

“You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt.22: 29)

+ Lecture IV: Alleged Discrepancies of the Holy Bible +

First, it would be prudent to speak of the **burden of proof**. It is a general rule in philosophy that the person who proposes must explain and defend. If someone says that “X exists”, the burden is on that person to provide a case for the existence of “X”. The burden is not on the one who denies that “X” exists. For how can one prove a negative? In this case, it is the critics who propose. They claim that the Bible is full of contradictions, and often propose a lengthy list of examples. Now, as Christians, we cannot prove that something is NOT a contradiction (i.e., one cannot prove that “X” [contradictions] do not exist). Instead, all that is required of us is to come up with a reasonable explanation so that what is purported to be a contradiction is not necessarily a contradiction. If we succeed, then the critics’ assertion that “X” and “Y” are contradictory is no longer an obvious truth, instead it becomes merely a belief that someone else has.

At this point the critics might cry “foul” and note that it is the Christians who propose. They are the ones who claim the Bible is inerrant, thus they should demonstrate this. But how? How does one demonstrate a document is without error? At this point, the Christians need only learn from the methodology of modern atheism. Many atheists do not argue that God does not exist, because they realize that one cannot demonstrate the nonexistence of something. Instead, they take a more agnostic position, and argue that there is no proof for God’s existence, thus they don’t possess God-belief. In the same way, the believer in inerrancy cannot demonstrate the nonexistence of contradictions in the Bible. After all, the Bible contains 31,173 verses. If we were to compare only couplets, where any one verse is juxtaposed against any other, one could write 971,750,000 couplets. Thus, by considering only couplets, there are almost one billion potential Bible contradictions! Surely, it is not reasonable to demand that a believer in inerrancy plod through one billion potential contradictions to prove negatives in every case. Instead, the believer in inerrancy can argue there is no proof for the existence of contradictions in the Bible, thus they don’t believe in Biblical errancy (thus they believe in inerrancy – being without error).

D) Erroneous Assumptions Employed by Critics:

a) A popular mistake is to take things out of context. It is easy to make contradictions when there are none by violating the context of the passage(s) in question. More significant is violating the context of belief. Christian understanding is a synthesis of many beliefs, and Biblical teachings are often interpreted through this background belief, which has been synthesized. Such a synthesis may include other facts, not directly related to the contradiction in question, but nevertheless, relevant. When the critic proposes a contradiction, he ought to do so from within the context of this background belief. By failing to do this, he/she merely imposes alien concepts as if they belong.

+ Say that Joe is recorded as saying that Sam is not his son. But elsewhere, he is recorded as saying that Sam is his son. An obvious contradiction, right? But what if one’s background belief about Joe and Sam includes the belief that Sam is Joe’s adopted son?

By ignoring the context this belief provides, one perceives contradictions where there are none.

b) The critics assume that the Biblical accounts are exhaustive in all details and intended to be precise. This is rarely the case. As such, the critics build on a faulty assumption and perceive contradictions where there are none. This is related to the context problem. Let's say that the only records of Joe speaking about Sam are the two cases where he affirms and denies that Sam is his son. Certainly Joe said many other things in his life, but they were not recorded – including the fact that he adopted a boy and named him Sam.

+ Another real life case concerns a newspaper report that lists the time of birth of twin babies. The first was born at 1:40 AM, and the second was born at 1:10 AM. If this account did not have the added detail that the birth occurred during the night in which daylight saving ended, it would APPEAR to be a real contradiction/error. But it was not. You have to know the whole story. **Since the accounts in the Bible are rarely intended as exhaustive and precise descriptions, it would seem prudent to see if different accounts complement, rather than contradict.**

c) The critics seem to assume that the Bible is written in one genre (a literal and descriptive account). While the Bible does indeed contain literal and descriptive accounts (which, of course, are not exhaustive in detail), it also contains many other styles of composition: the psalms communicate through poetry, many teachings/prophesies are in the form of hyperbole and metaphor, parables contain deeper messages, etc. **Since the Bible is actually many books of different genres, the critics' assumption leads them astray if it is used to see contradictions.**

d) This point is related to the one above, namely, the contradictions are often contradictions as a function of a particular interpretation. Thus, the contradiction would exist only if the critic applies the correct interpretation, and this is often not the case. **For example, in many situations, the critics use particular incidents or rules of thumb and interpret these as absolute principles.**

e) Sometimes the critics equivocate. He/she uses the same sense of a word in two sets of verses, when sometimes it is the case that the word has two meanings. **For example, peace could mean lack of war or it can mean an internal sense of tranquility.** (Check out example 8 below)

f) The critics often read contradictions into the accounts. This is often a function of all the points listed above, but sometimes it is due to plain ignorance. **In other cases, it is due to the fact that aspects of Hebrew idiom are not always captured in English translations.**

g) The critics assume that the believer in Biblical Inerrancy also believes that copyists could make no mistake. It is our belief that the original documents were without error, and were copied as faithfully as humanly possible. **Thus, copyist errors are of little concern and are unlikely to result in significant changes.**

h) Finally, the critics engage in black and white either/or thinking when a both/and approach seems to be called for. **This can be tricky, so check out the first example mentioned below.**

(Adapted from Andrew Tong, *Intro to Contradictions*, www.ugcs.caltech.edu)

II) Examples of Purported Contradictions:

We encourage the reader to keep in mind the above points as we go through some examples of alleged contradictions.

- 1. “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him” (Prov.26: 4)
“ Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes” (Prov.26: 5)**

The first things to note is that these seemingly contradictory teachings are right next to each other. Could the Holy Spirit contradict Himself? Of course not. In fact, it is very illuminating that these teachings are closely tied. They highlight the fact that some Biblical admonitions need not fall under the “either/or” criteria, but can be more properly understood in term of “both/and”. In debating various non-Christians or non-Orthodox, you may encounter foolish responses and name-calling. You can either choose not to respond or ignore the foolishness. At such times, you follow (Prov.26: 4). In other instances, you respond to the foolishness of your antagonist in the hopes that he/she can perceive the folly of their approach when you refute it. At such times, you are following (Prov.26: 5). In any case you need the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

- 2. “All the persons of the house of Jacob who went to Egypt were seventy” (Gen.46: 27)**

“Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy five people” (Acts 7: 14)

In (Gen.46: 26, 27), it is written, “All the persons who went with Jacob to Egypt, who came from his body, **besides Jacob’s sons’ wives**, were sixty-six persons in all. And the sons of Joseph who were born to him in Egypt were two persons. All the persons of the house of Jacob who went to Egypt were seventy”.

Notice that in the Holy Book of Genesis the wives are not counted, but Jacob, Joseph and his two sons are. This gives a total of $66 + 4$ (Jacob, Joseph, 2 sons)= 70.

In (Acts 7: 14), it is written that Joseph sent and called his father **and all his relatives**. Notice that Joseph his wife and his two sons are not counted since they were already in Egypt, Jacob is not counted as the verse implies, but the wives are now added to the count giving a total of $66 + 9$ (Judah’s and Simeon’s wives had already died acc to Gen.38: 12; 46: 10)=75.

- 3. “And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand” (Num.25: 9)
“Nor let us commit sexual immorality as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell” (1Corinth. 10: 8)**

This is pretty straightforward. The Holy Book of Numbers mentions the TOTAL number of people who died by the plague while St. Paul mentions the number of those who fell in one day only.

- 4. They claim that there is a contradiction between the sequence of the three temptations of our Lord Jesus Christ that are mentioned in the Holy Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke (Matthew 4: 1-11; Luke 4: 1-13)**

St. Matthew mentioned the temptations in chronological order while St. Luke mentioned them according to the location where they occurred. Therefore, the temptations that took place in the wilderness were mentioned together before the temptation that took place in Jerusalem.

5. “Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself. But the chief priests took the silver pieces and said; ‘It is not lawful to put them in the treasury, because they are the price of blood.’ And they took counsel and bought with them the potter’s field, to bury strangers in” (Matt.27: 5)

“Now this man (Judas) purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling head-long, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out” (Acts 1: 18)

There are two questions that are raised by these two verses; first, what happened to Judas? The above verses do not contradict but rather complement each other; Judas hanged himself as mentioned in the Holy Gospel of Matthew then his body fell down and all his entrails gushed out as mentioned in the Holy Book of Acts. Second, who bought the Potter’s field? The chief priests physically went and paid the money and bought the field as St. Matthew mentioned but St. Luke wanted to link Judas to this act because he was the reason for it in the first place (a similar incidence is mentioned in the following example).

6. “Now it was the preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, ‘Behold your king!’...So he delivered Him to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led Him away”(John 19: 14-16)

“Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him” (Mark 15: 25)

When exactly was our Lord crucified? St. John said the sixth hour and the Church teaches us to remember the crucifixion of the Lord every time we pray the prayer of the sixth hour, so why is St. Mark saying that He was crucified on the third hour? On the third hour the Jews cried ‘Crucify Him, Crucify Him’ and even though the Roman soldiers physically crucified our Lord on the sixth hour (as mentioned by St. John), St. Mark wanted to put the blame on the Jews who delivered Him to Pilate. In other words St. Mark is saying, ‘Now it was the third hour, and they (the Jews) crucified Him’.

7. “Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen” (Mark 16: 2)

“On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark...” (John 20: 1)

Had the sun risen or was it still dark? St. John mentioned the beginning of the journey when it was still dark and St. Mark mentioned the end of the journey when the sun had risen. Some have said that St. John mentioned the first visit to the tomb and St. Mark mentioned the second visit. Again no real contradiction.

8. “And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one” (Acts 9: 7)

“Now those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me” (Acts 22: 8)

The word ‘hear’ in the second verse means ‘to understand’ (Matt.11: 15; Jn.8: 9). Therefore, the men who were with St. Paul on the road to Damascus heard a voice but did not comprehend what was said. Of course there is no contradiction between seeing the light in the second verse and seeing no one in the first.

(Adapted from Fr. Manasseh Yohanna, *‘Solutions to the Problems of the Holy Book’*)
