

SCRIPTURES



QUESTION

R. Herbert

*Answers to Apparent
Biblical Contradictions*

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INTRODUCTION:

Why You May Need This Book

If you are a Christian, you may need this book. Every year new and even well-established believers are unsettled and in some cases turned from the Christian faith by claims that the Bible contradicts itself and so it cannot be the inspired word of God.

Just this past year, news stories told how a noted pastor in the United States stepped away from the Church because he felt he could not explain some of these seeming difficulties, and as a result he felt his faith had been destroyed. If seasoned pastors can be troubled by such things, we cannot expect new Christians or those beginning to consider the Christian faith to simply ignore them, and we may all be at risk to some degree.

It is important to realize that the situation is not a product of our own modern scientific age. Those who have hated the word of God have always attempted to discredit it in any way they could, and a number of Christian leaders in the earliest centuries of the Church – scholars such as Eusebius, Chrysostom, and Augustine – made reference to claimed biblical contradictions and wrote down explanations for some of them. In fact, providing answers to the Bible’s supposed contradictions is a small but important function of the Church.

So even if we feel comfortable in our own faith and don’t worry about claims of biblical discrepancies, we owe it to others we might be able to help to learn how to answer this type of criticism of the Scriptures – and that is why we may all need a book such as this. An additional reason is that discovering there are answers to these questions can be not only encouraging, but also faith-strengthening for all of us.

As with any large collection of books we can find many examples of seeming disagreements if we look hard enough, and many efforts have been made to try to catalog and explain these seemingly contradictory verses of the Bible. Yet those who want to find discrepancies will always come up with new ones. The solution is not to try to compile explanations for every seeming contradiction. Rather, we should try to grasp the principles that will help us understand and answer the questions raised – principles that can be applied to other scriptural questions as well.

This is especially important because many readers of the Bible feel that they do not have the training or background information necessary to resolve seeming Bible discrepancies they may encounter or be asked

about. Such readers need something that can help them without requiring hours (or years!) of study – something that can help them get past the apparent problem and get back to focusing on the message of the Bible.

That is why this book is different from any other that is currently available. Instead of trying to provide a long list of possible problems and answers to be studied and hopefully memorized, this book gives a few examples of seven principles that can be easily learned and applied to explain supposed problems in the Bible. The advantage of this approach, of course, is that it does not matter if the examples or the exact answers are remembered as long as the basic principles are kept in mind.

Before we begin this book, however, there is a central truth that must be stressed. Despite the fact that a great many seeming contradictions have been pointed out in the Bible, the good news is that for almost two thousand years Christian scholars have been providing answers to such assumed difficulties, and there is not a single supposed scriptural contradiction that cannot be answered. But in our own lives we may still need to learn the simple principles that can show how and why that is the case. That is what we hope to provide in the following pages.

1. ARE THEY THE SAME THING?

As we begin this exploration of the various ways in which apparent contradictions in the Bible can be shown to have clear answers, we look first at cases where seeming discrepancies are simply the result of our not realizing that the two supposedly conflicting accounts are actually talking about different situations rather than the same event. We will look at three examples of this type in the New Testament.

The Sermon on the Mount

Our first example is a very basic one, but it is instructive. Matthew's Gospel records the famous "Sermon on the Mount" given by Jesus soon after the choosing of his disciples (Matthew 5-7). This account appears to be paralleled by Luke, who records much the same sermon (Luke 6:17-49) – sometimes called the "Sermon on the Plain."

These names are not found in the actual New Testament writings – they have been given to the accounts to differentiate them because, although they are so similar, they do show differences. However, there are so many similarities that the two accounts are often presumed to record the same event and thought to show discrepancies where the details differ.

But there is no reason to believe that the two accounts do not record different sermons – or the same sermon given at different times. Just as modern-day pastors may give the same or a very similar sermon to different congregations, so we have no reason to think that Jesus could not have repeated important teachings to different groups of people.

The details of the two accounts support this likelihood. Matthew's account begins by saying: "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them" (Matthew 5:1-2). Luke, on the other hand, begins his account by telling us: "He went down

with them [the twelve disciples] and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people ...” (Luke 6:17).

So it is perfectly possible that Jesus first ascended a mountain, with the twelve disciples, taught them in detail, then came back down and gave a shorter, summary version of the same sermon to the crowds at the foot of the mountain. Alternately, the two events could have occurred in different places and times – so there is no reason to see any contradiction in differing details of what was said in the two accounts.

The Feeding of the Crowds

A similar situation can be seen in the account of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand and that of the feeding of four thousand by Jesus, found in the Gospel of Matthew and in the parallel accounts in the other Gospels.

For those who believe the Bible, it is clear in the words of Jesus himself that these were two separate events – just as he reminded his disciples, afterwards: “Don’t you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?” (Matthew 16:9-10).

But those who try to find errors in the Bible often claim that these similar-sounding stories are examples of varying oral traditions regarding events of which no one knew exactly what had happened or if they had ever happened at all. Nevertheless, the stories of the miracles of the feeding of the crowds actually provide a good example of the fallacy of such thinking.

The “Feeding of the Five Thousand” is mentioned in all four Gospels (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9:10-17 and John 6:5-15). The story tells us that Jesus fed the hungry crowd that followed him by dividing five loaves of bread and two fish. After the miraculous feeding was completed, it is recorded that the disciples collected twelve baskets full of broken pieces that were left over.

The “Feeding of the Four Thousand” is recounted in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark (Matthew 15:32-39 and Mark 8:1-9), and that story tells us that seven loaves and several fish were divided among the crowd. After this miracle the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of pieces that were left over.

Those who claim these are garbled varying accounts of the same event or story miss an essential piece of information. Mark and John tell us that the first miracle occurred on the western – Jewish – side of the Sea of Galilee and that Jesus and the disciples then crossed over to the eastern – Gentile – side of Galilee where the second miracle was performed.

The eastern side of Galilee where Jesus went after feeding the five thousand was the region of the Syrian Decapolis – a separate Roman-controlled area inhabited almost exclusively by Gentiles. The people of that area were notorious to the Jews for their pagan beliefs and practices (Isaiah 65:3-4, 66:3; Mark 5:11; etc.), and most Jews of Jesus’ day seem to have believed that the inhabitants of that area were the descendants of the seven ancient Canaanite nations driven out of the Promised Land in the time of Joshua (Joshua 3:10; Acts 13:19) – a tradition preserved by both the Jewish Talmud and some of the early Christian church fathers.

Nevertheless, Matthew and Mark both make it clear that Jesus went to these people, preached to them and compassionately healed their sick. His miracles on Galilee’s far side also spoke to God’s desire to include the people of that region in his outreaching mercy. So, just as we are told twelve baskets of leftover food were picked up on the western side of Galilee – doubtless suggesting the spiritual food available for the twelve tribes of Israel, so seven baskets of food were picked up on the eastern side of Galilee – doubtless symbolizing the traditional seven people-groups of the Gentile Decapolis.

A careful reading of the Gospel narratives shows that the details of the two similar miracles were not garbled but are describing two separate events that were extremely meaningful in what they both uniquely symbolized.

The Cleansing of the Temple

All three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record that when Jesus went to the temple in Jerusalem, he was angered by the business being conducted there and that he overturned the tables of the money changers and drove out those who bought and sold – saying that they had turned the temple into a “den of thieves” (Matthew 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 19:45–46).

The Gospel of John also tells us that Jesus went to the temple in Jerusalem and, making a whip of cords, drove out the money changers who were doing business there and overturned their tables (John 2:13–15). Jesus also said to those who were selling doves: “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” (John 2:16).

While many people presume these two accounts describe the same event, skeptics are quick to point out that while Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe the temple-cleansing as having taken place a few days before the crucifixion, John describes the cleansing of the temple as occurring during the first Passover of the three he says occurred during Christ’s ministry.

But once again, simply because two accounts are very similar does not mean that they refer to the same event. There is nothing in the Gospel accounts to suggest that Jesus could not have cleansed the temple on two separate occasions – first (as described by John) near the beginning of his ministry, and then again (as described by the other three Gospel writers) near its end. In fact, the situation in the temple was likely so accepted and entrenched that it may well have developed again in the years after Christ first threw out the money changers and merchants.

This is especially likely as the accounts contain small, but important, differences in their descriptions of the events. While John says that Jesus made a whip to drive out the merchants, for example, none of the Synoptic accounts records that notable detail. Also, in John, after cleansing the temple Jesus was immediately confronted by the temple officials who asked him: “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” to which Jesus

replied: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:18-19). None of the Synoptic Gospels includes this important statement, indicating once again that they were recording a separate, different event.

If we read the stories carefully, we also find that what Jesus said to the temple merchants is quite different in John’s account from those of the other Gospels. The two stories are similar – as they would be if the event occurred twice – but far from identical.

So it is likely that Jesus cleansed the temple on two occasions: once at the beginning and again at the end of his ministry. Because the events were so similar, it makes sense that a Gospel writer describing one event would not feel it necessary to describe the other.

This may be the simplest type of problem to untangle, but it is important to remember the principle we have seen here. Similar accounts may not reflect the same events, and if there is any reason to suspect that the two accounts are speaking of different things, then clearly they cannot be said to be in contradiction just because they differ in some of their details.

2. DOES IT ACTUALLY SAY THAT?

Now we turn to what is probably the most common reason that people sometimes think two biblical accounts contradict each other. The examples in this chapter all show situations where the apparent problem is a result of people not clearly seeing what the Bible really says in the two accounts that seem to conflict. First, we will consider the example of the baptism of Jesus recorded in Matthew 3:17 and John 5:37.

The Voice of God – Heard or Unheard?

Matthew 3:17 records that at the baptism of Jesus a miraculous sign was given: “And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” This verse is often contrasted with one found in the Gospel of John which tells us: “And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form” (John 5:37). Both these verses are clearly talking about God the Father, as we see in Jesus’ words recorded in Matthew 3:17 where the voice said “This is my Son...” and John 5:37 where the Father is specifically named.

But do Matthew and John contradict each other in these accounts – was the voice of God heard or not? We must ask ourselves a fundamental question: Do these verses really say what we are presuming they say – in one verse that people heard God’s voice, and in the other verse that they have never heard his voice?

First, we should notice that Matthew does not specifically say it was the voice of God himself that onlookers heard. Certainly, the voice said “This is my Son ...” – so we know the message was *from* God; but God uses many messengers to deliver his words.

We should remember that in his preincarnate state Christ himself was the “Logos” or “Word” of God (John 1:1, 14), acting as the “Spokesperson” of God (compare Genesis 1 and Hebrews 1:2). Since Christ, the primary spokesperson for God, was in human form at the time of his baptism, the voice that was heard from heaven was undoubtedly that of an angel relaying this message on behalf of God, just as angels are recorded to have delivered messages at other points in the Gospels – as when they spoke to Mary at the time of Christ’s conception (Luke 1:26-38) and to the shepherds at the time of his birth (Luke 2:8-15).

What Matthew records regarding the voice heard at the baptism of Jesus is simply yet another case of a divine messenger delivering God's words. So Matthew's statement does not contradict the words of Christ recorded in John that no one has heard the actual voice of God the Father.

What Were the Last Words of Jesus?

Consider another instance of this kind of supposed problem – this time regarding the recorded “last words” of Jesus.

The Gospels of Luke and John seem to disagree on what the last words of Jesus were. Luke tells us: “Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46 ESV). On the other hand, we read in John: “When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30 ESV).

On the surface, these two accounts certainly might seem to be at variance with each other regarding the final words of Jesus; but when we look more closely, we find little reason to see any contradiction.

In both cases nothing is specifically said to the effect that these were the last words of Jesus and the only last words of Jesus. Luke does seem to imply that Jesus died moments after crying out "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" However, John's account does not preclude the possibility that Jesus uttered other words – perhaps even minutes after receiving the wine – before he died.

While Luke seems to focus specifically on Jesus' final words, John seems to focus on the sour wine event and its resultant “It is finished” as the final prophecy fulfilled by Christ. This is typical of Luke's frequent focus on the humanity of Jesus and his actual words, as opposed to John's focus on Jesus' fulfillment of prophecies relating to the promised Messiah and details regarding his message of salvation.

So there is no reason to believe that both accounts were not true. Jesus' last words may have been a combination of what John and Luke record: “It is finished. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” If these were the actual and full last words of Jesus, then the two Gospel writers simply recorded the part of the statement that was of most importance to their own accounts.

It is also sometimes said that both Luke and John are contradicted by Matthew and Mark, whose Gospels both seem to record Jesus' expression “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” as his last words. But

both Matthew and Mark write that, soon after saying this, Jesus gave a loud cry: “And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit” (Matthew 27:50); “With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last” (Mark 15:37).

But these accounts do not say whether the “loud cry” or “loud voice” contained words or not. If the cry contained words, it was doubtless those recorded by Luke and John. The reason that the other two Gospels say a “voice” or “cry” was probably because they are based on the account of a witness of the crucifixion who was close enough to hear the cry, but not close enough to make out the exact words. (Both Matthew and Mark mention, in fact, that many of the witnesses stood “at a distance” from the cross – Matthew 27:55; Mark 15:40).

When we keep both factors in mind: that Luke and John compiled their Gospels stressing different themes, and that Matthew and Mark may well have drawn their information from different witnesses, there is no need to presume any contradiction between the four Gospels as to the last words of Jesus.

When Hearing Is Not Hearing

For a final example of this kind of problem, we move a little further into the New Testament to the two accounts of the conversion of Saul (the apostle Paul) on the road to Damascus, as recorded in the book of Acts. “And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one” (Acts 9:7 NKJV). “And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me (Acts 22:9 NKJV).

These two verses in Acts have been said to represent an undeniable contradiction in the New Testament – with Acts 9:7 stating that Saul’s traveling companions heard a voice, while Acts 22:9 seems to state that they did not hear the voice.

The supposed contradiction is hardly likely on logical grounds because the two verses occur in the same book by the same author – who would be unlikely to contradict himself – so we might expect that there is some explanation for the apparent difference in these accounts.

Anyone who has ever said “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch what you said” knows it is possible to hear a voice without understanding what was said, and the ancient Greek language actually adjusted for that fact in its use of the word “hear” (*akouō*). When a sound was heard as a meaningless or

unintelligible noise, the verb “to hear” was used with a noun in the “genitive case.” On the other hand, when a sound was heard that conveyed meaning or a message, the same verb “to hear” was used with a noun in the “accusative case.”

In Acts 9:7 we are told Saul’s companions “heard” a voice (genitive case noun – hearing a noise only), whereas in Acts 22:9 Paul, in recounting the event later, tells us the other men did not hear the voice (accusative case noun – hearing something with meaning).

So there is no real contradiction between the two accounts in Acts. In fact, unlike the King James Version of the Bible or its derivative New King James Version from which the verses above are quoted, most modern English translations understand this fact and translate accordingly. The NIV, for example, translates the two verses in the following way: “The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they *heard the sound* but did not see anyone” (Acts 9:7, emphasis added here and in the following verses). “My companions saw the light, but they *did not understand the voice* of him who was speaking to me” (Acts 22:9).

Apparently Saul’s companions heard a voice but did not understand it. The reason might have been as simple as that the voice was speaking in Hebrew, which Saul, but not all inhabitants of ancient Judea, understood. In any case, there is no contradiction in the fact that Saul’s companions heard but did not understand the voice that spoke to Saul.

In this example, finding what the Bible actually said requires some knowledge of the original Greek in which the New Testament was written, but we do not have to become biblical scholars to arrive at the answer to the problem. Simply consulting several good modern translations will usually help us to see what the Bible is saying in such cases.

Keeping the Principle in Mind

Looking back at the examples given in this chapter, we see a clear principle: in many instances where two verses appear to contradict each other, we simply need to look more closely at what is said in each case to find that no contradiction is present.

Sometimes we may presume that the verse in question is saying something that it is not really saying (as in the example we looked at of the baptism of Jesus where we might presume that it was God himself who was speaking). At other times (as in our second example, regarding the last words of Jesus) we might not realize that each of the two differing

accounts simply does not include the information given in the other. But in both cases, looking closely at the wording of the verses in question and asking “Does it actually say that?” or “Is what is said in the two passages really mutually exclusive?” allows us to solve the apparent problem.

In the final example we considered (that of what Saul’s traveling companions heard), looking at the actual meaning of the Greek words in the problem passages conclusively solved the seeming contradiction. But as we pointed out, use of such technical methods is rarely necessary because good modern translations have often done the work for us – we just need to take the time to compare the passages in several translations (for example, by using a free online Bible site such as BibleGateway.com) and we will often find the resolution to this kind of problem.

This first principle of asking “Does it actually say that?” probably solves the greatest number of apparent contradictions we may find in the Bible. In the next chapter we will look at the second most common cause of presumed contradictions and the principle that corrects it.

3. DOES IT REALLY MEAN THAT?

In this chapter we will see that in many instances an apparent conflict between two verses is simply the result of our not realizing that an ancient text can say something without meaning it literally. This may sound strange at first, but – as we will see – it is no different to the way we often use language today. Our first example of this is whether the Bible contradicts itself regarding if God can be seen or not.

Seeing God or Not?

The book of Exodus records words spoken by God saying “... you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Exodus 33:20). But only a few verses earlier in this same chapter we find that: “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exodus 33:11).

As with any two apparently contradictory verses in the same biblical book, by the same author – especially ones that are only a few verses apart, as these are – it would be completely unlikely that the author would have contradicted himself.

Yet the Bible makes it clear that God is invisible to physical eyes, and that even if we could see him we could not live, as Exodus 33:20 affirms (see 1 Timothy 6:16; etc.). On the other hand, there are also numerous verses where individuals claimed to have seen God, as in Exodus 33:11 (and see Ezekiel 1:26-28; etc.). The answer to this seeming contradiction is that there is a difference between fully seeing something and partially seeing it – just as we might partially look at the sun through a darkened sheet of glass, but we cannot look at it directly.

It is clear that in some circumstances God revealed himself to individuals, appearing to them in human or angelic form (Genesis 32:30, Judges 13:22; etc.), with greatly reduced glory (Exodus 33:18-23), or in a vision (Acts 7:55-56). As it happens, both the Hebrew and Greek words used in the Bible for “see” can mean to see with the eye or to see in the mind – as in “I see what you mean” – so when a verse talks about seeing God, we must ask if it means literally or not.

Although no human can see God directly, we are promised that eventually we will see God in his fullness: “... we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). The apostle Paul elaborated on this fact in his inspiring words: “For now

we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Paul’s statement is particularly inspiring because it affirms not only our future clear view of God, but also the fact that we can presently see him at least partially – conceptually – if we wish to look.

The Gospel of John records that Philip, one of the twelve disciples, asked Jesus: “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:8-9). Because Jesus was God in human form (John 1:1, 14), when people saw him, they were in that sense seeing God, but again, in a limited manner. When we read the detailed accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, we can “see” God in that sense, too. So, when the Bible says God cannot be seen, but also that God has been seen, we realize that although what is *said* may seem contradictory, what is *meant* is not.

Utterly Destroyed or Not?

We see the same principle at work in understanding the references in the book of 1 Samuel to the Amalekite people who were ancient Israel’s neighbors. First we are told: “[King Saul] took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword” (1 Samuel 15:8). Then, later, we read: “Now David and his men went up and raided the Geshurites, the Girzites and the Amalekites ...” (1 Samuel 27:8).

These verses in 1 Samuel are often cited as showing a serious contradiction in the Old Testament, but do they? First Samuel 15 does tell us that King Saul attacked the neighboring Amalekites and reiterates several times that those people were “totally destroyed.” On the other hand, 1 Samuel 27 is just as clear that some years later David attacked the (seemingly now non-existent) Amalekites.

Once again, the first clue we have that there is no contradiction between these seemingly opposing verses is that they were both written by the same person – the prophet Samuel. This alone indicates that it would be unlikely that the two statements were really at variance.

A clear answer to this apparent contradiction is found in the nature of ancient Near Eastern literature itself. The preserved records of the kings of the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians and other cultures of the ancient biblical world are full of examples of kings who “totally destroyed” their enemies, while other records show just as clearly that those enemies still

existed much later. A good example can be found on page 27 of the book *Peoples of the Sea* by archaeologists Moshe and Trude Dothan (Scribner, 1991), who cite an inscription of the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses III:

I slew the Denyon in their islands, while the Tjekker and Philistines were made ashes. The Sherden and the Washesh of the sea were made non-existent, captured all together and brought in captivity to Egypt like the sands of the shore.

The expression “made non-existent” used by Ramesses in this boast is clearly hyperbole. It is an exaggeration for effect no different from the way that we might say today that our favorite sports team “annihilated” or “totally destroyed” an opposing team. The Ramesses III text is also illuminating in that it shows within the text itself that “made non-existent” is a figure of speech, because it is immediately followed by the statement that a great many of these same people were captured and brought back to Egypt as captives!

It should not surprise us at all that the descriptions of battles found in the Bible often use exactly the kind of language and figurative expressions that were commonly used of victories and defeats by the peoples of the ancient world, and that we still use today of defeated sports teams! Again, although what is *said* may seem contradictory, what is *meant* is certainly not a contradiction.

Did the Centurion Go to Jesus or Not?

The story recorded by both Matthew and Luke of how Jesus healed a centurion’s servant in Capernaum (Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10) is often said to be one of the clearest contradictions in the Bible. This claim is made because Matthew’s account seems to tell us that the centurion went to Christ and talked with him in person, whereas Luke says that the centurion sent others to Jesus who asked for help on his behalf. Notice first what Luke tells us:

The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him ... So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: ‘Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have

you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.’ ...Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well. (Luke 7:1-10).

Luke’s detailed account makes it clear that the centurion did indeed send messengers to Jesus to ask his help. When we read about the same event in Matthew 8:5-13, however, it does sound as though the centurion went to Jesus personally because Matthew’s account contains expressions such as: “A centurion came to him,” “Lord, he said,” “the centurion replied,” “then Jesus said to the centurion, ‘Go ...,” etc. But the Bible often speaks as though someone in a position of authority did something when, in actuality, a servant or representative was the one who acted.

We can see a clear example of this in John’s Gospel which tells us that just before the crucifixion of Jesus: “Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him” (John 19:1 ESV), though Matthew 27:26 and Mark 15:15 make it clear that it was the soldiers acting under Pilate’s orders who actually performed this beating. This is so obviously what happened that no one claims it to be a contradiction, and the NIV and numerous other versions simply translate John 19:1 to say “had him flogged” as that is the obvious meaning, despite the fact that the text literally says “Pilate took Jesus and flogged him.”

The same principle can be seen to be at work in the abbreviated account in Matthew 8 which tells us that the centurion “went” to Jesus. The words of the centurion are the same as those that we find in Luke, but as Luke explains, the message was delivered by others. In both these situations – that of Pilate and the centurion (as well as many others in the Bible) – others spoke the words or completed the actions for individuals in command, and there is no real contradiction in the parallel accounts.

Here again, the principle we can observe is that while biblical accounts may sometimes seem contradictory in what is said, what is *meant* is clearly not contradictory at all.

Now that we have looked at what are probably the two most common reasons verses may seem to contradict each other, we can move on to a third type of potential problem that is also frequently encountered – but that is based on a very different situation.

4. DID SOMETHING CHANGE?

Another fairly common reason why biblical accounts may sometimes seem to contradict each other is simply that of change occurring over time or in different circumstances. We have all heard the expression “that was then, but this is now” and we understand how different circumstances can also change many situations in life. This same principle of changed times or conditions is one we must always apply in seeking to understand the Scriptures. Our first example of this kind of situation is a basic one, but it is a good one to keep in mind.

Humble Servant or Warrior King?

When we study the Old Testament, it is sometimes easy to become confused regarding prophecies which speak of the promised Messiah. For example, in Isaiah 53:2 we read: “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” However, when we turn to the book of Psalms we find a seemingly conflicting statement in a verse acknowledged by virtually everyone to have messianic significance: “You are the most excellent of men and your lips have been anointed with grace, since God has blessed you forever ... clothe yourself with splendor and majesty” (Psalm 45:2-3).

A number of explanations have been put forward for this apparent difference of majesty or no majesty, beauty or no beauty – such as the idea that these verses are speaking of different aspects of the Messiah’s appearance, or that Isaiah was speaking of “outward beauty,” while Psalm 45 speaks of “inward beauty.” That this is not the case can be seen by looking at the context of the verses surrounding Psalm 45:2-3 which are clearly speaking of the external appearance and attributes of the Messiah.

In this, and in similar cases, the apparent conflict is easily resolved when we separate the first coming of the Messiah from his prophesied second coming. The context of Isaiah 53 is clearly one of human life that fits the physical life of Christ at his first coming: “... he was pierced for our transgressions...” (Isaiah 53:5; etc.). Isaiah was speaking of the physical appearance of the Messiah which also matches what we know from other verses. When we read the Gospels, for example, we see that Jesus was able to slip through the crowds and avoid arrest on several occasions, indicating that he was probably of ordinary appearance and

certainly did not stand out as a person of noticeable physical beauty (John 5:13; etc.). Isaiah's words relate to the Messiah's appearance in his first coming.

On the other hand, when we look at the context of Psalm 45 we see it has reference to the Messiah's coming as a conquering king with great majesty and with the nations falling beneath his feet (Psalm 45:4-5). While this description clearly does not fit the first coming of Jesus Christ, it certainly fits the second coming, as we see, for example, in Revelation 19:11-16. When we also compare the description of the "bride" of Christ in Revelation 19:7 with that of the bride of the king in Psalm 45:9, we see that the connection with the second coming of the Messiah in that psalm is complete. When we are careful to distinguish the humble servant role of the Messiah's first coming from his role as conquering king at his second coming, the apparent conflicts of many verses are easily resolved.

Remember or Forget?

Our next example of this type of apparent scriptural conflict also comes from the Old Testament, again from the book of Isaiah. Two verses tell us respectively: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past" (Isaiah 43:18) and "Review the past for me" (Isaiah 43:26). While the one verse clearly tells us to forget the past, the other verse is equally clear in stating that it should be remembered.

We have already seen that in examples such as these where two seemingly divergent verses are found in the same biblical book or – as in this case – the same chapter, it is highly unlikely that their writer would have been unaware that he was contradicting himself, if that had been the case. In this particular instance we can see that the principle of change is involved.

As is so often true, the simple answer to this apparent contradiction is found in the contexts in which the two verses appear. When we look at the verses surrounding Isaiah 43:18, we find that God is speaking of working with those who had turned to him and whom he had redeemed. We see this beginning in the first verse of the chapter: "But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you'" (Isaiah 43:1).

The same situation applies in a number of verses in the following chapters – as when we read "I have swept away your offenses like a cloud,

your sins like the morning mist” (Isaiah 44:22). It is because of this forgiveness that God offered the comforting words: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.”

But the situation was entirely different with those who had turned from God and refused to walk in his ways. It is to those people that the words of Isaiah 43:26 and its surrounding verses were addressed. Notice that verse in full: “Review the past for me, let us argue the matter together; state the case for your innocence. Your first father sinned; those I sent to teach you rebelled against me” (Isaiah 43:26-27). Here, God instructs those who rejected him to remember the history of humanity and what that rejection had caused.

This principle of urging those who were not following God to remember the past is repeated several times in Isaiah. We read, for example: “Remember this, keep it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me” (Isaiah 46:8-9). Here, God clearly reminds those who rebel against him of his actions – both of correction and blessing.

There are other biblical verses, of course, that urge us to remember the things that God has done for us in the past. For example, Deuteronomy 6:12 states clearly: “be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” In exactly the same way, the apostle Paul reminds us of our past and tells us to “remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).

But in the context of Isaiah 43, we see God differentiating between those who rebel against him and those who do not. Isaiah, like many other biblical writers, shows that God works with us according to our attitude. His message to those who turn to him and want to walk in his ways is very different from the message he addresses to those who refuse and rebel.

So there is no contradiction between verses 18 and 26 in Isaiah 43. In actuality, the two verses simply provide examples of two different situations. The first shows God urging the repentant not to be afflicted by their past mistakes – as one of the benefits of his forgiveness. The second shows God urging the unrepentant to consider the past – as a reminder of both his blessings and his judgments.

Made Perfect or Being Made Holy?

Finally, we turn to the New Testament for what may be the ultimate example of the unlikeliness of a biblical author contradicting himself – in this case, not only in the same book and same chapter, but even in the same verse! In the book of Hebrews we read: “For by one sacrifice he has *made* perfect forever those who are *being made* holy” (Hebrews 10:14 emphases added).

Here, the author of Hebrews seems to tell us – in the same breath – that we are *already* made perfect by Christ’s sacrifice, and that we are *currently* being made holy. Is there really a contradiction here as some have claimed?

Long ago the King James Bible (KJV) avoided this seeming contradiction by translating Hebrews 10:14 as “For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified” – in other words, the KJV made it sound as though we are both already “perfected” and already “sanctified” or made holy. But virtually every modern translation acknowledges that the Greek of this verse does not say that. The expression “made perfect” is in the “perfect” Greek tense (what we commonly call the “past” tense in English) and it should indeed be translated “*made* perfect.” But the expression translated “are sanctified” in the KJV is in the Greek present tense and is accurately translated as “*being made* holy” in the NIV and most other modern versions.

So Hebrews does tell us that God has *made* perfect through Christ’s sacrifice those who are presently in the process of *being made* holy. But there is no real contradiction here because two different aspects of righteousness are being dealt with. One relates to our situation in the past, the other to our continuing situation – one was completed “then,” the other is being completed “now.” On the one hand, we have “justification” in which we are given righteous standing before God (“made perfect”) through Christ’s sacrifice, and on the other hand we have “sanctification” in which God then proceeds to make our lives holy in terms of behavior that is guided and helped by his Spirit (“being made holy”). Consider the differences:

Justification is a one-time event that happens outside of us, when we are declared righteous by God. Sanctification is a continual process that happens inside of us, as we are continually made more righteous by God. In other words, although we are already viewed as *being* right in God’s eyes through the sacrifice of Christ, we are also *being made* right through

the ongoing inward spiritual transformation that God works in our lives. The Bible clearly shows that the event of justification must be followed by the process of sanctification for salvation to be completed (Acts 26:18; etc.).

Clearly, there is no contradiction in Hebrews 10:14 – the same verse looks at two different events, one that occurred at an earlier time and the other that is still ongoing. Asking “Did something change” regarding what is being talked about in these verses dispels the appearance of any contradiction. It is one of the most important principles we can remember, as it affects such a wide range of verses.

5. IS A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE INVOLVED?

Sometimes we can be sure of what verses say and confident that we understand what they mean – and also know that nothing changed between two accounts that might make them seem to be at variance – yet a conflict does still seem to exist. At this point we must look at the perspective involved in what is said. To do this we may have to look at the perspective of the person who is speaking in the account, the perspective of the writer who recorded the words, or even the perspective of the original readers of the biblical documents in which the difficult verses occur. In this chapter we will look at an example from the New Testament of each of these types of verse.

The Order of the Temptations

Our first example is a simple one: the story of the temptation of Christ in the wilderness, after his baptism. The story is found in two of the Gospels – Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13 – and although these accounts are in close agreement, some have claimed they are contradictory because they list the temptations in a different order. This has been said to show disagreement among the New Testament writers and to prove that their differing accounts could not have been inspired.

Matthew records the temptations Jesus underwent as:

1. Turn stones into bread to satisfy his physical hunger,
2. Leap from the temple pinnacle to show his divine nature,
3. Worship Satan to receive great power.

Luke changes the order of these temptations slightly to:

1. Turn stones into bread,
2. Worship Satan,
3. Leap from the temple pinnacle.

However, there is a very likely reason for the different order given in Matthew's Gospel and that of Luke. We must remember that Matthew's

Gospel was written to a Jewish audience. Luke's Gospel, on the other hand, seems to have been written to a primarily Greek-speaking audience. Many of the differences between the two Gospels – for example, the genealogies of Jesus – are clearly as a result of the audiences addressed. The stories of the temptation of Jesus are no exception.

In Matthew, from a Jewish perspective, the temptations are arranged in an increasing order – from using God's power for personal needs, to taking a wrong path to fulfilling God's will, to finally placing another god before God himself. For a Jewish audience, all these temptations would seem serious, but there is no question that they would be seen as being in an increasing order.

In Luke, the order of the temptations is subtly but importantly changed. For a gentile Greek audience, the temptation to privately perform the miracle of changing stones to bread would not be as great as a temptation to receive great power and rulership in the world (through the worship of Satan), but that would itself not seem as great a temptation as publicly becoming like a god oneself (through being divinely lowered from the temple pinnacle). Luke's order of the temptations perfectly fits this gentile Greek perspective, as do so many of the details in his Gospel.

There is another point we should consider in looking at these accounts. Matthew's order of the temptations not only fits the Jewish perspective, but also seems to be in actual chronological order. We see this in the fact that Matthew uses chronological markers in his account – he writes “then” or some similar term before each of the temptations to show that one followed the other (Matthew 4:1, 5, 8, 11). Luke, however, uses no chronological markers and simply tells us what the temptations were – in an order that would more understandable to his own primarily non-Jewish audience.

When we take into account the different cultural perspectives of the original readers of Matthew's and Luke's Gospels – and the exact wording of the accounts – we see there is no real contradiction between the two narratives at all.

Do the Resurrection Accounts Conflict?

It is common for some who reject Christianity to speak of the “clear contradictions” among the Gospel accounts of the resurrection (Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20). The four accounts are frequently attacked as being inconsistent in terms of the witnesses to the event, its

timing, and what the witnesses saw. We will look at these aspects individually and see how the issue of perspective affects them:

The Witnesses: Matthew 28:1 states that two women (Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary”) came to the tomb of Jesus, whereas Mark 16:1 states that there were three women (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome). In Luke 24:10 we find three women named, but a different list of three than Mark gives (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Joanna); finally, John 20:1 mentions only Mary Magdalene. Clearly, a number of women went to the tomb that morning, but it is likely that each Gospel writer mentions the particular women that he had heard were there. The fact that there is so much agreement between the lists is, in fact, a point for their authenticity rather than some kind of contradiction. John mentions only Mary Magdalene, likely because she was either the first to arrive at the tomb or she was the leader of the group of women. But in each case the reporting perspective of the writer is all that is really different.

Timing of the Event: John 20:1 states “it was still dark” when Mary arrived at the tomb, but Mark 16:2 states it was “just after sunrise” when the women arrived. Once again, perhaps Mary Magdalene (who alone is mentioned by John) arrived at the tomb a little earlier than the others. Thus, from John’s perspective it was dark, whereas from the other writers’ perspective it was now light when the other women arrived.

What Was Witnessed: While Matthew 28:2 tells us “an angel” rolled away the stone sealing the tomb and sat upon it, Mark 16:5 says the women found “a young man” sitting by the tomb. Luke 24:4 says the women saw “two men,” and in John 20:1 it is not recorded that Mary Magdalene saw anything other than the moved stone. But Matthew does not say there was only one angel, just that one moved the stone. The “young man” mentioned by Mark was clearly how the women had described the angel. The fact that John does not mention the two “men” does not mean that they were not there – his account is written from the perspective of Mary Magdalene and it is possible that when she arrived at the tomb – somewhat before the other women – no one else was present. So this is hardly a contradictory situation.

As the theologian N.T. Wright has written, "It is a commonplace among lawyers that eyewitnesses disagree, but that this doesn't mean nothing happened." (*Surprised by Hope*, Harper 2008, p. 33). Given four separate accounts of the same event, one would expect differences of detail to be remembered by the different witnesses, and differences in the stress placed on certain details by the four writers as they recorded the event from their own perspectives.

Did Jesus Say the End Would Come in That Generation or Not?

Some of the statements of Jesus have been interpreted as being contradictory regarding when the end times would occur. Scriptures that supposedly show this are found in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 where his disciples asked Jesus when the end would come and he replied "See that you are not alarmed ... the end is not yet" (Matthew 24:6 ESV; and the parallels in the other Gospels). But in these same chapters Jesus is also recorded as saying: "this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (Matthew 24:34).

These verses only seem to be contradictory if we look at them from our own perspective, much later in history. When we look at them from the perspective of the original readers of the Gospels, we see there need be no problem. When Jesus spoke of the things that were due to take place before "this generation" passes away, he was speaking in response to a question asked by his disciples. They were impressed by the grandeur of the Jerusalem temple, but Jesus told them, "Do you see all these things? ... Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (Matthew 24:2). This statement naturally aroused the disciples' curiosity and they asked Jesus what signs would indicate A) when the destruction would occur, and B) when Christ would return (Matthew 24:3).

It is known that the prophetic warnings that Jesus then gave regarding the disciples' first question – about the demolishing of the temple – were fulfilled in AD 70 with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. These were the events that were fulfilled within a generation (forty years by Jewish reckoning) of Christ's prediction. But other statements contained in his discourse on the Mount of Olives in the same chapters of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were in answer to the second question regarding his coming and have a clear setting in a distant future, as we see, for example, in the prophecies: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew

24:14), and “For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equaled again” (Matthew 24:21) – neither of which was fulfilled in AD 70.

So, there is no real contradiction between statements of Jesus regarding signs that would be fulfilled within a generation of that time and others that would be fulfilled in some later, unspecified generation – of which Jesus clearly stated that “about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36).

Although this duality is clearly shown only by Matthew (who alone mentions both of the disciples’ questions), there is no reason to believe it could not have been the perspective of the other Gospel writers and the readers of these accounts. The perspective of the original speakers, the writers, and the original readers of the Bible all must be taken into account in fully understanding the Scriptures. And when they are, many apparent contradictions disappear.

6. DO WE HAVE ALL THE PIECES?

Sometimes, apparent contradictions in the Bible are the result of failing to bring together all the separate pieces of information that the Scriptures give us. Just as a jigsaw puzzle can only be completed when we have all its individual pieces, we must be sure that we bring all other relevant verses to bear on seemingly problem verses in order to clarify them. In this chapter we will look at an example from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament to illustrate this principle.

How Many Years of Famine?

In 2 Samuel and in 1 Chronicles we find a story telling how King David angered God by his pride in counting the fighting men of Israel, and how as a result of his action, God sent the prophet Gad to tell David to choose a punishment. In 2 Samuel 24:13 – in the New King James Version – we read: “So Gad came to David and told him; and he said to him, “Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land?”

Most modern translations actually change this verse to read “three years of famine” to avoid an apparent contradiction with 1 Chronicles 21:11-12 which reads: “So Gad went to David and said to him, “This is what the LORD says: “Take your choice: three years of famine ...”

There is really no reason for modern translations to depart from the clear reading of “seven years” found in in the Hebrew text of 2 Samuel. If we read both accounts carefully, we see that it is actually a different person’s words being recorded in the two books. In 1 Chronicles 21:11-12 we are told “Thus says the LORD...” and we have a direct quote from God offering three years of famine as one of the choices David could make. But in 2 Samuel 24:13 (NKJV) it is the Prophet Gad who speaks after giving God’s words: “...and told him [the choices], and said unto him...”

If we continue to put all the verses together that are relevant to this situation, we find that 2 Samuel 21:1 says there had been a famine in the days of David for three years, and from the time of 2 Samuel 21:1 to 2 Samuel 24:13 there was apparently about a year in which the land was recovering. So Gad was obviously aware of the fact that there had already recently been a famine in Israel for three years, the effects of which were probably still being felt.

Thus, after delivering God's message regarding a possible further three years of famine, the prophet Gad asks David if he wants to choose what would essentially be, for Israel, a total of seven years of famine – the three years that had already occurred, the year of slow recovery and then a further three years. This seems to be Gad's way of stressing the problematic nature of that choice, as the land was already weakened by famine. So there is no need to presume any contradiction between 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles on this point.

You may also notice another detail of 2 Samuel 24:13. In some modern translations such as the NIV the words "... and told him ..." are removed from the phrase "and told him, and said unto him," as the translators apparently thought these words were extraneous. But, as we saw, this is because Gad was telling David what God had said and also telling him what he, Gad, had to say. In removing these words the translators of the NIV actually remove part of the answer to the apparent contradiction with 1 Chronicles 21:12 that they are trying to correct!

How Many Women Anointed Christ?

Turning to the New Testament, we find all four Gospels record an event in which a woman came to Jesus during a meal and anointed his feet and dried them with her hair (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 7, John 12). This story is the subject of much confusion regarding many of its details, which are often said to be contradictory.

Many feel that while Luke's account seems to refer to an event in Galilee early in Jesus' ministry, the stories told by Matthew, Mark, and John refer to a separate event occurring in Bethany near the end of Jesus' life. Some even divide these latter three stories into separate events because John apparently says the event he described occurred "six days before the Passover" (John 12:1), while Matthew and Mark say the event occurred two days before Passover (Matthew 26:2; Mark 14:1).

But this confusion fails to put the various accounts together properly. For example, John does not say the woman anointed Jesus six days before Passover. What he says is: "Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany ... Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor" (John 12:1-2). John simply says that at some point after Jesus arrived in Bethany six days before Passover, a dinner was given in his honor. So there is no contradiction between the accounts of Matthew, Mark and John in this regard.

As for the account in Luke, although it is placed with other material from the early part of Jesus' ministry, that story does not say where the event took place – or when. Many presume that Luke's "orderly" (Luke 1:3) account is strictly chronological; however, it does often stray from a chronological sequence. For example, in Luke 3 we read that King Herod shut John the Baptist up in prison (Luke 3:19-20), but then we read in the following verses that Jesus was baptized by John (Luke 3:21-22). In reality, of course, John baptized Jesus before being placed in prison (Matthew 3:1-17; 4:12; John 1:29-34).

An even more striking example of this kind of "achronological" recording is seen at the end of Luke's Gospel where he appears to compress the five weeks between the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension into a single day – if we treat what is said chronologically (compare Luke 24 with Matthew 28 and John 21).

Luke's account also says the anointing event occurred in the home of a Pharisee named Simon; the others say it was in the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany. But Simon the Leper and Simon the Pharisee were probably one and the same. A leper could never have hosted a dinner nor have partaken in one with other people so Simon the Leper must have been healed and could thus have been the same as Simon the Pharisee. Simon may well have been referred to as "the Pharisee" in Luke because Luke stresses Jesus' reply to Simon's pharisaical attitude (Luke 7:39), while the other Gospels remember him as Simon the Leper.

So when we bring all the verses together, there is no real reason why all the Gospel accounts could not be referring to the same event. In fact, it would be a strange coincidence if two different women (or even more!) had gone to the house of a man called Simon, had anointed Jesus with exactly the same amount (300 denarii worth) of exactly the same kind of expensive perfume, and had wiped his feet with their hair. If they were different women, why did the Gospel writers not differentiate them in some way? On the other hand, that Mary sister of Martha was the one woman who anointed Christ may be seen earlier in John's account where he tells us: "(This Mary... was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.)" (John 11:2). And note that John says "the same one who" rather than "one of the women who."

It would also be strange if not one of the four Gospel writers recorded both (or more) of these stories, if multiple similar events had occurred. This is especially true considering Jesus' words in Mark 14:9: "Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has

done will also be told, in memory of her.” Would Christ have put so much emphasis on this event if it was the second instance of two virtually identical cases? If this had been done by two different women, surely both would be clearly recorded.

Beyond these facts, we should remember that in John (12:4-5) we are told Judas complained that the perfume used to anoint Jesus was worth 300 denarii and the money could have been given to the poor, but is rebuked by Jesus who tells him to leave the woman alone as she has done a good work. In Matthew (26:8-9) and Mark (14:4-5) we are told that some of the disciples made the same complaint (“300 denarii”) and were rebuked in the same way by Christ (Matthew 26:10-13; Mark 14:6-9). It is hard to believe that given identical circumstances, the disciples made exactly the same mistake after Jesus had already rebuked them for it on a separate occasion. It is more reasonable to put the Gospel accounts together and to see that they do not contradict each other – but refer, with differing details, to one dinner, one woman, and one anointing of Jesus.

Did the Woman Anoint the Head or Feet of Jesus?

A final detail of this story of the woman who anointed Jesus with expensive perfume shortly before his death, symbolically preparing him for burial, confuses some people and has been claimed to be a contradiction. Two of the Gospels – Matthew and Mark – seem to say the woman poured the perfume on Jesus’ head, while the other two – Luke and John – say the perfume was poured on his feet. This seeming contradiction is also solved very simply by putting all the accounts together. First, look at them individually:

While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his *head* as he was reclining at the table (Matthew 26:6-7, emphasis added here and below).

While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his *head* (Mark 14:3).

A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his *feet* with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them (Luke 7:37-38).

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' *feet* and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume (John 12:1-3).

Putting all this information together, it is clear that the woman must have anointed both Jesus' head and feet. We see an indication of this in what Matthew records, that Jesus said of the woman "When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial" (Matthew 26:12), using "body" as a term that encompassed both his head and feet rather than saying just one of these.

Finally, Jewish burial practice was to put ointment or perfume on much of the body, and at least the head and feet of the deceased, so we see that while two of the Gospels mention part of that symbolic anointing, two mention the other part. Putting the verses together shows not contradiction, but simply parts of the story that we need to bring together for full understanding.

Utilizing this basic principle – of making sure we have all the information the Bible records about a given event – can solve a great number of apparent discrepancies in the Scriptures. Sometimes, however, we may not have all the needed information in the Bible itself and may have to try to reconstruct the information in other ways. We will look at that situation next.

7. ARE WE MISSING SOMETHING?

In this chapter we will look at assumed biblical contradictions where the perceived problem is actually based on missing information – facts we do not have that would solve the difficulty if they were supplied. We will look at three examples of this: one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, and one which involves both.

King Solomon's Stables

Our first example comes from the Old Testament accounts of the stables of King Solomon. It is known that Solomon greatly developed ancient Israel's military capability, but two biblical verses regarding the stables for his chariot horses seem to conflict. The book of Kings tells us: "Solomon had forty thousand stalls of horses for his chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen" (1 Kings 4:26 NKJV), but the book of Chronicles asserts: "Solomon had four thousand stalls for horses and chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen" (2 Chronicles 9:25 NKJV).

While these two accounts agree on the number of horsemen (twelve thousand), they seem to disagree sharply on the number of stalls – forty thousand versus four thousand. Some translations of the Bible, such as the NIV, actually change the text of 1 Kings 4:26 to read "four thousand" so as to avoid an apparent contradiction with 2 Chronicles 9:25, because they presume the book of Kings must have had a scribal error introduced by the writing of "forty thousand" instead of "four thousand."

But this is an unnecessary supposition. First, we should ask why Solomon would need twelve thousand horsemen for only four thousand horses. Second, the two scriptural passages may simply describe different kind of stalls. In 1 Kings the forty thousand stalls are said to be for chariot horses (nothing is said about the chariots themselves), but in 2 Chronicles, the four thousand stalls that are mentioned were for horses and chariots.

Because each chariot was pulled by multiple horses, it would be natural for there to be fewer stalls for chariots. Additionally, the large "chariot stalls" may have been stables with individual stalls for each of the horses in the chariot's team as well as a holding area for the chariot itself. In

other words, the four thousand stalls may have contained many more, smaller, stalls for the horses.

This is no different from a modern account saying that someone has a garage in their home but not specifying whether it is a single, double, or even triple garage with room for one, two, or more cars. In Kings and Chronicles we are simply not given enough information to know exactly what type the stalls were that are mentioned in each account, but that does not mean they contradict any more than saying in my neighborhood twelve homes have garages and the homes in my neighborhood have garages for 16 cars.

Another verse sheds a little more light on these accounts. In 2 Chronicles 1:14 we see that Solomon had “fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses,” so we might wonder why would there be more chariot stalls (four thousand) than there were chariots (fourteen hundred). Historically we must realize that Solomon’s standing army was probably garrisoned in specific areas, but stables may well have been built in a number of other fortified areas and outposts to house chariots and horses that might need to be moved to them temporarily, depending on defensive needs.

So there is no need to think that there must be a contradiction between the books of Kings and Chronicles regarding Solomon’s stables, and most recent English Bible translations such as the ESV and CSB preserve the text of these different verses just as they were written. This example shows us that sometimes we can have all the information the Bible gives us and still need to think the situation through and to ask What am I missing? – What other fact could explain the difficulty?

Who Said That – Jeremiah or Zechariah?

Our next example is that of a quotation in the Gospel of Matthew that is said to be from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah: “Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: “They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me” (Matthew 27:9-10). The problem with these verses, according to many skeptics, is that the words quoted from Jeremiah do not appear anywhere in that book, but seem to appear in the book of Zechariah. If the Bible is inspired, the argument goes, why did Matthew incorrectly name the book from which the quotation is taken?

First, when we look closely at the frequently suggested “source” of Matthew’s quotation – in Zechariah chapter 11 – we find that the wording is similar, though not identical, to Matthew’s quote:

So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, “Throw it to the potter” – the handsome price at which they valued me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them to the potter at the house of the Lord (Zechariah 11:12-13).

Nevertheless, despite the differences, Zechariah’s words certainly are closer to those quoted in Matthew than anything we can find in the book of Jeremiah. But although this prophecy cannot be found in the book of Jeremiah as we presently have it, and it is similar to what is found in Zechariah, we have no reason to suspect that the words found in Matthew were not spoken by Jeremiah at some point.

We must always remember that the Bible refers to a number of other books that are not included within the established Scriptures, but which are directly quoted or alluded to within them. The Old Testament mentions many works of this kind – such as the Book of Jashar (Joshua 10:13; 2 Samuel 1:18; etc.). In the same way, in the New Testament the biblical epistles of 2 Peter and Jude both refer to the “Book of Enoch” (2 Peter 2:4, 3:13; Jude 4, 6, 13–15), which was apparently known to the New Testament apostles but is not extant today, and Paul’s epistle to the Colossians mentions an “epistle from Laodicea” (Colossians 4:16), which is not otherwise recorded.

So there are numerous instances where biblical writers quoted or alluded to works that were not included in the Bible itself and have been lost through the course of history. As a result, there is no reason to find it surprising if Matthew was able to quote specific words from Jeremiah that are not found in the book of Jeremiah itself. We know that Jeremiah also wrote the book of Lamentations, and it is perfectly possible that he wrote other books, too. Although we may be missing the evidence itself, there is nothing to stop us from presuming that Jeremiah did utter the prophecy recorded by Matthew. In fact, ironically, it is perfectly possible that Zechariah was actually alluding to that same no-longer-existing prophecy of Jeremiah!

In any case, the lesson we can learn from this example is an important one. Even if we do not have the actual source that Matthew’s quote came from, we must remember the principle used in courts of law – that

“absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” Just because we don’t have something doesn’t mean it didn’t exist. If there is a logical reason why an apparent discrepancy may exist between verses, then it cannot be said that they must be in disagreement.

Sins or Debts?

We will now look at a final example of this kind of situation in which we are missing information that would solve an apparent discrepancy between verses. Many readers of the Gospels notice that in the accounts of the Lord’s Prayer given in Matthew and Luke, in many translations there is a small but significant difference regarding the petition for forgiveness. Luke records Jesus as saying: “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us” (Luke 11:4), while Matthew records: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

Here, while Luke tells us that Jesus taught we should pray for forgiveness of our sins, Matthew records that we are to pray for the forgiveness of our debts. Matthew doubtless refers to spiritual rather than financial debts, but the two Gospels use different words with very different meanings.

Luke’s account uses the Greek word *hamartia* which is the word most often used for sins in the New Testament. Matthew, however, uses the Greek words *opheilēma* and *opheiletēs* which are translated as “debts” and “debtors” and which convey the idea of a debt or responsibility we have not paid off.

But the differences between these Greek words is negated when we realize that Jesus certainly would not have given the Lord’s Prayer in Greek, and that the language he would have used would have been Aramaic – the language spoken by the population of Judea in New Testament times. Unlike Greek, which has separate words for the ideas of sin and unpaid debts or responsibilities, Aramaic has a single word *khoba* signifying both sins and debts.

This means that the petition for forgiveness given by Jesus was interpreted as referring to “sins” by Luke and “debts” by Matthew (who was, of course, a tax collector!). In fact, there is a clear hint of this double meaning in Luke’s Gospel where the Greek actually includes both ideas in stating: “Forgive us our *sins*, for we also forgive everyone who is *indebted* to us” (Luke 11:4, emphases added). Although this double meaning does

not appear in the NIV, it is accurately recorded in the ESV, NKJV, CSB, etc. It is as though Luke tried to include both possible meanings of the word Jesus used.

So the accounts of Matthew and Luke do not contradict each other. Matthew simply stresses the debt aspect of the word Jesus undoubtedly would have used, while Luke stresses the sin aspect – though he also manages to include the idea of indebtedness in his account.

Once again we find that missing information, when brought into the picture, gives a clear explanation for what might seem to be a contradiction in the Scriptures. Each of the examples we looked at in this chapter was based on a different kind of situation, but in all cases it is possible to find or to surmise extra information that explains what the Bible says.

CONCLUSION: MULTIPLE POSSIBILITIES

Now that we have looked at the seven major ways in which verses that might seem to conflict can be reconciled, we can add a concluding principle to our examination of supposed biblical contradictions: the fact that in many cases there are actually multiple ways in which supposed contradictions can be solved! As is often the case, the three Old Testament examples that we look at in this chapter all have a number of possible answers.

Did All the Livestock Die or Not?

In the narrative of the plagues sent on Egypt described in the book of Exodus, we are told that in the fifth plague “All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one animal belonging to the Israelites died” (Exodus 9:6). Later, in the seventh plague, Moses told Pharaoh that any livestock not brought under shelter would be killed by a great hailstorm:

Give an order now to bring your livestock and everything you have in the field to a place of shelter, because the hail will fall on every person and animal that has not been brought in and is still out in the field, and they will die (Exodus 9:19).

If all the Egyptians’ animals were killed in the fifth plague, it is often asked, how could there be animals left to shelter from the seventh? There are at least four possible answers to this seeming contradiction:

First (using the principle we learned of asking “Does it Actually Say That?”), we find that the exact wording of Exodus 9:3 is “the Lord will bring a terrible plague on your livestock in the field,” so it may be that livestock not in the fields was not affected. The ancient Egyptians had extensive stables and holding areas for livestock, because many of the fields were covered in water during the annual inundation of the Nile River.

Second (using the principle of “Does it Really Mean That?”), we find that the words “all” and “every” in Hebrew do not mean “all” or “every” in all cases. Just as in modern English we can say “Everyone was at the party,” meaning a great many people or all the people of a certain type

such as a group of co-workers, so in ancient Hebrew the words “all” and “every” sometimes simply mean a great many or all those of a certain type.

Third (using this same principle), we can realize that the expression “all the livestock” could mean all the different types of livestock, animals of every kind – horses, cows, sheep, goats, etc. – as, in fact, we find in Exodus 9:3: “your horses, donkeys and camels and ... your cattle, sheep and goats.”

Fourth (thinking about the principle of “Did Something Change?”), we might realize that something had happened that changed the situation for the Egyptians. We are specifically told that in the fifth plague none of the livestock of the Hebrews was affected (Exodus 9:7), so it is possible that by the time of the seventh plague the Egyptians had forcibly requisitioned many of these animals and now had them in their own fields.

Given all these possibilities, there is no reason we need see any contradiction between what Exodus tells us occurred in the fifth and seventh plagues. The fact that the supposed contradiction is an obvious one that occurs within a few verses of the original statement indicates that the ancient Hebrews were fully aware of what was said but saw no problem regarding the situation. As a result, we need not, either.

Did Chariots of Iron Defeat the Word of God?

Two references to the conquest of the Promised Land found in the biblical books of Joshua and Judges have long been claimed to be contradictory. As we will see, however, there are actually multiple possible explanations for these verses. Notice first what Joshua states regarding God’s promise to the Israelites:

but the hill country shall be yours, for though it is a forest, you shall clear it and possess it to its farthest borders. For you shall drive out the Canaanites, though they have chariots of iron, and though they are strong. (Joshua 17:18 ESV).

Now compare that clear promise with what is recorded in Judges:

And the Lord was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron. (Judges 1:19 ESV).

When we compare these verses, it might appear that – despite God’s promise of victory over the iron chariots of the Canaanites – the Israelites were unable to defeat this enemy and their formidable war machines. But consider the following possible explanations for this apparent contradiction or failure of God’s promise.

First (using the principle of “Does it Actually Say That?”), we should carefully consider the actual wording of the promise given in Joshua 17:18. The Israelites were told that the mountain country to its “farthest borders” would be given to them. This does not specifically say that the Israelites would be helped against the Canaanites beyond the mountain region. When we turn to Judges 1:19, it tells us that Israel could not drive out the Canaanites with their iron-armored chariots from the lowlands. In other words, the area they could not subdue was not the mountainous region of the Promised Land, but the flat coastal plain beside it.

Second (using the principle of “Did Something Change?”), we can see that there may be no conflict between the two verses because Judges 1:19 was written some time after Joshua 17:18. God’s promise to drive out the Canaanites may have been fulfilled, but it clearly was not a promise in perpetuity – other verses show that Canaanites were able to move back into Israel as time went on, after Israel had taken control of the area. So Judges 1 may refer to Israel’s failure to establish lasting control of the lowland areas.

We should always remember the principle of conditionality behind the type of promise we find in Joshua 17:18. God promised the Israelites that he would assist them and be with them in battle as long as they obeyed him, but he also made it clear that he would withdraw his help if they turned from him. In fact, we find a specific reference to the failure of the Israelites to drive out the Canaanites from some areas in exactly this context in the book of Judges:

I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land I swore to give to your ancestors. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.’ Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? And I have also said, *‘I will not drive them out before you; they will become traps for you, and their gods will become snares to you’* (Judges 2:1-3, emphasis added).

So, despite the original promise given to Israel in Joshua 17:18, we see that God seems to have rescinded his promise – as he warned he would – when Israel did not obey him.

Going to or from Jericho?

Three of the Gospels tell the story of the healing of two blind men by Jesus in the vicinity of Jericho. The accounts agree in most details regarding this story, though there are a couple of differences which sometimes confuse readers and are labeled “contradictions” by skeptics.

Matthew 20:29-34 states that two blind men were healed, while Mark 10:46-52 and Luke 18:35-43 mention only one blind man. But the fact that Mark and Luke concentrate only on the one blind man may mean nothing more than that he was perhaps the leader and spokesman of the two men.

Seemingly more problematic, Luke says the healing occurred as Jesus was entering Jericho, while Mark and Matthew record it happening as Jesus left Jericho. But there are several possible answers to this apparent conundrum.

First (asking “Does it Really Mean That?”), a little research will confirm that the Greek verb *engizo*, translated “drew near” in Luke 18:35, can also mean “to be near.” There are several instances of the word being used this way in the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 21:3; 1 Kings 21:2; Jeremiah 23:23; etc.) and in the New Testament, including usage by Luke himself (for example, Luke 19:29, and compare Matthew 21:1). Given this understanding, Luke 18:35 can be understood as simply meaning that the healing took place while Jesus was near Jericho.

Next (remembering to ask “Did Something Change?”), a little bit of research also will discover the fact that there were, by Jesus’ time, two cities of Jericho: the mound of the anciently destroyed city and the later inhabited city of Jericho close by. So it is possible that Jesus could have healed the two men as he was leaving the area of the ancient city and entering the newer city of Jericho – in which case the miracle could be said to have occurred as he left or as he entered Jericho.

Yet another possibility (“Are We Missing Something?”) is that, while Jesus was approaching Jericho, the blind men cried out, but were not heard because of the noise of the crowds. The next day, after Jesus stayed the night in the city, they may have waited on the road leaving Jericho

(knowing that Jesus and the other pilgrims were going to Jerusalem for the Passover), and then called out again and more loudly. We have no way to prove this possibility; but looking at the situation carefully and thinking about what might have happened suggests this perfectly possible scenario.

So there are at least three viable answers to the apparent discrepancy between Luke and the other Gospel writers regarding the location of the healing of the blind men. While we do not have enough information to know which answer is most likely correct, the fact that there are several possible answers discounts any need to think that there must be a contradiction in the scriptural accounts.

Keeping the Possibilities in Mind

We have only considered multiple possible answers for the three examples given in this chapter, but a great many of the supposed contradictions we looked at in the chapters of this book also have other possible solutions.

Whenever we find verses that seem not to be in harmony with each other, we can systematically work through the various principles that we have outlined and more often than not we will discover two or even more possible answers to the problem.

Of course, we only need one possible answer to any seeming contradiction to realize that the verses may not contradict each other at all. Even if we cannot prove which answer is correct, there are often numerous possible ways in which we can see that biblical contradictions do not exist.

APPENDIX:

Does the New Testament Quote the Old Testament Accurately?

In studying the Bible, you may have noticed that when New Testament authors quote verses from the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), their quotations are often somewhat different from the wording of the verses they appear to be quoting.

This has led to skeptics claiming that the New Testament Christians misquoted or even “changed” the Bible in order to try to make their case and to show what they wanted the Scriptures to show. However, there are a number of simple answers to this question of why the wording of quotations in the New Testament often appears to be different from the quoted Old Testament verses themselves.

First, we must realize that our modern Bibles differ in many small details from the Scriptures that were available to the earliest Christians. The earliest manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible on which most of our modern Old Testaments are based date to about AD 900, but before that time many copies of the Hebrew Bible had slight differences. The New Testament writers had access to these earlier versions of the biblical books, and it is those versions that they quote – meaning that their quotations often have slightly different wording from the same verses in our modern Bibles.

Next, we should be aware that not all the New Testament writers knew Hebrew. For example, Luke, the author of the third Gospel and the book of Acts – and evidently a speaker of Greek – may not have known the Hebrew language. He seems to frequently quote from the Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek that was made in the third and second centuries BC. The author of the book of Hebrews certainly was also more comfortable using Greek and never quotes directly from the Hebrew Bible – only from the Septuagint and other versions. And even the apostle Paul, though he clearly knew Hebrew, also used the Septuagint at times.

In fact, of the approximately 300 Old Testament quotes in the New Testament, approximately two-thirds of them came from the Greek Septuagint translation, and these quotes often differ very slightly from the

wording of the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament writers evidently had no difficulty in regarding such translations as the Word of God.

Also, we don't think it strange today when Christian teachers or preachers quote a specific translation in order to best make the point they are trying to get across. Sometimes a given translation uses the exact word that is being discussed – for example, confidence instead of faith – so a particular modern-day translation of the Bible may work best in a given message or under particular circumstances. The New Testament writers were no different and seem to have sometimes chosen a version of the Bible that provided wording that best fit their message.

Another thing to keep in mind is that today we can easily access a Bible in order to quote a particular verse, but few early Christians owned complete copies or even parts of the Scriptures. The New Testament writers often had to rely on memory in order to include a biblical verse or passage in their own writing. Writers like the apostle Paul (who quotes the Old Testament some 183 times in his epistles) knew the Scriptures well enough to be able to quote them exactly or close to exactly from memory.

Finally, the writers of the New Testament sometimes combined two or more verses from the Hebrew Bible in order to make their point. This is no different from today when in our own writing we quote from several pages of a book or even from several sources. But first century writers did not utilize footnotes or other forms of citation (which appeared much later in history) to note exactly where each quotation came from. For example, in his epistles, Paul sometimes introduced quotations from the Old Testament by saying something like “it is written in the law” (1 Corinthians 9:9; etc.). But at other times, when he was confident that his readers would recognize the source, he simply made the quotation without even mentioning where it was from (Romans 2:24; etc.).

Even when verses from different areas of the Scriptures were quoted together, if the New Testament writers knew they were writing to individuals who knew the Scriptures well, they often simply quoted the verses next to each other without mentioning where they were from. They knew that many of their readers would not only recognize the verses they quoted, but also would know the setting in which they appeared.

For all these reasons, it is entirely natural that the way the ancient authors quoted biblical texts is often somewhat different from the way we would quote them today.

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