

Article: DT075

TAMING BIBLE "DISCREPANCIES"

This article first appeared in the Effective Evangelism column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 24, number 2 (2001). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

With the Skeptic's Annotated Bible Web site on the Internet and books such as *Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy* available, Christians should prepare for accusations that the Bible has contradictions. The possibilities for error are endless. For all those questions that are easily answered, there may be a passage that is seemingly indefensible.

Although confidence increases when we examine how conservative scholars address "discrepancies," critics often don't accept their answers. They argue that Christian theologians equivocate, speculate, and maintain a double standard while examining other religions. Just as Christians challenge cults to abandon belief in their scriptures *a priori*, blind allegiance to the Bible is foolish; nevertheless, the Bible's supposed discrepancies can logically be solved by explaining details such as cultural context and linguistic variants.

Historical Difficulties. Besides being philosophical and ethical, Christianity rests on historical time-space events. In other words, if biblical events can be proven false, Christianity crumbles.

Christian historian Paul L. Maier wrote the novel *A Skeleton in God's Closet*, in which he theorized the reaction of the world if archaeologists discovered Jesus' skeleton. Although it would be difficult to prove such a find 2000 years later, there are other ways the records could show antinomies in a time-space context. What time, for example, was Jesus crucified? Mark 15:25 indicates the third hour, but John 19:14 states that Jesus stood before Pilate during the sixth hour.

Philosophical/Doctrinal Problems. If biblical teachings are not philosophically congruous, the result is intellectual dissonance. For example, atheists claim that Christians attempt to prove the existence of God by insisting everything has a cause; yet, Christians also claim that God is the Uncaused Cause.

Ethical Questions. Critics point to passages that seem to defy the very ethics the Bible espouses. God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac; yet, human sacrifice is strictly forbidden in Scripture. Allegations of ethical inconsistency further address the discrepancies between God's methods in the Old Testament compared with the New Testament and contemporary Christian ethics, such as with slavery, polygamy, and alleged "evil acts" by God, in particular the destruction of innocent persons.

Rebuttals. Rebuttals to such "discrepancies" often involve explaining idioms, copyist errors, methods of calculating time and dates, and cultural considerations. Concerning the time of Jesus' crucifixion, Gleason Archer explains in *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, "There is no difficulty at all in the received textual reading, provided we understand that John was following the official numbering system of the Roman civil day."¹ Writing in Ephesus, John would be inclined to use the Roman system instead of the Jewish system. What looks like a blatant contradiction has a valid historical explanation.

Norman Geisler and Ronald Brook address the philosophical "discrepancy" of the Uncaused Cause in *Come Let Us Reason*.² The correct Christian position is that everything contingent on something else has a cause. God, in a category by Himself, is not contingent on something else; therefore, God does not need a cause. This philosophical "contradiction" has a valid explanation that is more logical than the atheist's position that the universe did not have a cause or is not contingent.

The ethical problem of human sacrifice is explained both by Archer in his book, and by John Haley in his *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*. God never intended the sacrifice of Isaac; rather, the Lord was testing Abraham and also foreshadowing the sacrifice of His Son. Differing ethical practices between the

Testaments can be explained through understanding the two covenants. God's dealings with humankind vary according to circumstances, culture, and era. What some consider His "evil acts" fall within the prerogative of God. The Creator of life, for instance, is entitled to take away life.

The scope of alleged contradictions is immense. Besides books cited here, many allegations are addressed in detail at www.tektonics.org and www.christian-thinktank.com.

When Rebuttals Aren't Enough. Critics claim that Christians do everything possible to prevent the appearance of a contradiction. Ex-preacher turned atheist, Dan Barker, writes, "'This circle is a square' seems contradictory. But I have learned from Christians many ways to interpret a phrase to make sense. It could mean a circle of squares, or a square of circles. Or, in the original language the word 'square' was used to refer to any bounded geometric object...Or, the term 'square' is symbolic, like 'the four corners of the earth.' Or the word 'circle' is meant loosely, as in 'circle of friends' — a square circle is an old-fashioned group of acquaintances..."³ This provides a comical picture that is also sobering. Do Christians equivocate?

First, if critics misunderstand what biblical inspiration means — if they accept only a wooden, literal view of all passages — then problems abound. In this way, they validate only one (extreme) view of Scripture in order to defeat it.

The Bible is not a modern textbook. God did not introduce our modern technological or cultural considerations into the minds of the Bible's authors. In *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Geisler and Nix write, "The Bible is written for the common men of every generation, and it therefore uses their common, everyday language...it is not reasonable for one to say the Bible is scientifically incorrect; it is merely scientifically *imprecise* by modern standards" (emphasis in original).⁴

Haley asserts, "It should also be remembered that a writer may employ customary phraseology, involving a historical inaccuracy, yet not be chargeable with falsehood, inasmuch as he does not intend to teach anything in reference in the matter. For example, a historian might incidentally speak of the 'battle of Bunker Hill,' while he knows perfectly well that the battle was fought on Breed 's Hill."⁵

While it seems that advanced, modern knowledge by the authors would be proof of involvement of an all-knowing God, just the opposite would occur. Records that are accurate by our standards today would be open to accusations of fraud. This already happens concerning prophecy. The obvious cultural nuances guard against claims of fraud, while the prophecies speak of divine intervention. Both divine and human characteristics are necessary for authentication.

Second, Christians "equivocate" only if the principles of logic are ignored. To say that theologians should not theorize about options in reconciling alleged discrepancies is to promote the blind faith (for reverse purposes) that the critics abhor. Blind faith accepts *or rejects* a passage on assumption. Some "discrepancies" have several possible answers. This need not be unsettling. Having too many answers does not prove there is no answer.

Third, the critics misrepresent the nature of language. Communication is expressed through multiple genres and shades of meaning. Jesus used hyperbole when He said we are to hate our parents. It is simplistic to think that this contradicts love passages or that Jesus is twisted in His thinking to insist that we hate our parents but love our enemies.

These basic principles allow the writers to speak within their cultures as authentic voices. They allow for logical options to be explored, thus promoting critical thinking instead of squelching analytical thought. They acknowledge the inherent flexibility of language. Not to allow for this is to exercise a simplistic mindset toward the Scriptures.

Double Standard? We are ethically compelled to reject a double standard while examining cults and other religions. Supernatural events in other writings should not be casually disregarded while supernatural events in the Bible are simply believed. The nature of language, moreover, must be considered fairly for all religious writing.

The Book of Mormon can be called into question because of Alma 7:10: “He [Jesus] shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers....” Since Mormons also believe the Bible, this statement contradicts Micah 5:2 and Luke 2:4 that Jesus’ birthplace was Bethlehem. The Book of Mormon even references Luke 2:4.

The question arises: Is this a true contradiction or an imprecision? Mormons have no problem seeing this as an imprecision. Just as today we may mention we are from a big city when we are from a suburb of that city, Bethlehem can be viewed in the same way. (Bethlehem is only five miles from Jerusalem.) This is not entirely convincing, however, since it appears to be in the same genre as the prophecy in Micah, and walking distance from Bethlehem to Jerusalem hardly makes it a suburb; nevertheless, for Mormons, this alone will not discredit the Book of Mormon.

Another problem with the Book of Mormon creates a documented time-space violation. Mormons believe it was written between 600 B.C. and A.D. 421. We know that the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible was published in A.D. 1611. The Book of Mormon contains passages taken from the KJV, down to the italicized words that were added by the translators for clarity.⁶ The Book of Mormon was “translated” by Joseph Smith in the early 1800s when KJV was the only English translation in use. Instead of pointing away conspiracy, as do the alleged discrepancies of the Bible, this actually indicates fraud.

A Positive Purpose? It’s difficult to imagine that something as threatening as alleged Bible contradictions could have a positive purpose. John Haley, however, lists reasons why God allowed these apparent “discrepancies” to exist: (1) The Bible promotes stimulation of the intellect, not blind faith. (2) The difficulties provide “strong incidental proof that *there was no collusion* among the sacred writers.” This issue has proven to be critical concerning the resurrection of Jesus, the cornerstone of orthodox Christianity. (3) The alleged contradictions “lead us to *value the spirit beyond the letter* of the scriptures” (emphasis in original).⁷

If the biblical records were technically modern, we would call them fraudulent. If the authors did not relate to their cultures, we would call them irrelevant. If the languages were gutted of various genres, we would call the Bible simplistic. The records instead demand that we search for answers, to search out God. This is the focus of the Bible — engaging in relationship with Him. Above all, the Scriptures are God’s love story toward humankind, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ.

— Rachel D. Ramer

NOTES

1. Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 364.
2. Norman L. Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks, *Come, Let Us Reason* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 101–2.
3. Dan Barker, *Losing Faith in Faith* (Madison, WI: Freedom from Religion Foundation, 1992), 163.
4. Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 57.
5. John W. Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1992), 11.
6. Ron Rhodes and Marian Bodine, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with the Mormons* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 125.
7. Haley, 36–37.