

The Bible Is Full of Contradictions

Christianity is the religion of the Bible. If the Bible is credible and trustworthy, then so is Christianity. If the Bible is neither accurate nor consistent, then it takes Christianity down along with it. That is why it is such a serious objection when someone says that the Bible is full of contradictions. If that, in fact, is true, it significantly undermines the credibility of this book. And more significant than that, it undermines the credibility of the entire Christian faith.

Let's look at some examples of biblical contradictions. The first, Mark 15:25, is the narrative that is telling the story of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Obviously, because the crucifixion and the cross are central to all the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith, it is especially important that this story be a reliable one. Mark 15:25 says, "It was the third hour when they crucified him." That is when they crucified Jesus. Now make a comparison with me to John 19:14. To see the context, let's read from John 19:12 -18:

Pilot tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

When Pilot heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour.

"Here is your king," Pilot said to the Jews.

But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!"

"Shall I crucify your king?" Pilot asked.

"We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered.

Finally Pilot handed him over to be crucified and so the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, He went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgatha). Here they crucified him, and with him two others — one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

Mark 15:25 says that Jesus was crucified the third hour while John 19:14 says that Jesus was crucified after the sixth hour. So which is it?

Let us look at another example. This time it's referring to the number of angels who appeared at the tomb where Jesus was buried and where the Bible reports he was raised from the dead. Matthew 28:1-6 tells us:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightening, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."

Now stay with me and take a look at Luke chapter 24. Again, we'll read the parallel accounts or another angle on what happened at the tomb, this time written by Luke. Luke 24:1-8 says:

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed

like lightening stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among

the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words.

Okay, so which was it? One angel as in Matthew 28 or two angels as in Luke 24? You begin to wonder if the Bible authors can't count up to two, can they get anything straight? Is anything that they say believable?

Hold that thought and let's look at another

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example. The third example is rated PG-13 for it describes the very violent death of Judas Iscariot, the follower of Jesus who betrayed him to the authorities so Jesus could be tried and crucified. The first account of Judas' death appears in Matthew 27:3-7:

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."

"What is that to us," they replied? "That's your responsibility."

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

The Chief Priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners.

One last place to look is the comparative story written by Luke in Acts 1:18-19. This is the R-rated account of Judas' death:

(With the reward that he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

What do you do if you are the medical examiner for the city of Jerusalem and have to write a cause of death on his death certificate? Do you put that he hung himself, or do you put that he fell down and that his insides were torn open?

There are a lot of considerations that need to be made when responding to accusations of biblical contradictions. Let us look at two of them. The first one is to recognize that differences aren't necessarily contradictions.

There is a rule of logic called *The Law of Non-contradiction* that says that something cannot be true and not true at the same time. That would be contradictory. Another way to say it is that something can't be Object A and not Object A at the same moment. You can't have two identical assertions that are opposite to each other.

However, there may be differences in description without contradiction. We all live with that all the time. One day I made an appointment to have lunch with a man that I had gone to graduate school with and had not seen for a long time. We planned to meet at a well-known restaurant for lunch at noon.

I got there in time, got a table and waited for over an hour, but he didn't show up. I finally decided this shouldn't be a total waste so I ordered lunch and ate by myself. Several weeks later someone said to me, "I hear you stood up Keith for lunch." I insisted that I was the one who had been stood up. I was sufficiently bothered that my character was being impugned that I got on the telephone and called him up and said, "What's the deal? I was at the restaurant in Bloomington on time. You didn't show up and now you're telling people that I stood you up for lunch." He said, "Bloomington? I was at the restaurant in St. Louis Park at noon just as we agreed." So, he was in one place and I was in the other place and both of us were saying we'd been stood up. What seemed to be a contradiction was actually a difference.

The same thing is a frequent issue in courtroom testimony. Just because there are differences in statements that are made by alternate witnesses does not necessarily mean that one is lying or that what both of them say is untrue. It is the responsibility of the judge, the attorneys and the jury to seek to reconcile those differences and to understand exactly what happened. Keep that consideration in mind when looking at accusations of contradictions in the Bible.

The second consideration is simply to give the Bible a fair chance. When I have had people say to me that the Bible is full of contradictions, I have responded typically with two questions:

"Have you read the Bible?"

"What are the contradictions that you are talking about?"

I'm not trying to give the impression that there are not issues within the Bible that are sometimes difficult to understand or statements that can be difficult to reconcile. However, at least in my experience when I've asked those questions, most of the people that have claimed there are a lot of contradictions in the Bible have admitted to me that they have never read the Bible and have been unable to sight any contradictions as an example of what they thought. That is simply not fair. It is certainly okay to have doubts and to accuse the Bible of having errors, but it is not fair to make those accusations without first reading the Bible, without knowing what those alleged contradictions are and without giving a fair chance for a reasonable response.

What does it mean to give a fair chance? Well, it certainly means reading the Bible. It means interpreting the Bible the same way that we would interpret any other book or any other piece of literature — recognizing that poetry has to be understood

as poetry, that history has to be understood as history, that speeches have to be understood as speeches. Giving the Bible a fair shot is also to acknowledge that the Bible was written a long time ago, by forty different authors, over a span of thousands of years and that the Bible that we read has been translated into English from Hebrew and from Greek and a little bit from Aramaic. To give it a fair chance is to understand that things may not have been communicated as clearly to us as we would choose for them to be communicated. That may require us sometimes to do some extra digging and to give some extra effort.

To give the Bible a fair chance means that we listen with an open mind to explanations of contradictions that may not be contradictions at all — that in fact may be instead simply differences. Giving a fair chance means that we put forth at least a reasonable effort to not exaggerate seeming contradictions but at least look for ways of understanding them so those statements can be reconciled. I think that is the fair chance that we would give to other people and to other writings.

With these two considerations in mind, that differences and contradictions are not the same thing and the need to give the Bible a fair chance, let's go back to the three examples that we read earlier. In Mark 15:25 we read that Jesus was crucified "the third hour." John 19:14 says that it was "about the sixth hour" when the trial before the Roman Governor of Pilate was ended. How do we compare and reconcile the two?

First of all, John says that it was about the sixth hour. He didn't set a precise time. It was an estimate, except I'm not sure that helps very much because an estimate that is three hours different is a significant variance. It may be more helpful to understand that there were different ways of calculating time in 1st century Palestine. For example, in terms of talking about what hour it was, the Jewish tradition was to start with sunrise which is a logical approach. When Mark talks about the third hour, if the Jews were calculating that sunrise is about 6:00 a.m., that would mean that the crucifixion of Jesus took place at 9 a.m. in the morning.

The Romans, however, calculated the beginning of the day the same way we do now in the United States, at midnight, not at dawn. When John says

that the trial ended about the sixth hour it is certainly reasonable that the arrangements to go from the trial to the crucifixion could take up to three hours or bring us from 6 a.m. to about 9 a.m.. Then let's also allow for the fact that these people did not have watches, much less digital ones, and that they had to estimate time by the sun. They did have sundials, however, but you would have to go and find the sundial to find exactly what time it says. They would commonly talk about a whole block of time by one number. They might refer to the block of time from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. as the 6:00 time hour or from 9 to noon as the 9:00 block of time. When you start putting those pieces together, then you see that it may not be as great a variance as it seems to be. It's possible that Mark referred to the morning block by 9 a.m. while John referred to the morning block as "about noon."

How does that compare to what we do? Suppose I were to ask you when did Princess Diana die in a car crash? You might say, "That happened Saturday night, because I remember. I was just about ready to go to bed, we were watching this TV show, and they interrupted and a news flash came on and then we switched to a news channel. We followed it all the way to the point that the announcement was made late Saturday night. I will always remember when it happened." Now if you have a conversation with someone from Paris or London and you'd ask, "When did Princess Diana die?" the answer would be, "Sunday morning. I remember

someone waking me up with a telephone call and saying, "Turn on the television and see what has happened." So which was it? Did she die Saturday night or did she die Sunday morning? The difference was in the time zones.

If we recognize that there are different

ways to calculate time, it is only fair to allow Mark and John in their context to also do it and to report appropriately something that may be different but is not necessarily contradictory.

But what about the apparent contradiction between Matthew and Luke about the number of angels at Jesus' tomb? Matthew 28 tells about there being one angel at Jesus' tomb and Luke 24 says that there were two angels. However, talking about one doesn't mean that there weren't two.

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Suppose that I'm in conversation with you and I tell you about speaking to about 600 people at Wooddale Church on Sunday morning. Later during the week you come across someone from Wooddale Church that says, "Last Sunday at Wooddale Church there were close to 4,000 people there." And you say, "Wait a minute, I heard Leith Anderson say something about 600 and now you're talking about more like 4,000. That's quite a significant discrepancy!" Except when I was talking to you, I was referring to the 8:30 service, not the thousands of people that attended the other services. You begin to understand that just because I refer to some doesn't mean that I've excluded all.

In both narratives by Matthew and Luke, there was only one angel that was doing the talking. When Matthew reports what happens, he talks about one angel because he was the one that was talking; he didn't say that there were two or ten or twelve others, he reports the one. By contrast, when Luke reports the story he says there were two, although one apparently did the talking for the two. A contradiction? I don't think so. It is just that one counted the talker and the other counted everybody.

Or, let us go back to the PG-13 story that tells about the death of Judas. Matthew 27:5 says that Judas hanged himself. Acts 1:18 says that he fell headlong and that his body was ripped open. The question is, could not both of those things have happened? Suppose that Judas hanged himself from a tree branch that extended over the valley of Hinnom which is right outside of Jerusalem. Shortly afterwards, the rope or the branch could have broken and his body would then fall 25 or more feet to the rocky surface below where the overhang of those trees were and still are. Now you say, "Wait a minute, that is getting a little far-fetched, isn't it?" Well, maybe not really. Compare that to the story of man who also chose to commit suicide standing on a building ledge. He shot himself with a revolver, fell off the ledge and careened down to the pavement below. One person may say, "He obviously died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound." Another person says, "Wait a minute, he fell off the building to this horrific death down below." Different reports? Yes. Contradictory? No. After all, the cause of death may be complex. Medical examiners sometimes find that there are multiple causes that lead to a person's death or it is difficult to specifically define the exact reason for a person's death. Complexity means that there are multiple variables and there may well have been multiple variables in the death of Judas,. So it doesn't seem fair to accuse

the Bible of a contradiction that really is a difference of emphasis.

Now let me just add some final advice. If you or someone with whom you are in conversation is serious about this, serious about the credibility of the Bible, then consider some personal advice. The first piece of personal advice is to read the Bible. Fair is fair, so read the Bible. Because the Old Testament is more difficult to read and to understand, it is probably best for most to begin their experience in reading the Bible with the New Testament rather than begin in the Old Testament.

A second piece of advice to each reader is to pray and ask God to speak to you through the Bible. Someone doing that may say, "How do you pray to a God when you're not sure you believe Him or that He even exists or that He is connected to the Bible?" The prayer is a simple prayer that says, "God if you are there and if this is your book, then will you please speak to me through it?" Repeat that prayer with each reading of the Bible.

Finally, write down any concerns that come up — any contradictions, anything that is exceptionally difficult to understand — write them down and make a legitimate effort to find satisfactory answers. I know that there are people who can and will do something like this and at the conclusion say, "I just don't believe it. I don't believe the Bible after all." That is fair. They've given the Bible a chance. However, for large numbers of people who have embarked on precisely that process and journey, they have found, and you may discover, that the Bible is truthful, it is powerful, it is transforming. It is the word of God. It is clearly worth the effort to read it, to understand it and to treat it supernaturally with the recognition that through it God will speak.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
612-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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