

## Dealing With “Discrepancies” in the Bible

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What is a discrepancy in the Bible? For our purpose, a discrepancy in Scripture would be an idea, a thought, or a statement that appears discordant with or contradictory to other ideas or statements elsewhere in the Bible. Now the critical question is this, Are there discrepancies in the Bible? This question, in its essence, addresses the nature of the Bible. Does the Bible, in its nature, contain conflicting and inconsistent ideas and information? As with defining the nature of anything, we cannot and should not restrict our understanding of the nature of the Bible to these phenomena. In other words, what the Bible *is* is not fully defined simply by what it *appears* to us to be. An illustration might be helpful here. A rod plunged partially in a pool of water often appears to be bent. This is a phenomenon. However, there are causal reasons for the rod to appear to be bent, while it is not really bent.

It is quite evident that looking at the phenomena of the Bible, that is, looking at it as it appears to us, there are discrepancies. When critics of the Bible point to inconsistent dates, numbers, etc. they are dealing with the Bible formally as a phenomenon. However, the issue becomes a little bit more difficult when we begin to pay attention to other causal reasons regarding the nature of the Bible. Closer examination leads us to ask, for example, how the Bible came about and for what ends it was written. It is these latter kinds of questions that condition our answer as to whether in its nature the Bible contains contradictory and inconsistent facts and ideas. In other words, just as with the apparently bent rod there were causal reasons to show that the rod was not really bent, these questions force us to ask whether there may be causal reasons for the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in the Bible.

First, what do we know about how the Bible came into existence? The classic texts of 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:19-21 show in a fundamental way human and divine agencies working together to produce the Scriptures. This fact cannot be ignored. Scripture is not just a human product. God was involved in its production. Furthermore, without even completely understanding the dynamics and logistics of the divine-human interaction, 2 Peter 1:19 makes it clear that the divine influence endowed the product with firmness, certitude, and stability. This is the essence of the use of the Greek word *bebaioteron* in the text. The foregoing points are causal factors that cannot be ignored in any quest to try to understand the nature of the Bible.

Second, what do we know about the ends for which the Bible was written? Here again 2 Peter 1:19 is helpful. However we interpret the “lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts” the text is unequivocal about the end for which the Scriptures are given: We walk in a dark world, and God through His grace has given us a lamp, the Scriptures, for reproof, guidance, and correction. The intent of the text is that the course of our lives should be directed by the word of God.

How do these factors regarding how the Bible came into being and the ends for which it came into existence help us in dealing with alleged “discrepancies” in the Bible? First, without succumbing to the view of “inerrancy” which associates the perfection of the Bible with God’s timeless perfection, should not the fact of God’s involvement in the production of the Bible mean something when we talk about

discrepancies in the Bible? Second, it would seem that the divine involvement in bringing about the Scriptures was necessary to give it the certitude, surety, and stability that would be needed for it to function as a light and guide for our walk. An unsure and uncertain guide would not be much of a guide. In this connection it is a bit difficult to see how the Bible in its nature could be inconsistent and contradictory and still function effectively as a light and guide for our walk.

The point I am making in bringing up these causal factors in connection with the phenomena of Scripture is to say that by its very nature, Scripture encourages us to approach the Bible as a harmonious, consistent, trustworthy document which may still show evidence of human imperfection due to the human agency involved in its origin. The tension between the divine and human contributions to the production of Scripture is a creative tension that should not be flippantly resolved either in the direction of total divine control as in verbal/mechanical inspiration or in the direction of human ingenuity as in encounter revelation. Therefore, assuming the essential harmony of Scripture, we should seek to resolve apparent contradictions or discrepancies as far as possible by observing, among others, the following points: (1) Read texts in their contexts by paying attention to time and circumstances of writing; (2) be aware that biblical authors may legitimately use former writers and point out aspects that are not readily discerned in the original statements; (3) keep in perspective oriental metaphors and hyperboles; (4) take note of the practice of giving several names to one person, e.g. Edom/Esau and Gideon/Jerubbaal; (5) remember that different authors may be emphasizing different viewpoints; (6) consider the use of different modes of reckoning; and (7) study the different principles of arranging ideas and data.

Although we may be willing to acknowledge tensions and discrepancies in Scripture, it should not be the function of the interpreter to focus on them. Bible students look at the impressive unity and beauty of Scripture. Many scholars have adopted the foregoing approach to Scripture and in the process resolved what hitherto seemed unresolvable discrepancies. Perhaps it should not surprise us that we will sometimes have to search and dig hard and long to see the harmony and beauty of biblical truth. Some discrepancies may be solved in the future as some were resolved in the past. Some texts containing tensions may be harmonized, others may not. Let us study diligently. Jesus, in the parable of the hidden treasure (Matt 13:44) and the parable of the pearl of great price (Matt 13:45-46), seems to suggest that things of tremendous worth do exist that may not be apparent to the casual observer. Joy awaits those who find hidden treasures. If we cannot find a solution, let us not become obsessed with some details losing sight of the whole picture. Let us learn to suspend our judgment, because we are just humans dealing with the Word of God given to us in human language.

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