

Session 6

Reading carefully

Despite being written by many different authors over a period of 1600 years, the Bible does not contradict itself. In this session we examine some of the extraordinary internal consistency of the Bible and look at the alleged contradictions and how they can be explained. We also consider the exciting discovery of “Bible echoes”.

Internal consistency

One thing you will notice as you start to read the Bible regularly, is that its message is remarkably consistent. Despite being written by many different authors, from all walks of life, over a period of about 1600 years, the basic message is the same. Of course, this is what you would expect from a book inspired by God.

The Bible is also consistent in the little things, the apparently trivial details. There are many examples in the Bible where different passages support each other, providing “undesigned coincidences”. The idea is best seen by examples.

Goliath the giant

- Numbers 13:33 There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight.NKJV
- Joshua 11:21–22 At that time Joshua went and destroyed the Anakites from the hill country ... No Anakites were left in Israelite territories; only in Gaza, Gath and Ashdod did any survive.
- 1 Samuel 17:4 A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. He was over nine feet tall.

These passages were written by three different authors at three different periods of history. Yet they match each other perfectly. The first passage shows that when Israel entered the promised land there were many giants there (the sons of Anak, or Anakites). The second passage shows that Israel destroyed nearly all of these giants, but left a few in three towns: Gaza, Gath and Ashdod. The third passage casually mentions that the giant Goliath's home town was Gath. He must have been descended from one of the Anakites. There is a ring of truth about these three passages. They sound more like accurate history than contrived fiction.

Healing in the evening

In Matthew 8:16 we read

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.

Why did they come in the evening? Matthew does not tell us. But Mark records the same incident and says that it was on a Sabbath (Mark 1:21). In another passage (Matthew 12:10) we learn that there was a belief among the Jews that it was not lawful to heal on the Sabbath. We also know that the Jews counted 6pm as the end of one day and the start of the next. So the Sabbath ended at 6pm and after that, in the evening, the people brought the sick people to be healed. Putting these passages together, the explanation is clear.

Again, the incident has the ring of truth. Matthew reports that the healing took place in the evening without saying that it was a Sabbath. If the story was contrived, these little details may have been overlooked.

Ahithophel the traitor

Once King David was walking on the roof of his palace when he saw a beautiful woman named Bathsheba bathing. He requested that she come to him and she became pregnant. David arranged for her husband Uriah to be moved to the frontline of battle where he was killed. David then married Bathsheba. When confronted with his sins, he was filled with remorse and asked God to forgive him. You can read the full story in 2 Samuel 11–12.

Sometime later, David's son Absalom conspired to seize the

throne for himself. David fled with his loyal followers. David's chief advisor, Ahithophel, remained in Jerusalem and offered his advice to Absalom. The competing armies fought, Absalom was killed and his army defeated. Thus David retained the kingship. The full story is given in 2 Samuel 15–19. The Bible says this second incident was God's punishment for the first (2 Samuel 12:11–12).

One curious incident in these events is that Ahithophel was a traitor and that Absalom expected him to be willing to change sides (2 Samuel 15:12). This is surprising because David described him as his familiar friend in whom he trusted (Psalm 41:9). It was so unexpected to David, that he never got over it (Psalm 55:12–14). So why did Ahithophel change sides and how was Absalom so sure that he would?

The answer is found by comparing 2 Samuel 11:3 and 23:34,39. In these verses we learn that Ahithophel was the father of Eliam who was the father of Bathsheba and that Uriah and Eliam had both been in David's guard. So the girl with whom David committed adultery was Ahithophel's granddaughter and the man whose murder David organized was Ahithophel's grandson by marriage and probably a friend of his son. It seems Ahithophel was seeking revenge.

When Absalom had captured David's palace, he asked Ahithophel what to do next. He said "Go and lie with the concubines of David on the roof of the palace" (2 Samuel 16:20–22). In other words, "Pay him back. He stole another man's wife; now you steal his!" What's more it was on the roof of the palace, the same place David had seen Bathsheba.

Such a fascinating story hidden beneath the text could not have been contrived. The Bible didn't tell this story, but it's there in the background for us to search out. The internal consistency of the Bible shows it has the ring of truth.

Contradictions?

For every person who starts to read the Bible, there must be hundreds who say "Read the Bible? No way! It's too full of contradictions." This is important because if the Bible were full of contradictions then it would not be true, and it would not be worth reading.

It must be said that the charge is most often made by those

who are openly enemies of the Bible or those who have little or no knowledge of what it does say. The thing about alleged contradictions is that they are often shown to be in harmony after a bit more careful reading or study. Apparently, few who claim the Bible is full of contradictions take the trouble to check things out thoroughly before opening their mouth or putting pen to paper.

The sign on the cross

When Jesus was crucified there was a sign above his head. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John say what was on the sign. As the four statements are not identical, does the Bible contradict itself? Let's look at how each gospel records what was written on the sign.

Mt 27:37	This is Jesus	the King of the Jews
Mk 15:26		the King of the Jews
Lk 23:38	This is	the King of the Jews
Jn 19:19	Jesus of Nazareth	the King of the Jews

Does each writer have to record everything? Is it not likely that the sign said "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews"?

Jesus clears the temple

In the Bible, Jesus is twice recorded as having cleared the temple of traders. John 2:13–16 records an incident at the start of his preaching while Matthew 21:12–13 has an incident near the end of Jesus' life. To state unequivocally (as some do) that this is a contradiction is very strange. The simplest explanation is that there were two occasions, not one. This idea is confirmed by a comparison of the context of the two passages.

The ring of truth

Explaining a few cases does not prove anything, but it does show that some alleged contradictions can be harmonised perfectly with a little careful reading and thought.

A contradiction occurs when the truth of a fact is denied or two statements are made which are contradictory. This is not true of the things many people claim to be contradictions. Different reports can highlight certain (different) features and omit others, without being contradictory. Over the centuries, many Bible

‘contradictions’ have been alleged. Careful thought and study have discovered harmony behind most of these.

It is our contention, from what has gone before, that as the Bible is the word of God, it is true. Thus it is not contradictory, and so we wait in faith for further knowledge or discoveries to harmonise any remaining ‘contradictions’. We suggest that this is a very reasonable approach to take in the light of past experience.

If all the books of the Bible told exactly the same story and every detail fitted together perfectly, we would probably conclude it was a fabrication, a cooked up story that hangs together. True stories don’t tend to be like that. The Bible is not like that either. There are places where it is difficult to make the details from one part fit in with another part. And this is what you would expect from real life. Real life is full of situations that appear contradictory. Only when you learn all the circumstances do you realise that these real life ‘contradictions’ are not contradictory at all. The Bible has that ring of truth about it.

Can you explain these?

Sacrifice or not? In Hosea 6:6, God says “I desire mercy and not sacrifice”. But God had told them to sacrifice!

Did Saul inquire of the Lord? Compare 1 Samuel 28:6; 1 Chronicles 10:13–14.

Which country? Compare 2 Samuel 8:13 with 1 Chronicles 18:12. (NIV corrects the discrepancy.)

How did Judas die? Compare Matthew 27:3–5 with Acts 1:18.

Bible echoes

One of the exciting things in Bible reading is finding in one part of the Bible an “echo” of an idea from another part of the Bible. These often help us understand more about what God is telling us. Finding Bible echoes usually only comes about after you become very familiar with the Bible.

One example is the “failure of the firstborn”. To the Jews, the firstborn son of the family was very important. Under the Jewish law of inheritance, he was entitled to a double portion.

Bible echo: In the wilderness

List as many people as you can who were leaders of God's people and spent a period of time in the wilderness?

Why do you think this happened?

Despite this, not one of the successful men of the Old Testament is said to be a firstborn. Every firstborn male of the Old Testament, who might have had a position of honour, was in some way a failure. Only after reading the Bible through many times do you notice this sort of thing. The reason for this remarkably consistent theme is that God is teaching us something: important people in human affairs are not necessarily important to God. The world had to wait for God's own firstborn son to be born before it could see a successful firstborn.

This also provides additional evidence for the inspiration of the Bible. If the Bible writers were not inspired, what made them all combine to produce this instructive piece of harmony? They certainly didn't do it deliberately, because none of them draws attention to it.

Bible echoes also keeps Bible reading a fascinating occupation even after you have been reading it for years. Stay alert and you might find another Bible echo, a concealed theme, buried deep in the pages of Scripture, waiting to be unearthed.

How readest thou?

It is one thing to read the Bible through,
Another thing to learn and read and do.
Some read it with desire to learn, and read
But to their subject pay but little heed;
Some read it as their duty every week,
But no instruction from the Bible seek;
While others read it with but little care,
With no regard to how they read or where;
Some read it as history, to know
How people lived two thousand years ago,
Some read it to bring themselves into repute,
By showing others how they can dispute;
While others read because their neighbours do,
To see how long it takes to read it through.
Some read it for the wonders that are there,
How David killed a lion and a bear;
While others read it with uncommon care,
Hoping to find some contradiction there.
Some read as though it did not speak to them
But to the people at Jerusalem.
One reads it as a book of mysteries,
And won't believe the very thing he sees;
One reads with father's specs upon his head,
And sees the thing just as his father said;
Some read to prove a pre-adopted creed,
Hence understanding but little as they read,
For every passage in the book they bend
To make it suit that all-important end.
Some people read, as I have often thought,
To teach the Book, instead of being taught;
And some there are who read it out of spite,
I fear there are but few who read it right.
One thing I find, and you may find it too,
The more you read, the more you find it true;
But this to find, an open eye is needful,
With often prayer, and humble heart all heedful;
The man who reads with pride or inattention,
Will only find full causes of dissension,
The man who reads with modest penetration,
Will find the joy of comfort and salvation.

Homework

1. In Matthew 5:1 – 7:29, we find Jesus’ famous “Sermon on the mount”. Matthew 5:1 tells us it was spoken “on the mountain”. A similar sermon is recorded in Luke 6:17–49. But Luke 6:17 says it was spoken “on a level place”. Some have said this is a contradiction. How can we explain it?

2. 1 Samuel 13:19–21 explains how the Philistines planned to keep the Israelites a subject nation. How does this help explain 1 Samuel 17:48–51?

3. How many things in the following paragraph may be untrue?

Some shepherds out in the fields at night saw angels singing in the sky. They were told about a new baby and quickly went to Bethlehem to see Jesus. At about the same time, three kings followed a star across the desert to Bethlehem where they found baby Jesus in the stable.

Check the details in Luke 2:1–20 and Matthew 2:1–12.