

How to Approach Bible Difficulties

(Most of the following suggestions are condensed from the book When Critics Ask by Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe.)

Jesus said that everyone who hears His words and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. BUT do we really have a rock to build a house upon? Do we know what Jesus' words really are? Has God spoken in the Bible or is it just a human book - an assortment of writings from 40 human authors written over 1,400 years and full of contradictions?

As a church we believe that "The sole basis of our beliefs is the Bible, God's infallible written Word. We believe that it was uniquely, verbally and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, and that it was written without error in the original manuscripts. It is the supreme and final authority in all matters on which it speaks."

So how do we deal with the difficulties, contradictions, and unexplainable problems that critics claim are found in the Bible? Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Assume that the Unexplained is Explainable.** - It is a mistake to assume that what *you* cannot explain is unexplainable. When a scientist comes upon an anomaly in nature, he does not give up further exploration. He continues to do research with the confident expectation that an answer will be found. Likewise if the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, then you can be confident that there is an answer for every anomaly in the Bible.

Simply because you cannot at this moment come up with an explanation for a Bible difficulty does not mean that there is no explanation. It's rather arrogant to think that. Some further Biblical, archaeological, or linguistic research may reveal the explanation. Or it may be that, even though you're a pretty smart cookie, you will have to wait for someone else to show you the explanation! A little time, a little humility, and a little trust can take you a long way toward solving Bible anomalies.

2. **Presume the Bible Innocent Until Proven Guilty.** - This is not asking anything special of the Bible. It is the way we approach all human communications. The Bible, like any other book, should be presumed to be telling us what the authors said and heard. Negative critics of the Bible begin with just the opposite presumption. Little wonder, then, that they conclude the Bible is riddled with error.

This "guilty" presumption leads critics to rather ridiculous statements, such as the skeptic who wrote that Genesis 6:20 "contradicted" Genesis 7:2 (the number of animals to take on Noah's ark). Really? The author of Genesis contradicted himself within four verses? Don't you think that he would have noticed? Give the authors some credit that they actually thought about what they were writing and assume they are innocent until you have exhausted all reasonable explanations for an anomaly.

3. **Understand the Context of the Passage.** - Perhaps the most common mistake of critics is to take a text out of its proper context. One can prove anything from the Bible by this mistaken procedure. The Bible even says, "There is no God." Of course, the context is: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1).

Bible difficulties are often explained by simply reading what the author said before or after the verses in question. A skeptic wrote on one web site that Exodus 9:6 (the 5th plague on the livestock) contradicts Exodus 9:25 (the 7th plague of hail falling on livestock). He wrote, "Where did the livestock come from, if they were all killed in the 5th plague?" Now you would think the author (or the Jewish people who celebrate the Passover every year) would have noticed this amazing contradiction! Or we could just read the context of Exodus 9:6 and note that the author made it clear that the 5th plague was on "livestock in the field" (verse 3). Read the context before you make a "guilty" verdict.

4. **Don't Assume that a Partial Report is a False Report.** - The Biblical authors express the same thing in different ways and from different viewpoints. No one author tells us everything about an event. Just like a newspaper reporter, they pick and choose what portion of an event they will write about. This doesn't make it false, it merely makes it partial. Compare, for example, Peter's famous confession in the Gospels:

Matthew: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (16:16).

Mark: "You are the Christ" (8:29).

Luke: "The Christ of God" (9:20).

Skeptics looking for contradictions will often point to the sign fastened to Jesus' cross. This sign contained the charge for which Jesus was crucified. Each of the four gospels has different wording for the charge (compare Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19). When skeptics call this an error, they make the mistake of assuming that a partial description is a contradiction. The complete wording of the charge was probably: "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." (And the charge was written in three different languages - see John 19:20.)

A partial description does not make an error. If it did, then every 30-second news report on the *Six O'clock News* would be a lie.

5. **Allow New Testament Citations of the Old Testament to be Less Than Exact Quotations.** - Critics often point to variations in the NT's use of the OT Scriptures as a proof of error. They seem to forget that the OT was written in Hebrew, the NT in Greek. Translations from one language to another can and often do differ without being in error.

In addition, critics forget that every *citation* need not be an exact *quotation*. It was then (and still is today) a perfectly acceptable literary style to give the true *essence* of a statement without using precisely the *exact words*. The same *meaning* can be conveyed without using the exact same *verbal expressions*.

Sometimes the New Testament authors will cite only part of the OT text (Jesus did this in Luke 4:18-19, citing Isaiah 61:1-2). Sometimes the NT summarizes the OT text (Matthew 2:6). Others blend two texts into one (Matthew 27:9-10). Sometimes they change the speaker (compare Zechariah 12:10 with John 19:37). This was perfectly acceptable Jewish rabbinic practice. We must not insist that the NT writers have to stick to 21st century college rules for quotation (when they did not even know what 21st century college rules would be)!

6. **Don't Assume that Divergent Accounts are False Accounts.** - Almost all critics of the Bible make the mistake of calling divergent accounts, "contradictions." There are no true "contradictions" in the Bible. A "contradiction" is to state one fact and then to state that the negative of the fact is also true. For example, "Jesus died on a cross" and "Jesus did NOT die on a cross." This is a contradiction. Both cannot be true.

What we find in the Bible are divergent accounts, not contradictions. For example, Matthew 28:5 says there is one angel at the tomb of the resurrection, whereas the apostle John informs us there were two (John 20:12). Even assuming that these verses refer to the same appearance to the same group of women at the same time, these are not contradictory reports. In fact, there is an infallible mathematical rule that easily explains this problem: wherever there are two, there is always one - it never fails!

It was perfectly acceptable practice in ancient times to mention only the primary person or speaker. Twenty-first century reporters still do the same thing. Matthew did not say there was *only* one angel. You have to add the word "only" to Matthew's account to make it contradict John's. When critics do this, the error is not in the Bible, but in the critic.

7. **Recognize that the Bible Doesn't Approve of Everything it Records.** - It is a mistake to assume that everything contained in the Bible is commended by the Bible. The whole Bible is *true* (John 17:17), but it records some *lies*, for example,

things that Satan said (Genesis 3:4; John 8:44) or the advice of Job's friends or the words of a false prophet. Distinguish between what the Bible records and what it teaches. Unless this distinction is held, it may be incorrectly concluded that the Bible teaches adultery and murder because it narrates David's sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:4) or that it promotes polygamy because it records Solomon's harem (1 Kings 11:3). Inerrancy of the Bible means that whatever the Bible records it records accurately and whatever it intends to teach is true.

8. **Remember that the Bible Uses Non-technical Everyday Language.** - To be true, a book or report does not have to use scholarly, technical, or scientific language. Leviticus 11:6 says that the rabbit chews its cud. Verse 19 of the same chapter places the bat under the category of "bird." These examples have been used by some critics to prove that the Bible contains factual errors. But the use of observational, nonscientific language (such as a rabbit "chewing its cud" or the sun "setting") is not unscientific, it is merely prescientific. Is it really proper to demand that a 1400 B.C. author use 21st century biological categories to classify animals?

The writers of the Bible wrote from an observational viewpoint. From an observational viewpoint a rabbit chews its cud, even though it does not technically chew the cud with regurgitation. A bat is a "flying thing" (the real meaning of the Hebrew word that we translate "bird"). The sun sets and rises, even though we know the earth revolves around the sun. (When is the last time you called up the TV weather person to straighten her out about "sunrise" and "sunset"?) Don't demand that the Bible use the technical categories of modern science or scholarship.

9. **Don't Demand Exhaustive Comprehensiveness from the Bible.** - 189,765 warriors or 200,000? 39 years or 40 years? Scripture is an ancient document and like other ancient documents of its time (and many of our time) it rounds off numbers and records key speakers in a narrative while neglecting to mention others (compare Mark 10:46 with Matthew 20:29-30). This was a totally acceptable writing style in ancient literature and is even acceptable in modern speech and writing:

Question: "How many people were at Samantha's party?"

Reply: "A hundred."

Response: "Wow!"

(The response is not: "I heard there were only 89 people! Liar!")

One skeptic wrote that the Bible was in error because it taught that the circumference of a circle was 3 times the diameter of a circle (1 Kings 7:23), rather than 3.14 times the diameter! Permit the Bible the same freedom in

rounding numbers, highlighting individuals, and recording details that you would allow any other speaker or writer in normal communication.

10. **Allow the Use of Figurative or Symbolic Language.** - The Bible should be read like any other writing recognizing the use of poetic symbolism ("The trees of the field clap their hands"), figures of speech (Jesus said, "I am a door"), hyperbole ("When you pray, go into your room and close the door"), and different genres of literature (the use of parable, proverb, poem, or factual reporting). Don't insist that a poem contain precise scientific or historical accuracy (ex: trees don't have hands). Allow an exaggerated, general, or symbolic statement to be modified or explained by the context.



This is what we mean when we say that we interpret the Bible literally. To interpret the Bible literally is to interpret it as *literature*, according to the normal rules of grammar, speech, syntax, genre, and context. We do this without thinking for other pieces of literature. We should allow the Bible the same privilege.

For example, one skeptic wrote that Judges 4:21 (Sisera was lying on the ground) contradicted Judges 5:26-27 (Sisera was standing up and fell). This critic ignores the fact that Judges 4 is historic narrative (factual reporting) while Judges 5 is poetry (containing symbolic statements, such as the great general Sisera "falling" before a woman). The Bible should be read in the same way we read *Reader's Digest* or the *New Yorker*.

11. **Don't Confuse General Statements with Universal Ones.** - Critics often jump to the conclusion that unqualified statements admit to no exceptions. They seize upon verses that offer general truths and then point with glee to obvious exceptions. In so doing, they forget that such statements are only intended to be generalizations.

The book of Proverbs is a good example of such an issue. Proverbial sayings by their very nature offer only general guidance, not universal assurance. They are general rules for life, but general rules admit exceptions. Even in English this is true. We say, "He who hesitates is lost," but we also say, "Look before you leap." Both are true in a general way.

One critic of the Bible wrote that Proverbs 16:17 ("when a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him") was a "contradiction" with Jesus' crucifixion! Obviously this proverb is not intended as a universal truth. Paul was pleasing to the Lord and his enemies stoned him (Acts 14:19). Jesus was pleasing to the Lord, and His enemies crucified Him! Nonetheless, it is a general

truth that one who acts in a way pleasing to God can minimize his enemies' antagonism.

12. **Remember that Only the Original Text, Not Every Copy of Scripture is Without Error.** - Every student of the Bible knows that there are errors in the hand written copies of the various manuscripts. But with the 25,000 manuscripts we have, textual scholars are able to reconstruct the original text of Scripture with an accuracy WELL BEYOND ANY OTHER ancient document. For example, in the New Testament only 400 words are somewhat "uncertain" and NONE of these 400 words affects a single doctrine from Scripture.