

Does The bible *Contradict* Itself?

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Here are some points to consider when dealing with passages that seem to be at odds with each other.

People who contend that the Bible is not the inspired Word of God often base their claim on one chief point: that the Scriptures contain a number of discrepancies or contradictory statements.

This claim, if true, would indeed make it hard to believe that the whole Bible from beginning to end is of divine origin. After all, to make contradictory statements means to err, and a book that contains errors cannot in its entirety come from the great, the all-wise, the perfect God.

On first inspection, it does seem that there are certain Bible passages that contradict each other. But on closer inspection, and by examining the very meaning of "contradiction" itself, we can see that this is simply not the case.

One dictionary defines "contradiction" as the following: "The principle that it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time and in the same sense, that contradictory attributes cannot co-exist in, and may not be affirmed of, the same object, and that the same proposition cannot be both true and false."

If, in studying the Scriptures, a violation of this definition can be proved, then we must unhappily conclude that Biblical contradictions do occur. Let us then examine this important definition in detail.

The Same Thing

First, the definition says that "it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be." "The same thing" are the words to be noted here. It seems incredible, but it is nonetheless true, that people often cite alleged discrepancies when in fact they have merely lost sight of whether the same person or thing is being spoken of in two propositions.

For example, in Acts 12:1-2, we are told that James was put to death by Herod. A number of years later, when the first apostolic council was held, we find that one of the main speakers was James (Acts 15:13-21). The rash and superficial critic might exclaim that here we have a contradiction, for it is impossible for an object - James - to be and not to be. Yes, but is it the *same* James who is spoken of in both instances? The James mentioned in Acts 12 was the son of Zebedee, while the James mentioned in the apostolic council was probably a brother of Jesus,

the author of the epistle of James. Hence, an apparent discrepancy vanishes the minute we carefully note that the persons in the two passages in question were not one and the same.

At the Same Time

The next term of the definition is “at the same time.” The time element in two propositions that apparently contradict each other is often overlooked. In Genesis 1. the perfection of the world is asserted as a fact. In Genesis 6, the perfection of the world is asserted to be not a fact. Some people have maintained that here the book of Genesis contradicts itself. But wittingly or unwittingly, these same people have withheld from their audience the important fact that one statement was made immediately after the creation of the world while the other was made later, at the time immediately preceding the Flood, and concerned the world after the Fall.

In the Same Sense

Many so-called contradictions disappear if the term “in the same sense” from the above definition is given due attention. Unbelievers have maintained that there is a discrepancy between the words of Jesus concerning John the Baptizer: “And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come” (Matt. 11:14), and the words of John the Baptist himself, who, when asked by a delegation from Jerusalem whether he was Elijah, answered, “I am not” (John 1:21).

Seemingly, we have here a contradiction. But are both statements made in the same sense? That is, does “being Elijah” have the same meaning in each case? Jesus, one notes, does not say, “This John is the old Elijah come back to earth.” Rather, He says, “This is Elijah who is to come,” the predicted Elijah, the Elijah of prophecy, the forerunner of the Messiah, whose coming was predicted in Mal. 4:5.

The meaning of the question addressed to John was whether he was the actual prophet Elijah who had lived in the days of Ahab and Jezebel. His answer, of course, was a prompt denial. Obviously, it is of the highest importance that we examine the *sense* in which being or not being is asserted of a person or thing.

Conflicting Attributes

According to our definition, where attributes are assigned to a person or thing, they must not be contradictory. Tall and short are contradictory attributes. A person cannot be tall and short at the same time.

The Bible says that God is stern and that He is kind - apparently contradictory qualities. But are they really? Many a judge, when on the bench and in contact with criminals, is stern but when face to face with suffering humanity, he shows himself kind, merciful and forgiving.

Christians are said to be holy and sinful at the same time. Yet, a little study reveals that these two attributes can and do exist side by side. The Scriptures inform us that Christians are both new creatures, born again by the spirit of God, and sinners born of sinful parents. According to their new nature they are holy; according to their old nature they are sinful. Hence, the two

qualities mentioned are not contradictory in the case of Christians.

Other Factors

In dealing with alleged contradictions, it is important to remember that the two propositions may *differ* from each other without being *contradictory*. In most cases, people who charge the Bible with containing discrepancies fail to distinguish between “difference” and “contradiction.” The statement that two angels (John 20:12), were in the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning is certainly different from the statement that one angel was there (Mark 16:5). But are the statements contradictory? Neither denies that the other is true. One is simply more complete than the other. The simple rule of difference vs. contradiction, a rule consonant with reason and common sense and applied every day in dealing with secular authors, usually forms the basis of our solution of so-called contradictions.

Now and then a discrepancy appears to exist between two passages of the Scriptures because one or the other or both have not been translated correctly or accurately, In such cases a person acquainted with the original text usually can dispose of the difficulty in short order.

As is well known, we no longer possess the original manuscripts of the prophets and the apostles, but we have merely copies of these manuscripts made by others. The possibility cannot be excluded that when these copies were prepared some errors crept in. We must not forget that it is the *original* text of the Bible that is inspired, and that of later copies inspiration can be predicated only insofar as they agree with the autographs (i.e., the original, handwritten manuscripts) of the apostles and prophets. The early copyists were very conscientious and painstaking, but they were not perfect.

In solving alleged discrepancies, it is important to remember that it is sufficient that a *possible* way of harmonizing the two texts in question may be pointed out. If one person says that Mr. Smith has white hair, while another speaks of his hair being black, these two remarks appear to be contradictory. However, the first speaker may be referring to Mr. Smith as an old man and the second may be describing him in his youth. Given that possibility, the charge that a discrepancy exists must be dropped until proof is brought that this explanation is not valid. In other words, an alleged contradiction disappears the minute a *possible* method of bringing the respective propositions into agreement is suggested.

Finally, we must emphasize that whenever we meet with an apparent contradiction in the Bible that defies our efforts to solve it, we must not conclude that a real discrepancy has been discovered. If we are unable to remove a certain difficulty, that does not prove that no one else can. What folly if a person declares that what appears puzzling to him or her must appear so to everybody else! Some things that seemed baffling to our ancestors no longer perplex us. It may well be that succeeding generations will have no trouble solving some things that are obscure to us today.

It is, after all, the height of presumption to exalt our little intellect above the wisdom of the great God. What is needed above all else in dealing with so-called Biblical discrepancies is the spirit of reverence, which bows submissively when the “King eternal, immortal, invisible..who

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alone is wise" (I Time. 1:17) has spoken. Whoever approaches the Scriptures with this attitude will be granted to understand many things that to the irreverent, haughty critic are like a book sealed with seven seals.