

# Bible Contradictions

## “The Skeptics’ Impotent Axe”<sup>1</sup>

### I. Introduction.

- A. Likely, we all have encountered those who have rejected the Bible as inspired truth “because it’s full of contradictions, you know.”
1. Equally likely, these objectors have been unable to substantiate their arguments with even a single example of contradiction.
  2. Instead, their opposition has merely echoed the vocal skeptics who have catered to their cravings for rejecting God and the authority of His Word.
- B. This debate once reserved for the realm of “higher criticism” has become mainstream.
1. A simple Google search for “Bible contradictions” yielded “About 3,070,000 results (0.19 seconds).”
  2. The top seven results, and eight of the top ten, advance the skeptics’ agenda.
    - a) Introducing his list of 60 alleged contradictions, Jim Merritt wrote, “The Bible is riddled with repetitions and contradictions, things that the Bible bangers would be quick to point out in anything that they want to criticize.” (Merritt)
    - b) Introducing his list of 300+ alleged inconsistencies/contradictions, Donald Morgan wrote, “These lists are meant to identify possible problems in the Bible, especially problems which are inherent in a *literalist* or *fundamentalist* interpretation.” (Morgan, emp. in orig.)
    - c) From EvilBible.com: “If the Bible was divinely inspired, then why would it have so many really obvious contradictions?” — 205 listed. (Biblical)
    - d) From thethinkingatheist.com: “Browse the points below and ask yourself if the bible is truly a perfect, accurate, divinely-inspired document for living.” (Bible)
    - e) Dan Barker, a preacher turned atheist: “The problem is not with human limitations, as some claim. The problem is the bible itself. People who are free of theological bias notice that the bible contains hundreds of discrepancies.” (Barker) — 33 cited examples.
    - f) Another 474 are listed on the Skeptic’s Annotated Bible (Contradictions), with a link to “1001 Contradictions & Discrepancies in the Christian Bibles.”
    - g) One organization, The Reason Project (reasonproject.org), has gone so far as to graphically depict the 439 contradictions they have identified in the Scriptures.
  3. Consistently, these are claimed as only a representative sample of thousands more. (Barker)
  4. “An organized and systematic plan to poison the public mind by scattering broadcast...a cheap and virulent infidel literature. That these nefarious attempts result, in far too many cases, in subverting the religious faith and the morals of the young, there can be no question. And the means employed by the friends of virtue for exposing and defeating these ‘devices of Satan’ seem, I regret to say, less efficient than is desirable.” (Haley v)

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<sup>1</sup> Bromling

5. As illustrated in the case of Bart Ehrman (*Misquoting Jesus*), one who begins to see “errors” in the Bible has set a course toward shipwrecked faith.
6. In his book *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins asks, “Do these people never open the book they believe is literal truth? Why don’t they notice those glaring contradictions?” (120)

C. In the face of such challenges, it is our job to open the book and give answers. (1 Pet. 3:15)

1. I believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. (1 Cor. 2:12-13; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21)
2. But if charges of error, contradiction, and discrepancy can be sustained against the Bible, then my faith in inspiration rests on shaky ground.
  - a) “Nothing is to be gained by overlooking, evading, or shrinking from them. Truth has no cause to fear scrutiny, however rigid and searching. Besides, the enemies of the Bible will not be silent, even if its friends should hold their peace.” (Haley vi)
  - b) “Of the importance of our theme, little need be said. Clearly it bears a close and vital relation to the doctrine of inspiration. God, who is wisdom and truth, can neither lie nor contradict himself. Hence, should it be discovered that falsehoods or actual contradictions exist in the Bible, our conclusion must be, that, at any rate, these things do not come from God; that so far the Bible is not divinely inspired.” (Haley 3)

D. It is not within the purview of this study to examine:

1. Any alleged contradictions/discrepancies between the Bible and secular history.
2. Any alleged contradictions/discrepancies between the Bible and science.
3. *All* alleged contradictions/discrepancies in which the Bible is said to be in conflict with itself (nearly 900 addressed in Haley’s book).

E. This study will focus on:

1. Defining “contradictions” — what does and does not constitute a discrepancy in Scripture.
2. Identifying the origins of alleged contradictions in Scripture.
3. Establishing principles by which to examine and resolve alleged contradictions.

## II. What Constitutes A Contradiction?

- A. “That no candid and intelligent student of the Bible will deny that it contains numerous ‘discrepancies,’ that its statements, taken *prima facie*, not infrequently conflict with or contradict one another, may safely be presumed.” (Haley 1)
- B. “A mere difference does not a contradiction make!
  1. “Is the same thing or person under consideration?”
  2. “Is the same time period in view?”
  3. “Is the language that seems to be self-contradictory employed in the same sense?” (Jackson 25)
- C. Only if all of these are so can a genuine contradiction/discrepancy be charged.

D. Observable even in standard definitions of the terms.

1. Contradiction: “a statement or proposition that contradicts or denies another or itself and is *logically incongruous*; *direct opposition* between things compared; inconsistency.”<sup>2</sup> “a combination of statements, ideas, or features of a situation that are opposed to one another; a person, thing, or situation in which *inconsistent elements* are present.”<sup>3</sup> (emp. added)
2. Discrepancy: “an instance of difference or inconsistency.”<sup>4</sup> “a lack of *compatibility* or similarity between two or more facts.”<sup>5</sup> (emp. added)

III. From Whence Do Alleged Discrepancies Come?

A. Misunderstood context.

1. Who is speaking? (e.g. Gen. 2:17; 3:3 vs. 3:4; Job’s three friends)
2. What is the subject? (e.g. “ark” Gen. 6 vs. Josh. 3; “works” Rom. vs. James)
3. When is it said? (e.g. Gen. 1:31 vs. 6:6; Gen. 6:9 vs. 9:21)
4. How is it spoken? (e.g. perspective, idiom, figurative language, poetry, etc.)
5. What is the purpose? (e.g. Lk. 1:3 vs. Jn. 20:31)

B. Supplementation. (e.g. 1 Sam. 21:1 vs. Mk. 2:26; Mt. 20:29-34 vs. Mk. 10:46-52 vs. Lk. 18:35-43)

C. Varying computations of time and numbers. (e.g. Mk. 15:25 vs. Jn. 19:14; Mt. 12:40 vs. Lk. 24:7)

D. Multiple names and synonyms. (e.g. Mt. 1:16 vs. Lk. 3:23)

E. Translation errors, antiquated language. (e.g. Gen. 1:28 KJV; 2:19; Ps. 88:13 KJV)

F. Manuscript errors, esp. numerals. (e.g. Lk. 3:36 vs. Gen. 11:12; 2 Kgs. 8:26 vs. 2 Chr. 22:2)

1. “The copyists have committed these errors by seeing or hearing wrongly, by faithlessness of memory, and by other misunderstandings; yet not arbitrarily or intentionally. And by none of them have the essential contents of scripture been endangered.” (Haley 42)
2. “A great proportion, indeed the mass, of variations in Hebrew manuscripts, when minutely scanned, amount to nothing more than the difference in spelling a multitude of English words. What matters it as to the meaning whether one writes *honour* or *honor*, whether he writes *centre* or *center*?” (Haley 43, emp. in orig.)

G. Human imagination, “dogmatic prejudice” (Haley 25).

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<sup>2</sup> Webster’s Universal College Dictionary

<sup>3</sup> New Oxford American Dictionary

<sup>4</sup> Webster’s Universal College Dictionary

<sup>5</sup> New Oxford American Dictionary

#### IV. By What Principles Should We Address These Issues?

- A. "To the interpreter of scripture, no two qualifications are more indispensable than common sense and honesty." (Haley 16)
- B. Innocent until proven guilty — do not assume a contradiction until such can be proven.
- C. Fairness — do not hold the Bible to an unreasonable standard to which you would hold no other form of communication, written or verbal.
- D. "One need show only the possibility of harmonization between two passages that appear in conflict in order to negate the force of an alleged discrepancy." (Jackson 28)

#### V. Conclusion.

- A. "Opponents of religion have boasted perennially of their ability to remove the Christian's foundation of faith by hacking away at the Bible. They think that by chopping incessantly in the forest of inspiration with the cynical axe of criticism they will be able to expunge the Bible from the masses, and push God from the Universe. Thomas Paine believed he had so triumphed. He concluded arrogantly in *Age of Reason*: 'I have now gone through the Bible, as a man would go through a wood with an axe on his shoulder, and fell trees. Here they lie; and the priests, if they can, may replant them. They may, perhaps, stick them in the ground, but they will never make them grow (1795, p 151).'" (Bromling 19)
- B. "Moreover, I may be allowed to say that the more thoroughly I have investigated the subject the more clearly have I seen the flimsy and disingenuous character of the objections alleged by infidels... I cannot but avow, as the issue of my investigations, the profound conviction that *every difficulty and discrepancy in the scriptures is, and will yet be seen to be, capable of a fair and reasonable solution.*" (Haley x, emp. in orig.)
- C. "We, therefore, deem the position an impregnable one, that all the discrepancies and objections which the teeming brain and malignant heart of infidelity have been able to conjure up and rake together, do not in any essential degree detract from the value of the inspired volume, nor diminish its wonderful and beneficent moral power." (Haley 51)
- D. Certainly then these alleged contradictions are "The Skeptics' Impotent Axe" (Bromling).
- E. Instead, "The inspired narratives exhibit 'substantial agreement with circumstantial variation.' This is precisely what a court of justice requires in respect of the testimony of witnesses. Should their evidence agree precisely in every word and syllable, this fact would be held by the court proof of conspiracy... The disagreements of the sacred writers effectually bar the charge of 'conspiracy' on their part." (Haley 36-37)
- F. Pascal: God is "willing to be revealed to those who seek him with their whole heart, and hidden from those who as cordially fly from him, has so regulated the means of knowing him, as to give indications of himself, which are plain to those who seek him, and obscure to those who seek him not. There is light enough for those whose main wish is to see; and darkness enough for those of an opposite disposition." (qtd. Haley 39-40; cf. 2 Th. 2:10-12)

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### Additional Resources

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