

DOES THE BIBLE CONTRADICT ITSELF?

The Bible can be a challenging book to read. Not only was it written thousands of years ago in a different culture and in ancient languages, but the Bible also contains what many believe are contradictions. For example, two accounts of the same event often tell different stories and the reader is left wondering which account is true, or if the Bible should even be trusted. After all, if there are genuine inconsistencies and contradictions in the Bible, doesn't this call into question the so-called truth it claims to communicate?

Fortunately, this is not a new issue, nor does it take us by surprise. Readers of the Bible have recognized, analyzed, and discussed these alleged contradictions for centuries. Even great Christian theologians like Augustine (354-430) and John Calvin (1509-64) wrote extensive commentaries on Scripture and wrestled with these same issues. They recognized that these apparent biblical inconsistencies often perplex readers and can't simply be left unexplored. And like biblical scholars today, they came to an important conclusion. With a little understanding of ancient languages, literature, and the cultural context, it becomes clear that these contradictions are not real contradictions; they are apparent contradictions. Now, there are scholarly books that examine every relevant passage and suggest plausible solutions (e.g., *When Critics Ask* by Geisler and Howe). But it might be helpful to highlight a few important principles to remember when we come across what we think is a contradiction in the Bible.

First, we should remind ourselves that the Bible is a collection of books written by many different authors. Accordingly, various authors had different purposes or emphases for what they wrote. On the highest level, this means that one author may underscore God's judgment of evil while another emphasizes his grace. Some readers perceive the Old Testament and New Testament this way, which is a shame because God's justice and grace are present in both. And yet we recognize that when one author focuses on one attribute of God, it's not necessarily to the neglect of others.

Also, different authors sometimes diverge when they describe the details of the same event. For example, the books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles are often parallel, describing the same kings in the life of Israel. However, sometimes the stories include quite different details.

Are we to conclude that the two authors are contradicting one another? Of course not, because we know that two people can describe the same event, include dissimilar details depending on their emphasis, and both can be fully accurate in what they communicate. The gospel accounts of Jesus' life illustrate this fact not only in the stories they relay, but the order in which they are compiled. Luke's order of events is often at odds with Matthew's

and one could surmise that the two books contradict one another. But this claim overlooks the way that Luke often organizes Jesus' actions and teachings thematically rather than chronologically. Thus, there is no contradiction, only two different purposes and methods of relating the same events. In case we think this strange, we need only look at the numerous biographies of an important historical figure like Abraham Lincoln. The multitude of emphases (his childhood, family, senate race, presidency, the Civil War, etc.) and biographical method (chronological or thematic) do not, in and of themselves, present contradictions that call into question the accuracy of the accounts. The same is true of the gospel accounts, and the Bible in general.

A second important and related principle to keep in mind is that some apparent inconsistencies result from different biblical authors using the same words or phrases in different ways or in light of different contexts. A well-known example comes from Paul and James:

- Paul: "... a person is justified by faith apart from observing the law." Romans 3:28 (TNIV)
- James: "... people are justified by what they do and not by faith alone." James 2:24 (TNIV)

Obviously, it appears as if these two verses are directly contradicting one another. However, Paul and James are speaking to different audiences and the contexts of these two verses reveal that they are using the language of justification and works in two different ways. Commentaries on Romans and James can explain this in greater detail, but should this be any surprise to us?

Words have a huge range of meaning. A teenager loves her boyfriend, a fan loves his football team, a mother loves her daughter, and a little boy loves his toy truck. Just like an English word can take on varying meanings depending on the person and context, the Bible is no different.

Third, in the ancient world there were no symbols for quotation marks in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, the languages in which the Bible was written (the punctuation has been added in English translations). In other words, when an ancient author related someone else's words, it was acceptable to paraphrase that person as long as the author maintained faithfulness to the meaning of the original utterance. Unlike the modern concern with precise journalistic accuracy, the ancient world had no such qualms. Thus, minor variations of Jesus' words in the gospels do not present contradictions or call into question the historical reliability of the accounts.

Lastly, sometimes we just need a better linguistic, geographical, cultural, or historical perspective to understand perceived inconsistencies. Scholars and historians often explain local figures of speech and nuances that do not translate into English. Of course, there will always remain some unanswered questions in light of the Bible's subject matter. Human authors often struggled with how to describe who God is and what he had done.

And yet they did leave us their accounts, and we have collected these works in the Bible. And while some are troubled by the apparent contradictions, many actually point to these seeming inconsistencies as evidence of the Bible's authenticity and reliability. Contrived and forged works don't contain such marks.

The best explanation is that the biblical authors simply reported what they saw and knew so that through their stories, readers would see the hand of the supreme Author, and begin to find their place in the grand story.