

The Authority of the Scriptures: Lesson 7
Alleged Discrepancies in the Bible
(a crash course on common-sense hermeneutics*)

- I. Generally the perception of a discrepancy arises from a misunderstanding of one or both of the relevant passages. Some basic rules of biblical interpretation:
- A. Consider context: Immediate, whole book, other books by same writer, whole Bible
 - B. Consider historical background when information is available
 - C. Interpret unclear passages by comparison with clear passages.
 - D. Let the New Testament interpret the Old Testament

II. Resolving apparent discrepancies

A. Difficulties do not constitute discrepancies.

There is nothing surprising in the fact that there are 'Bible difficulties'...There is no other book so old, so remote from us in time and culture, and so varied in form and content, that is read, and read with profit, by so many people not particularly well-equipped to deal with ancient documents. The surprising thing is—not that there are difficulties—but that there are so many men and women of good will who learn to read the record of God's Son without serious difficulty. Martin H. Franzmann

- 1) A contradiction exists only when two statements cannot both be true. Unless this condition applies, there is no legitimacy in the charge of contradiction.
- 2) It is not essential in the defense of infallibility to determine how any given problem is in fact to be resolved. It is enough to have a plausible explanation. There may be more than one possible explanation to an apparent discrepancy. However, the presence of even one plausible solution removes all grounds for the charge that a contradiction exists.
- 3) Even when a plausible solution to a difficulty has been suggested, one is not compelled to accept the legitimacy of the solution. In the final analysis, the reader's verdict on the Bible's infallibility will rest on his/her predisposition to believe or to disbelieve. One who, upon other grounds, judges the Bible to be God's Word will be predisposed toward accepting the validity of plausible solutions. One who is generally suspicious of the Bible's truthfulness will incline toward doubting the validity of any proposed solution.
- 4) One who believes the Bible to be true should not be afraid to confront difficulties, since the truth will always have the best argument on its side, and if the Bible could be validly proven false, one who loves truth would not wish to continue believing in it. On the other hand, if the Bible is true, its ability to overcome all challenges will simply demonstrate its truthfulness more dramatically.
- 5) Fair-minded approach to apparent discrepancies:
 - a. Give the author credit for at least average intelligence (I Cor, 14:22,23/Phil.3:12,15)
 - b. Be as fair in assuming the author's honesty as you would that of anyone else whom you have no reason to distrust.

B. Some hermeneutic principles that can clear up apparent discrepancies: If passages seem to contradict one another, consider...

1. The ambiguity of a statement sometimes allows for more than one possible meaning
 - What Saul's companion heard and saw (Acts 9:7/22:9)
 - Who was Joseph's father? (Matt.1:16/Luke 3:23)

* hermeneutics is the science of interpretation

2. A word may have more than one meaning
 - Does God tempt? (Jas. 1:13/ Gen. 22:1)
 - Does God repent? (Num.23:19[I Sam. 15:29/Ezek.24:14]/ Gen. 6:6[Jer. 18:8,10/Jonah 3:10])
 3. One person or group may be known by more than one name
 - Apostle lists (Matt.10:2-4/Mark 3:16-18/Luke 6:14-16/Acts 1:13)
 - Ishmaelites and Midianites (Gen.37:36/ Gen.39:1)
 4. Different passages may reflect a change in conditions
 - All good or all bad? (Gen.1:31/ Gen.6:5)
 - Absalom's sons (II Sam.14:27/ II Sam.18:18)
 5. Different passages may be written for different purposes or emphases
 - John and the Synoptics
 - Faith or works? (Rom.3:28/James 2:24)
 6. Literary devices may be unfamiliar to our culture
 - Anthropomorphisms
 - Hyperboles
 - Compression or summary of narratives
 7. When a liar's words are recorded, their content is not being endorsed
 - God's word vs. Satan's (Gen.2:17/Gen.3:4)
 - Joseph's brothers (Gen. 42:27,35/ Gen.43:21)
 - Who killed Saul? (I Sam.31:4/II Sam.1:6-10 [4:10])
 8. Various means of calculating time may be used in different passages
 - Nebuchadnezzar's first year (Jer.25:1/ Dan.1:1)
 - The time of the crucifixion (Mark 15:25/John 19:14)
 9. Different methods of grouping material may be employed
 - Two Creation accounts (Genesis 1:1-2:3/ Gen.2:4-22)
 - Order of events in the gospels
 10. Accounts of one event may give different details
 - Judas' death (Matt.27:5/Acts 1:18)
 - Paul's early years (Acts 9:20-30/Gal.1:15-24)
 - Resurrection accounts (Matt.28/Mark 16/Luke 24/John 20-21)
 11. Actions of an agent are often attributed to the sender
 - Centurion with sick servant (Matt. 8:5-13/Luke 7:1-10)
 - Judas' purchase of a field (Matt.27:5-10/Acts 1:18)
 - The Jews crucified Jesus (Matt. 27:27-35/I Thess.2:14-15 [Acts 2:23])
 12. Occasionally corruption of manuscripts has resulted from copyist errors
 - Soloman's stalls (I Kings 4:26/II Chron. 9:25)
 - Goliath's slayer (I Sam.17:50-51/II Sam.21:19/I Chron.20:5)
 - Victims of the plague (Numbers 25:9/I Cor.10:8)
- D. Since He could prevent it, why would God allow the Bible to contain difficulties?
1. They stimulate thought and inquiry (II Timothy 2:7)
 2. They show the Bible to have the same author as nature (Psalm 19)
 3. They void any charge of collusion against the authors (II Peter 1:16)
 4. They test the spiritual disposition of the reader (Heb.4:12/I Pet.2:8/II Pet.3:16)