration—if there is **any** reasonable way of harmonizing these records, then no legitimate contradiction may be charged to the accounts.

How shall these narratives be reconciled? Several reasonable possibilities have been posed by scholarly writers.

In the first place, the fact that two of the accounts mention only one man, while the other mentions two, need not concern us. Had Mark and Luke stated that Christ healed **only** one man, with Matthew affirming that **more than one** were healed, an error surely would be apparent, but such is not the case. If one says, “I have a son,” he does not contradict himself by stating further, “I have a son and a daughter.” The latter statement merely supplements the former. There is no discrepancy, therefore, with reference to the number of people involved.

But how shall the second problem be resolved? Several reasonable possibilities have been advanced.

1. It is possible that **three** blind men were healed in the vicinity of Jericho on this occasion, and that the incident mentioned by Luke, as occurring when Jesus approached the city, might have represented a different miracle than that recorded by Matthew and Mark. This may not be the most likely explanation, but it cannot be disproved.
2. Edward Robinson has argued that the verb *engizo*, rendered “drew near” (Luke 18:35) also can mean “to be near.” He cited evidence from the *Septuagint* (1 Kings 21:2—“it is **near** unto my house” [cf. Deuteronomy 21:3, Jeremiah 23:23, Ruth 2:20, 2 Samuel 19:42]) and from the New Testament (Luke 19:29; cf. Matthew 21:1, Philippians 2:30). He thus translated Luke 18:35 as “while he was yet nigh unto Jericho” (1855, p. 200). This view implies that Luke simply located the miracle **near** Jericho and hence such can be readily harmonized with the other records.
3. Perhaps the most popular viewpoint among reputable writers is the fact that at the time of Christ there actually were **two** Jerichos. First, there was the Jericho of Old Testament history (Joshua 6:1 ff.; 1 Kings 16:34), which was located at the sight of Elijah’s spring. In the first

century, however, that city lay almost in ruins. About two miles south of that site was the new Jericho, built by Herod the Great. The Lord—traveling from the north toward Jerusalem—first would pass through the old Jericho, then some two miles to the southwest would go through Herodian Jericho. The miracles under consideration, therefore may have been performed **between** two towns. Accordingly, the references in Matthew and Mark to **leaving** Jericho would allude to the old city, whereas Luke’s observation to **drawing near** Jericho would refer to the newer community (see Robertson, 1930, 1:163).

## CONCLUSION

In dealing with so-called “contradictions” in the Bible, these principles should be remembered. (1) No contradiction exists between verses that refer to different persons or things. (2) No contradiction exists between passages that involve different time elements. (3) No contradiction exists between verses that employ phraseology in different senses. (4) Supplementation is not the same as contradiction. (5) One need show only the possibility of harmonization between two passages that appear to conflict in order to negate the force of an alleged discrepancy.

Finally, this point needs to be made: the differences in various Bible accounts of the same events actually demonstrate the **independence** of the divine writers, and prove that they were **not in collusion!** God, though using human writers in the composition of the Bible, is nevertheless its ultimate Author. And since the perfect God cannot be the source of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33) or contradiction (Hebrews 6:18), it must be acknowledged that the Bible is perfectly harmonious. This does not mean that men will not struggle with difficult passages. If seeming discrepancies are discovered, let us apply ourselves to a diligent study to resolve them; but let us never foolishly charge God with allowing His sacred writers to contradict one another.

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Originally Published In  
*Reason & Revelation*  
 June 1983, 3[6]:25-28

## ARTICLE REPRINT

Distributed by  
 Apologetics Press, Inc.  
 230 Landmark Drive  
 Montgomery, AL 36117-2752  
 (334) 272-8558