

Dealing With Apparent Contradictions

Apparent contradictions in the Bible are a challenge to the student of Scripture and the church leader who often has to give an account of the Bible's reliability.

Problems need to be faced and given honest answers.

Alleged Doctrinal Discrepancies

If we pay attention to the main purpose lying behind the writing of any book or any section of a book in the Bible we often find that many apparent contradictions clear up. Note these examples:

The Teaching On Justification In Paul And James

Are we saved by faith or by works? Compare Romans 3:28 with James 2:24. Luther rejected the Epistle of James as 'a right strawy epistle' because he thought it compromised the doctrine of justification by faith *alone*.¹

But the epistles of Romans and James agree with each other in that they see the initial experience of salvation realized by faith in Christ - and that the evidence of salvation is a changed life. Paul says in Ephesians, '**For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do**' (Eph. 2:10). Likewise, James recognizes new birth: '**[God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth**' (Jam. 1:18). James is aware of the teaching of Jesus - we are known by our fruit (see Mt. 7:20). Paul has to stress the importance of saving faith against the false teaching of Judaisers.

Eternal Life And The Keeping Of The Law

Jesus said to a young man, '**If you want to enter life, obey the commandments**' (Mt. 19:17). Does Jesus teach that a man 'enters into life' (is saved) by keeping the Jewish law? No. Salvation is always through faith in Christ (Acts 16:31). But, if a man is not contrite or repentant he requires the application of God's holy law to show him his need. Paul says the law makes us conscious of sin (Rom. 5:20) and, as such, '**was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith**' (Gal. 3:24).

Are We To Keep Holy Days?

Paul says, '**He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord**' (Rom. 14:6) and thereby appears to advocate the keeping of holy days. But elsewhere the apostle criticizes Christians who observe special days, months, seasons and years because it is turning to 'weak and miserable principles' (see Gal. 4:9, 10). To answer the question we need to recognize that in Romans Paul is dealing with 'disputable matters'. Some believers obviously want to keep the Jewish Sabbath and regulations with regard to meats. Paul rules that the kingdom of God is more than eating and drinking (v. 17), but recognizes that a man must have a clear conscience before God. (If a man's conscience rules that he must observe a holy day to the Lord, he can do no other.) Further, other Christians must respect such a conscience (cf. 1 Cor. 10:25-33). The situation in Galatians is rather different in that Judaisers are legislating that the Jewish law *should*

¹ A number of commentaries on Romans or James believe that the epistles represent two different beliefs held by the Gentile and Jewish churches on salvation.

be kept by Christians - and that this is necessary for salvation. Paul pleads with his readers not to compromise their faith in Christ, nor to become entangled with a yoke of bondage.

Apparent Discrepancies In Quotations

There are parallel passages in the Old Testament and the Gospels which seem to give contradictory accounts. These must be faced. Consider these examples:

The Kingdom Of God And The Kingdom Of Heaven

The kingdom of God is the central theme of Jesus' preaching according to the Synoptic Gospels. However, Matthew represents the Lord speaking of the 'kingdom of heaven', while Mark and Luke speak of the 'kingdom of God'. A comparison of Mt. 5:3 with Lk. 6:20 demonstrates that the two terms are the same. Matthew's choice of 'kingdom of heaven' is due to the Jewish practice of avoiding the direct use of the name of God. Even the Lucan account of 'angels rejoicing in the presence of God' (Lk. 15) may be a circumlocutory way of referring to God.

Peter's Confession At Caesarea Philippi

Peter's messianic confession appears to differ in the Synoptics. Study this synopsis:

'You are the Christ, 'You are the Christ' 'The Christ of God' the Son of the living God' (Mt. 16:16) (Mk. 8:29) (Lk. 9:20).

Here any discrepancy can be resolved by harmonizing the accounts and by noting that Matthew gives the most complete quotation, Mark the crucial element, and Luke a summary.

The Father's Plea In Mt. 17:14-16; Mk. 9:17-18; Lk. 9:38-40

The fact that spoken words in the Gospels have been translated from Aramaic into Greek, and then into a third language (e.g. , English), will account for some differences. However, the words may be harmonized.

Words May Be Spoken On Different Occasions

A comparison of the versions of the Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:9-13; Lk. 11:2-4) or the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-11; Lk. 6:20-22) will reveal differences. They will not be discrepancies if they were spoken on different occasions.² R. McQuilkin makes the point that in the biblical culture 'words do not need to be verbatim duplication; they only needed to convey the truth accurately'. He says there may be more than one way to express the same meaning accurately.

Differences In Quoting Scripture

Sometimes Scripture appears to be misquoted.

Quoting The Old Testament In The New Testament

Consider the prophecy that Peter applied to Judas: **'May his place be deserted; let there be no-one to dwell in it'** (Acts 1:20), which reads in the psalm: **'May their place be deserted; let there be no-one to dwell in their tents'** (Psa. 69:25). The fact is, some

² This will not be a sufficient explanation if we hold that Jesus taught by exact repetition.

quotations vary in translation because, whereas our versions translate the OT from the Hebrew, the NT translates the same text from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) before it is translated into English. Further, the NT often uses OT texts in a dynamic way.³

Textual Variants

None of the original OT or NT manuscripts are extant, so some differences in biblical texts can be due to the transmission of the text (its copying and translation). Modern translators are open and honest in that they declare significant alternative readings as footnotes or marginal notes. (The longer ending of Mark's Gospel provides an obvious example - see Mk. 16:8.) Different readings (or variants) may be found in Bibles containing *a critical apparatus*.⁴

This whole area of study will be discussed later. It is sufficient to say two things here: first, that we believe in the infallibility of the Scriptures 'as originally given'.

Then, secondly, that no known textual differences affect any doctrine of the Bible. This is a miracle. It is obvious that God has providentially preserved his Word.⁵

Alleged Historical Discrepancies

The Bible embraces ancient history. Archaeology often supports biblical details about places, people and events. Sometimes the biblical record is preferable to the archives of world empires, that often boast of quick and far-reaching conquests. Sir William Ramsay has supported Luke as a historian of first rank in his work related to Acts.⁶

Alleged Scientific Discrepancies

Naturalists and materialists often seek to discredit the biblical record of miracles. As R. McQuilkin says, miracles may be a stumbling block to the naturalist. Today, however, you cannot say that 'scientists' do not believe in miracles. Since Einstein, physicists, who are aware of a dynamic universe, are more open to the idea of random (and even divine) events.⁷ The problem is a philosophical one, not a scientific one. However, note R. McQuilkin's valid observation here:

A person's presuppositions concerning the nature of reality determine his view of the possibility of miracles. If God exists, then he is free to work. If such a God exists, and he chose to visit the natural world, it would be incredible if he did not possess more than human power. On the other hand, if one's presuppositions rule out the realm of the spirit or

³ In our cited verse, the plural 'their' is taken as 'he' in Acts. On this whole subject see W. C. Kaiser, *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New*, Chicago, Moody, 1985.

⁴ For example, K. Aland, et al. (eds.), *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd edition, London, United Bible Societies, 1975. In the case of alternative readings this edition indicates the variant that probably represents the original text by an alphabetical grading system, e.g. , A, B, C, D.

⁵ We have reasons for arguing for the preservation of the biblical text or texts, but not for the inspiration of a translation, such as the *Authorised Version* (which is an English translation).

⁶ See W. M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1920.

⁷ This new openness is demonstrated by the fact that a biologist recently said on the media (*The Nick Ross Show*, BBC 2, December 1999) that physicists will believe anything!

a God who is free to intervene in the affairs of man, no amount of historical or even 'scientific' (empirical) evidence would bring such a person to faith.⁸

Miracles Are A Historical Question

We cannot scientifically test biblical miracles at this point in time. But the historical evidence in support of them is strong - many well-qualified witnesses give testimony to them. Christianity is based on the miraculous resurrection of Jesus Christ – an event that is attested by many witnesses (see Lk. 1:1-4 and 1 Cor. 15:1-11).

The Miracles In The Bible Are In Keeping With Its Revelation Of God

In the OT God intervened in history in and through the ministry of people like Moses (see Ex. 7 - 12). In the New Testament the miracles of Jesus Christ and his church demonstrate the coming of the kingdom of God (Mt. 12:27). Biblical miracles compare sharply with those of pagan religions, and the love and compassion which is displayed through them seems to make them supernaturally natural. The miracles of Jesus in the canonical Gospels compare sharply with those portrayed in the apocryphal Gospels.

The Bible And Science

It is easy to see the two as being in conflict. However, the Bible has insight into the mystery of the universe, and provides answers to questions about our existence. It answers why-type questions in comparison to how-type ones, which are the concern of science. Why there is something as opposed to nothing is a question that only religion and philosophy can seek to answer.

⁸ R. McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, p. 247.