

Talk # 4 Contradictions

INTRODUCTION

The long, long lists of bible contradictions, errors and discrepancies.

These can be found extensively in books and particularly on the internet in long lists or podcasts. You will likely run into them in university courses on the bible as literature and such. With such a long list, how can we think of the bible as historically reliable, much less the inspired word of God? **What if this isn't a problem we need to solve**, but an **opportunity to enjoy** the word in a way we never have before?

We don't want to twist the texts and force them to say what we want just to get us over the finish line; we want authentic answers that are reasonable, because we assume that God is reasonable! So we don't want to gloss over things; we want to understand them as fully as possible. Note: Even these long lists **represent a tiny minority of the text**; the great majority of items on these lists are very easy to explain and are clearly there to make it look like there is a long list. So we're actually down to a much smaller list, but it is still extensive, especially in the gospels. As we have seen in previous talks, the reliability of the Gospels is on a strong footing.

The plan for tonight is not to answer all of these, but rather to explain why these 'contradictions' **ARE IN FACT INTENTIONAL**, to pick some of the most important among them to look at. More importantly we will look at how to discern **why things are written the way they were at the time**, and to set up a level playing field that will allow you to judge for yourselves, and gain insight into how to look critically at the criticism itself.

Definition of what is a contradiction:

Seems very straightforward, no?

1) EXERCISE OF EVERYDAY CONVERSATION

We use language all the time not technically precise as instructions to assemble furniture!

1- Vladimir is a bachelor/Vladimir is married

2- Jasmine has red hair/Jasmine has dark brown hair

3-

Barack Obama was president of the USA from 2008-2016 (election to election)

Barack Obama was president of the USA from 2009-2017 (inauguration to inauguration)

Barack Obama was president of the USA from 2009-2016 (policy influence)

4- Montreal Canadiens- "It is a hockey club"/"They are a hockey team"/"Players on a sports team."

5- He was in Japan for two weeks/He was in Japan from the 10th to the 22nd.

6- We spent the weekend in Toronto. Did you leave Friday night? No, Saturday morning

7- I work every day from 6:30am-2:30pm/I don't take lunch

From friendly sources:

I had lunch with him the day before Easter at noon

He usually brings a sandwich for lunch, but sometime soup

2) INTENTION IS EVERYTHING

WHAT ARE THE GOSPEL WRITERS ATTEMPTING TO PRODUCE?

The gospels are not meant to be a textbook or a blueprint- they are people telling YOU a story with a specific purpose; to let you in on Jesus so that YOU can have a relationship with Him.

Q) Why would intentionally introduce contradictions?

Example- Fig tree withering: Matt 21:18-21 withers the same day/Mark 11:13, 20-21 next day

[A] They are not contradictions- They are just writing styles from their time we're not used to.

How did ancient writers actually differ from what we're used to?

These techniques are practiced basically by all ancient historians such as Thucydides, Sallust, and Quintilian. **The life of Julius Caesar** is covered by Suetonius, Cassius Dio and Plutarch, and they regularly transpose speeches and events to different years and even different countries, for literary purposes, such as showing his growing ego, his greed, or his virtue.

This is true of the gospels as well. Nothing hinges on this flexibility; information is not lost, in fact, it is meant to be **enhanced**. So they freely used several compositional devices which we will look at below.

Plutarch (1st/2nd century AD, sort of right after the gospel of John was written)

Wrote Parallel 'Lives' or biographies of 50 famous Greco-Roman characters

Interestingly, Nine of these lives overlap the same period of time, and share about 42 stories.

So it's like different books writing about the same subject (Caesar, Mark Anthony, Brutus)

This is not different authors disagreeing, but the SAME author telling the same story from a different perspective. So it's not like different authors with different sources.

What does that sound like? It is similar to the same stories that gospels writers cover.

How does this help? *We can learn how they used language and style of writing different than we do to explain themselves, but again, not like IKEA furniture instructions*

Compositional device No. 1

COMPRESSION – conflating events in stories and shortening them

Story of Cato opposing Julius Caesar, Crassus and Pompey making a deal to make two laws (extension of consulship to 5 years, the other to guarantee Caesar's extension of provincial command for 5 years) allowing them more power. In 'Lives' of **Cato**, he is the main character, he is thrown in jail twice trying to block these two laws (Bills). In the 'Lives' of Pompey & Crassus, the two laws are one law and Cato is barely mentioned. The story is compressed and shortened (conflated into one event).

Jairus' daughter: Gospel of Mark 5:23 Jairus starts by telling that his daughter is 'about to die', then meets the woman with the issue, then people say his daughter has died, and it's 22 verses long. Same story for Luke, in 16 verses. In Matthew's account starts with 'my daughter has just died', and the story is just 8 verses. **NB- MATTHEW READ MARK**

Fig tree withering Mark 11 is 13 verses, the tree is cursed by Jesus and the next day it is withered, with events in between. Matthew 21 is 5 verses long and the withering happens immediately.

How do we know this is compression and not an error?

Post-Resurrection Appearances in Luke seem to all happen in Jerusalem on the same day, no mention of Galilee. Yet in Acts 1:3 Luke says Jesus appeared to them for 40 days.

Who ran to the tomb? Luke 24 just Peter. In John 20 Peter and John. But in Luke 24 the Emmaus road guys tell Jesus how several of the disciples ran to check.

Note again:

Are we losing anything due to compression?

The stories are the same and produce the same result. Authors and readers would not have thought these were contradictions. The core of the gospel stories is always preserved, but the peripherals may be altered to get a point across. In a world without typewriters or computers, this sort of shorthand was used to save space as well as to get the story moving.

Compositional device No. 2

TRANSFERENCE – Skipping people or by-passing them with others

In Plutarch Lives of Pompey and Cato, a Tribune proposes the law since he is the official who is supposed to do it, in Crassus 'Lives', Pompey and Crassus do it. This is just shorthand for Pompey and Crassus getting the Tribune to propose the law. He removes the tribune from the picture. In another example Pompey delivers a speech for a friend in court, in other 'Lives' he has others do it for him.

Who sits on your right and left hand? Mark 10:35 the brothers ask. Matthew 20:20 James & John's Mom asks.

Centurion asking for sick servant, Luke 7, Centurion sends Jewish elders, centurion never appears, in 10 verses. Matthew removes Elders, has Centurion directly request, 6 verses.

Compositional device No. 3

DISPLACEMENT - Placing event at a different time

In Lives of Caesar, he is approached by Consuls and Senators, and Caesar doesn't stand. Realizing his error, he bares his neck for them to slay him. In Lives of Mark Anthony, he doesn't include the scene as an earlier story, but Plutarch has a scene where Mark Anthony and Caesar float the idea of crowning Caesar king. When it doesn't work, Caesar bares his neck to the arena. He's using the earlier event to show the character and tactics of Caesar in a different place.

Jesus flipping the table John has it early in Jesus' ministry, other in the Passover week.

Jesus' anointing by Mary John 12 seems to have the event six days before Passover, while Matthew 26 & Mark 14 place it two days before Passover. But why displace? John is already talking about Mary and family in previous chapter, so continues with a story about her.

Matthew's Five Discourses are compilations of what other gospel writers put in several places.

Luke's Traveling Narrative Little chronology or geographical information (lots of 'He was in a certain place) all roped together in the last journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. Luke is more interested in grouping ideas than following a map.

3) CONCLUSION – IMPACT ON RELIABILITY

We don't like any manipulation of details in the 21st century, where we have photographs, recordings, internet posts, emails, and texts. Yet in our conversations and when we tell stories we often cut corners, use figures of speech, **all for the purpose of crafting a story for our listener**. Half of the bible is poetry, proverbs, prophecy and letters.

This is what the gospel writers are about. The details of each event can be found in the texts, but not in every text, because the intent is not to lay out all kinds of factoids, even though the gospels are full of facts, and they often stop the narrative to clarify things.

The purpose is to give a reliably account of the life of Jesus, His teaching and His person, all leading up to the crucifixion and resurrection, God's act of love for all humanity.

So now, when you read the scriptures and run into a situation that seems odd, or hear someone telling you about contradictions in the gospels, you can be confident and trust that God has indeed put together the world's most important book.

Next Time: Historical & Geographical questions, or possibly the Resurrection narratives.