



ANSWERING THE **TOUGH QUESTIONS** ABOUT CHRISTIANITY

WHAT ABOUT ALL
THE CONTRADICTIONS
IN THE BIBLE?

LESSON #
7

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

At Mobberly, we believe the Bible is the Word of God partly because it is inerrant **as originally written and properly interpreted**. However, not everyone has a similar opinion of the Bible. Some people discount our belief that the Bible is the Word of God because they claim it has errors and contradictions. When faced with these accusations, we can choose one several options in response:

1. Ignore the issue.
2. Allow Satan to use our doubt to render us ineffective as a follower of Christ.
3. Ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom and dig deep into Scripture to find reasonable explanations.

THINK ABOUT THIS

How can you believe the Bible is true when there are so many contradictions?

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

1 CORINTHIANS 2:12-14; 2 PETER 3:15-16 (*All Scripture CSB unless otherwise noted*)

THE MAIN IDEA

What does it mean when Mobberly Baptist Church states on its website that we believe "The Holy Bible...has...truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter"? There are accounts in the Bible that seem to conflict with one another. Do these "errors" refute our claim that the Bible is true?

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How should we reply to people who claim the Bible is full of errors?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

It should come as no surprise to us that non-believers do not understand the Bible because:

1. They do not have the Holy Spirit to guide them. (1 Corinthians 2:12-14)

¹² Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God. ¹³ We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people. ¹⁴ But the person without the Spirit does not receive what comes from God's Spirit, because it is foolishness to him; he is not able to understand it since it is evaluated spiritually.

2. What's more, the "author of lies" confounds their thinking to create issues when there are none. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

¹⁵ Also, regard the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our dear brother Paul has written to you according to the wisdom given to him. ¹⁶ He speaks about these things in all his letters. There are some things hard to understand in them. The untaught and unstable will twist them to their own destruction, as they also do with the rest of the Scriptures.



START HERE

Satan knows that our faith is based on God's Word. Most of what we know about God and all we know about His desire to reconcile His relationship and fellowship with mankind through Jesus is recorded there. It should come as no surprise to us, therefore, that questioning the truth of the Bible is one of Satan's major attacks on our faith.

Genesis 3:3-5 records the "oldest trick in the book" (literally!) when Satan tempts Eve by causing her to doubt her belief that God has told her the truth:

³But about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, 'You must not eat it or touch it, or you will die.'" ⁴"No! You will certainly not die," the serpent said to the woman. ⁵"In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

CONVERSATION EXAMPLE

Your high school daughter tells you that a teacher told her he isn't a Christian because of all the errors and contradictions in the Bible. This lesson will help you work through this objection with her to bolster her confidence in the Bible as God's Word.

ADDING CLARITY

The website for the American Humanist Association states,

The Bible is an unreliable authority because it contains numerous contradictions. Logically, if two statements are contradictory, at least one of them is false. The biblical contradictions therefore prove that the book has many false statements and is not infallible [i.e., unable to err].¹

They include examples such as:

The contradictions start at the in the opening chapters of the Bible, where inconsistent creation stories are told. Genesis chapter 1 says the first man and woman were made at

¹ Sommer, J. (n.d.). *Search Some Reasons Why Humanists Reject the Bible*. American Humanist Association. Retrieved November 26, 2024, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/reasons-humanists-reject-bible/>.



the same time, and after the animals. But Genesis chapter 2 gives a different order of creation: man, then the animals, and then woman.²

There are even contradictions in the accounts of the resurrection – the supposed event that is the very foundation of the Christian religion. Mark 16:2 states that on the day of the resurrection, certain women arrived at the tomb at the rising of the sun. But John 20:1 informs us they arrived when it was yet dark. Luke 24:2 describes the tomb as open when the women arrived, whereas Matthew 28:1-2 indicates it was closed. Mark 16:5 declares that the women saw a young man at the tomb, Luke 24:4 says they saw two men, Matthew 28:2 reports they saw an angel, and John 20:11-12 claims they saw two angels.³

Concerning the death of Judas, the disloyal disciple, Matthew 27:5 states he took the money he had received for betraying Jesus, threw it down in the temple, and "went and hanged himself." To the contrary, Acts 1:18 claims Judas used the money to purchase a field and "falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out."⁴

What does it mean when we claim the Bible is inerrant? Inerrant can be defined as "wholly true." Paul Feinberg writes,

Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures *in their original autographs and properly interpreted* will be shown to be **wholly true** in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences.⁵ (emphasis added)

Justin Taylor discusses another aspect of inerrancy - precision. He references a chapter on "The Inerrancy of Scripture" in *The Doctrine of the Word of God* by John Frame that offers some important distinctions and clarifications. Frame points out that inerrancy suggests to many the idea of precision [free from any error] rather than its lexical meaning of mere truth. Frame points out that "precision" and "truth" overlap in meaning but are not synonymous:

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Barrett, M. (n.d.), *The Authority and Inerrancy of Scripture*. The Gospel Coalition. Retrieved on November 26, 2024, from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/authority-inerrancy-scripture/#:~:text=Paul%20Feinberg%20defines%20inerrancy%20as,life%20sciences.%E2%80%9D%20If%20this%20definition>.



A certain amount of precision is often required for truth, but that amount varies from one context to another. In mathematics and science, truth often requires considerable precision. If a student says that $6+5=10$, he has not told the truth. He has committed an error.

If you ask someone's age, the person's conventional response (at least if the questioner is entitled to such information!) is to tell how old he was on his most recent birthday. But this is, of course, imprecise. It would be more precise to tell one's age down to the day, hour, minute, and second. However, would that convey more truth? And, if one fails to give that much precision, has he made an error? I think not, as we use the terms truth and error in ordinary language.

Similarly, when I stand before a class and a student asks me how large the textbook is, say that I reply "400 pages," but the actual length is 398. Have I committed an error, or told the truth? I think the latter, for the following reasons:

- (a) In context, nobody expects more precision than I gave in my answer. I met all the legitimate demands of the questioner.
- (b) "400," in this example, actually conveyed more truth than "398" would have. "398" most likely would have left the student with the impression of some number around 300 [similar to prices like \$3.99], but "400" presented the size of the book more accurately.⁶

Taylor also quotes Frame as follows,

"So, in reading the Bible, it is important to know enough about the language and culture of the people to know what claims the original characters and writers were likely making."⁷

Frame concludes,

So, I think it is helpful to define inerrancy more precisely (!) by saying that inerrant language makes good on its claims. When we say that the Bible is inerrant, we mean that the Bible makes good on its claims [to proclaim truth].⁸

⁶ Taylor, J. (2013, November 21). *What Is Inerrancy and Why Do We Need the Word? Packer and Frame*. The Gospel Coalition. Retrieved November 26, 2024, from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/what-is-inerrancy-and-why-do-we-need-the-word-packer-and-frame/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.



Thus, Frame demonstrates that the level of precision required for inerrancy, or proclaiming truth, depends on many criteria, including the context, culture, and expectations of the audience. Inerrancy does not mean that the human authors of the Bible cannot:

1. Present different descriptions of the same events due to their different perspectives, audiences, and objectives.
2. Use linguistic tools such as metaphors, similes, paraphrases, approximations, hyperboles, etc.

GOSPEL FOCUS

When non-believers bring up "contradictions" in the Bible, these questions can be fruitful prompts for a few reasons:

1. They are interested in the topic because they brought it up and thus can be engaged in the conversation.
2. It allows us to dig deep into the Bible and reveal its truth.
3. It could lead to additional spiritual conversations and opportunities to share the gospel as we are confronted with questions that require more study. (e.g., "That is an interesting question. Why don't we both do some study on our own and get back together to discuss what we have discovered?")

Thus, we should not be intimidated and avoid these discussions because the Bible offers us the following assurances:

³What, then, are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? (Rom. 8:31)

¹¹Whenever they bring you before synagogues and rulers and authorities, don't worry about how you should defend yourselves or what you should say. ¹²For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what must be said. (Lk. 12:11-12)

They want to be teachers of the law, although they don't understand what they are saying or what they are insisting on. (1 Tim. 1:7)

REVIEW AND DISCUSS

There are several categories of errors that critics claim are in the Bible. Due to time constraints, we can only cover three categories in this lesson. However, over approximately 2000 years, the Christian faith has existed, and all these claims have been raised and answered. If your class



members are curious about other challenges to Biblical inerrancy, "When Critics Ask" by Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe is a good place to start.

1. DIFFERENT ACCOUNTS OF BIBLICAL EVENTS DON'T CONTRADICT ONE ANOTHER.

The critics claim the following two accounts contradict one another, and thus one must be false:

¹⁸ Now this man acquired a field with his unrighteous wages. He fell headfirst, his body burst open and his intestines spilled out. (Acts 1:18)

³ Then Judas, his betrayer, seeing that Jesus had been condemned, was full of remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders. ⁴ "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood," he said. "What's that to us?" they said. "See to it yourself!" ⁵ So he threw the silver into the temple and departed. Then he went and hanged himself. ⁶ The chief priests took the silver and said, "It's not permitted to put it into the temple treasury, since it is blood money." ⁷ They conferred together and bought the potter's field with it as a burial place for foreigners. (Matt. 27:3-7)

Matthew, writing to the Jews, focused on the involvement of the Jewish leaders in the incident. In a sense, they purchased the field for Judas since they did not want to keep his tainted money. In Acts, Luke records Peter's summary of the event as he starts the conversation about a replacement for Judas. Because funds provided by Judas were used to buy the field, Peter attributes the purchase to Judas.

As for the different accounts of Judas' death, these two accounts can be complementary, as Geisler and Howe point out in their book *When Critics Ask*. Judas hung [sic] himself, as Matthew states, but for some reason, fell from a sufficient height and/or onto something below (possibly after several days) to rupture his abdomen. Luke may have highlighted this detail of Judas' demise because he was a physician.. Judas hung himself, as Matthew states, but for some reason, fell from a sufficient height and/or onto something below (possibly after several days) to rupture his abdomen. ⁹ Luke may have highlighted this detail of Judas' demise because he was a physician.

⁹ Geisler, N. & Howe, T. (1992). *When Critics Ask* (p. 361). Wheaton IL SP Publications.



Many supposedly contradictory biblical accounts critics claim can be explained this way. For example, the differences in the resurrection account can be resolved thusly:

1. **The different numbers and appearances of the angels at the tomb:** Some accounts describe the angels as looking like young men, while others don't provide that much detail. As for the number, where there are two, there is always one. Some of the gospels focus on the one angel that spoke.
2. **Different amounts of light that morning (i.e., "still dark" vs. "at sunrise "):** Sunrise can include times when it is still dark with only a hint of light on the eastern horizon.
3. **Was the tomb open or closed when the women arrived?** Matthew writes that the women started for the tomb that Sunday morning and describes how the tomb was opened. He doesn't specify that the women had arrived before the tomb was opened. Luke's account clarifies that the angel opened the tomb before the women arrived.

Interestingly, critics use different accounts of the same events in the gospels to say the Bible has errors. They also discount the Bible by claiming that the consistency between the various gospel accounts shows that the gospels are just copies of one account.

DISCUSS

What other biblical accounts are you aware of that differ in their details? How can you reconcile the accounts so they are not contradictory? (Possible answers: Various personal responses)

2. IMPRECISE NUMBERS, QUOTES, ETC., ARE NOT BIBLICAL ERRORS.

As mentioned above, varying degrees of precision in language do not create an error if the truth is properly communicated.

For example, Matthew (17:1) and Mark (9:2) record that Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the mount where He was transfigured. This occurred six days after He told the disciples that some of them would see the "*kingdom of God come in power*" (Mk. 9:1). Luke 9:28 states the timing was "*[a]bout 8 days after this conversation*" (emphasis added). Luke's approximation includes the precise number given by Matthew and Mark.

As Giesler points out in the book *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*,

Occasionally, a general truth is mentioned without citing a specific text. For example, Matthew says that Jesus moved to Nazareth 'that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "he shall be called a Nazarene" (Matt 2:23). Notice, Matthew quotes no



given prophet, but rather "prophets" in general. Several [OT] texts speak of the Messiah's lowliness. To be from Nazareth, a Nazarene, was a byword for low status in the Israel of Jesus' day" ("Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" John 1:46).¹⁰

DISCUSS

Can you think of other biblical accounts that appear to have contradictory numbers or imprecise quotes? (Possible answers: Various personal responses)

3. **SCRIBAL ERRORS AND MISTRANSLATIONS WERE NOT IN THE ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS AND DO NOT AFFECT THE TRUTH BEING COMMUNICATED.**

Critics like to point out that differences in numbers are found in some English Bible translations, thus proving that the Bible contains errors. In some cases, the "errors" may indicate that various writers of the Bible expressed different perspectives. Despite these different perspectives, truth is still communicated.

For example, 1 Kings 4:26 indicates Solomon had 40,000 stalls for his horses, while 2 Chronicles 9:25 reports this number as 4,000 stalls. From other consistent information provided in 1 Kings 10:26 and 2 Chronicles 1:14 about the number of chariots Solomon owned (1,400) and the number of horsemen in his army (12,000), it was apparently unclear to the scribes which number of stalls was correct.

Perhaps they both were true since neither account specifies where the stalls were located (2 Chronicles could have counted the stalls in Jerusalem while 1 Kings included stalls in the storage cities for his chariots and the cities for his horsemen (1 Kgs 9:19). Also, the Hebrew word for the number 40 (rbym) and the number 4 (rbh) are very close. The manuscript being copied may not have been clear. Without definitive proof of one number being correct and the other incorrect, the scribes faithfully made their copies. In any event, the truth of the text is properly conveyed: Solomon was wealthy and had many horses.

Sometimes, we see differences in the text due to improper translation. These differences were not in the original language and manuscripts, and an increased understanding of the ancient languages has resulted in the enhanced translations we have now.

¹⁰ Geisler, N. (1998). *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (p. 78) Baker Academic.



An example is found in the King James Version of the Bible, which records in 2 Kings 8:26 that Ahaziah was 22 when he began his reign in Judah. However, 2 Chronicles 22:2 states that he was 42 when he assumed the throne. This is a case of mistranslation because Ahaziah was obviously 22 since 2 Kings 8:16-25 states that his father Jehoram was 32 when he became king of Judah. Jehoram reigned for 8 years between the 5th and 12th years of the Northern Kingdom king's reign. Subsequent translations of the Hebrew have corrected this passage (e.g., Christian Standard Bible, Amplified Bible, New American Standard Bible, etc.).

As we learned last week, Bible scholars point to the many ancient manuscripts available today to support the claim that we can determine the original text from these copies. However, critics point out numerous textual "errors" in these copies (some have estimated about 200,000). Geisler states in the *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*,

First of all, these are not "errors" but variant readings, the vast majority of which are strictly grammatical [e.g., spelling, punctuation, etc.]. Second, these readings are spread throughout more than 5,300 manuscripts, so that a variant spelling of one letter of one word in one verse in 2,000 manuscripts is counted as 2,000 "errors." ¹¹

Textual scholars Westcott and Hort have estimated that only 1 in 60 variants has significance. This would leave a text 98.33 percent pure.¹² Philip Schaff calculated that, of the 150,000 variants known in his day, only 400 changed the meaning of the passage, only fifty were of real significance, and not even one affected "an article of faith or precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of Scripture teaching." ¹³

DISCUSS

Why must new believers learn about these Bible "difficulties" and study them sufficiently to explain to those who ask? (Possible answers: Various personal responses)

REFLECT ON THE LESSON

¹¹ Ibid. p 532

¹² For more information on these 19th-century theologians see "Who were Westcott and Hort, and what did they have to do with the text of the Bible?"

(n.d.). *Who were Westcott and Hort, and what did they have to do with the text of the Bible?* Got Questions; Got Questions Ministries. Retrieved November

29, 2024, from <https://www.gotquestions.org/Westcott-and-Hort.html>.

¹³ Schaff, P. (2016). *Companion to the Greek Testament and the English Version* (pp. 177). Wentworth Press.



A good question for non-believers is: "Why do you think these 'errors' and 'contradictions' are still in the Bible? After all, these issues have been raised (and answered) since before the canon was assembled."

Many critics of the Bible also claim that it is full of myths and legends due to the time between when the events occurred and when they were recorded. Some also claim that prophecies were added after the actual events occurred. Manuscript evidence refutes these claims. However, if a critic holds the position that the Bible has been edited over time, it seems a bit farfetched that these editors didn't also resolve the so-called "contradictions."

More reasonable positions include the following:

1. Ancient readers of Scripture didn't see these issues as contradictions because their culture and language understood the truth being communicated and/or didn't require the expectations about precision that current critics impose.
2. Over the years, the scribes who made copies of the Scriptures were so dedicated to their craft that they felt they had no right to edit the text.

DISCUSS

How does the integrity of the Bible impact your daily walk with Christ? (Possible answers: Various personal responses)

RESPOND

The early church father, Augustine, is quoted (by Geisler) as writing,

"If we are perplexed by any apparent contradiction in Scripture, it is not allowable to say, 'The author of this book is mistaken'; but either the manuscript is faulty or the translation is wrong, or you have not understood." ¹⁴-Augustine

Thus, a Bible "difficulty" can be an exciting opportunity for us to seek God's wisdom and allow the Holy Spirit to enlighten us to the solution to the "difficulty." James wrote,

Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him. (Jas. 1:5)

¹⁴ Geisler, N. (1998) *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (p. 74) Baker Academic.



APPLY

Formulate a plan to handle situations when you are asked about a biblical "difficulty." What opportunity would you see? What tone of voice would you use?

LOOKING TO NEXT WEEK...

HOW CAN YOU BELIEVE THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST IS A HISTORICAL FACT?