

Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels, Part 1

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2 Peter 3:16— There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

| | External | Internal |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Positive Evidence | Non-Christian sources Incidental confirmations | Undesigned Coincidences Other internal clues |
| Objections | Alleged historical errors in the Gospels | Alleged contradictions between the Gospels |

Answering objections: the big picture

The Bible is a big book; there are thousands of objections that skeptics have raised against it.

Sometimes, we will encounter questions and objections that we do not at the moment know how to answer.

There is nothing wrong with attempting to answer, to the best of our ability, difficult questions regarding Scripture.

The fallacy of objections

It is easy to get fixated on some particular objection that we cannot, at present, answer in a fully satisfactory way.

The key question: on which side of the issue do the greater objections lie?

It requires more “faith” to be a consistent atheist than it does to be a Christian.

A common view of the New Testament, and one statement of the objection from contradictions

“[The New Testament] is a work of crude carpentry, hammered together long after its purported events, and full of improvised attempts to make things come out right.”

—Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great* (2007), p. 110.

“[T]he sources [regarding Jesus’ resurrection] are *hopelessly contradictory*, as we can see by doing a detailed comparison of the accounts in the Gospels.”

—Bart Ehrman, *The Historical Jesus* (2000), p. 90 [emphasis added]

Our goals for this evening

To understand the difference between a real contradiction and an apparent contradiction.

To explore some of the methods that historians use to assess apparent contradictions in secular historical work, identifying some common sources of apparent contradictions.

To examine, in the light of those methods, a few of the most common charges of contradiction among the Gospels.

To assess the accusation that the Gospels are “hopelessly contradictory.”

What we will not do this evening

We will not prove that the Bible is inspired or that it is inerrant. Historical research cannot establish these conclusions, though it can clear the ground for their consideration.

We will not try to resolve all of the alleged contradictions among the Gospels. But come back next time for more, with a focus on the death, burial, and resurrection narratives.

An example of an actual contradiction

“Legendary science-fiction author Ray Bradbury passed away Wednesday morning in Los Angeles.”

“Bradbury’s daughter confirmed his death to the Associated Press on Wednesday morning. She said her father died Tuesday night in Southern California.”

“Bradbury died Tuesday night in Los Angeles, his agent Michael Congdon confirmed.”

These accounts are discrepant in some details, but the big picture is consistent and strongly confirmed: *Ray Bradbury has just died*. This example illustrates two points:

In secular historical work, scholars expect that independent accounts will have apparent and even real contradictions in many of the details.

Such discrepancies do not affect the overall picture unless the contradictions are real and are so extensive that they undermine the credibility of all of our sources.

Contradictions: real and apparent

Contradiction: Two claims contradict one another when one of them must be false if the other is true. At least one of the two claims must be mistaken.

Apparent contradiction: Two claims apparently contradict one another when it seems that they cannot both be true.

Five common sources of apparent contradiction

1. Carelessness—interpreting a phrase or sentence without regard to genre or narrative context.
2. Completeness—assuming that every account of an event includes every significant detail about it.
3. Conflation—treating two different events or persons as the same.
4. Confusion—treating the same event or person as different (common with names)
5. Context—ignoring facts about the language and culture of the events, or assuming that those are identical to the cultural context we share today.

We will see each of these sources at work in the alleged contradictions we examine this evening.

An apparent contradiction and its resolution

Who made the public proclamation of the Declaration of Independence from the balcony of the Old State House in Boston on the morning of July 18, 1776?

- * Some early sources say it was William Greenleaf, high sheriff of Suffolk County
- * Other early sources say it was Colonel Thomas Crafts

Actually, *both* Greenleaf and Crafts read the Declaration from the balcony. Greenleaf had a weak voice, and the crowd could not hear him clearly, so Crafts—who had a stentorian voice—repeated it after him loudly enough for all to hear.

The apparent contradiction was caused by the assumption that it *could not be both*. But it was. The appearance of contradiction arises because most of us lack a key piece of information about the *context*.

Two accounts of the life of Jonathan Edwards

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| He was a minister, and the son and grandson of a minister | He was a minister, and the son and grandson of a minister |
| He was precocious and, before he was 10 years old, he was famous for his intellectual attainments and his religious maturity | He was precocious and, before he was 10 years old, he was famous for his intellectual attainments and his religious maturity |
| He served for two years as a tutor at his college before accepting a pastoral position | He served for two years as a tutor at his college before accepting a pastoral position |
| ... in the church where his maternal grandfather had been a pastor ... | ... in the church where his maternal grandfather had been a pastor ... |
| ... but was subsequently dismissed on account of a doctrinal dispute | ... but was subsequently dismissed on account of a doctrinal dispute |
| He moved to a smaller church where he was well loved | He moved to a smaller church where he was well loved |
| While at this smaller church, he turned to scholarship and produced several valuable works and corresponded with eminent men at home and abroad | While at this smaller church, he turned to scholarship and produced several valuable works and corresponded with eminent men at home and abroad |
| He was called from this church to the presidency of a prominent college | He was called from this church to the presidency of a prominent college |
| On the first Sunday of the new year, he preached on Jeremiah 28:16—"This year thou shalt die" | On the first Sunday of the new year, he preached on Jeremiah 28:16—"This year thou shalt die" |
| Although he was apparently in good health when he preached that sermon, he died later that year, in his mid 50s | Although he was apparently in good health when he preached that sermon, he died later that year, in his mid 50s |

| | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| He died in 1758 | He died in 1801 |
|------------------------|------------------------|

Since no one can die in his mid 50s both in 1758 and in 1801, it seems that one of these accounts must be wrong. We will return to this striking apparent contradiction later.

Some alleged contradictions in the Gospels

1. Matthew and Luke present conflicting genealogies for Jesus.
2. Matthew claims that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, but Luke claims that Jesus was born during the census of Quirinius more than a decade later.
3. Matthew has Mary and Joseph living in a house in Bethlehem when Jesus was born, while Luke says they were living in Nazareth and traveled to Bethlehem for a census.

4. Mark says that Jesus had a disciple named Thaddeus, but he doesn't list Judas. Luke lists Judas but not Thaddeus.
5. Matthew says that the centurion came to Jesus himself, but Luke says that he sent messengers instead of coming himself.
6. In the Synoptics, the cleansing of the temple comes at the end of Jesus' ministry; in John, it comes at the beginning.
7. Matthew says that Judas hanged himself and the Jewish rulers bought a field with his money; Luke, in Acts, says that Judas bought a field and fell down and died.

Alleged contradiction #1: The genealogies of Jesus

Matthew 1:16—... and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

Luke 3:23—Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli, ...

Apparently, according to Matthew, Joseph's father's name was Jacob, whereas according to Luke, Joseph's father's name was Eli. The two genealogies diverge widely all the way back to David, a thousand years earlier.

Assumption: Both genealogies are meant to give the ancestry of Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father.

Answer to alleged contradiction #1

The assumption is false; the genealogy in Luke goes through Mary, not through Joseph. The appearance of contradiction arises because the critic has conflated two distinct genealogies.

Two clues in the text suggest that the assumption is false:

1. The Greek in Luke 3 does not say "the son of Heli, but rather simply "of Heli"; the word "son" is not repeated after the first usage.
2. The location of the qualifying phrase—"who was the son, as it was supposed, of Joseph"—and the omission of the possessive definite article *του* before Joseph's name make it plain that Joseph is not part of the lineal descent being given.

A related complaint

Luke gives many more generations than Matthew does for the part where the two genealogies run in parallel.

“Do these people never open the book that they believe is the literal truth? Why don’t they notice those glaring contradictions? Shouldn’t a literalist worry about the fact that Matthew traces Joseph’s descent from King David via twenty-eight intermediate generations, while Luke has forty-one generations?” – Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Mariner Books, 2008), p. 120

Response: Matthew does skip over some generations. But it is not required that either genealogy should give each link always from father to son. His purpose is to establish Jesus’ legal descent, not to give every step in the descent. Note the way that Matthew opens his genealogy: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

A second complaint

“But Matthew *counts* the generations and comes up with three groups of fourteen. How can he be skipping generations if he is *counting* them?”

Assumption: the only purpose of counting the generations is to specify the total number of father-to-son links in the list.

Answer to the second complaint

The purpose of Matthew’s counting is not to specify the number of father-to-son generations but rather to break the list into three parts, setting 14 names in each.

“But why?”

Possibly for easy memorization. See the similar convention in the Zohar. Additionally, in Hebrew, the numerical value of the name “David” (דוד) is $4 + 6 + 4 = 14$.

A third complaint

How could they possibly have known their ancestry back so far?

To know the tribe from which one was descended was a matter of great importance to the Jews.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, gives his own ancestry, and then writes: “So have I set down the genealogy of our family as I have found it described in the public records, to put an end to any would-be detractors.” *Autobiography* 1.1 (#6)

The third complaint arises from ignorance of the *cultural context* of first century Judaism

Alleged contradiction #2: The date of Jesus’ birth

Matthew 2:1—Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king ...

Luke 2:1-2—In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. (ESV)

The complaint stated: “Matthew claims that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, but Luke claims that Jesus was born during the census of Quirinius more than a decade later.”

But *does* Luke claim that?

A summary of the answer

Luke knows that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, who died in 4 BC (Luke 1:5). Luke also knows about the taxation under Quirinius in AD 6 (Acts 5:37). Luke does not claim that the taxation under Quirinius took place in 6 BC or that Jesus was born during the taxing of Quirinius

See lecture 04b (Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels: Luke and John) for details!

Alleged contradiction #3: Where were Mary and Joseph living?

Matthew 2:1—Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, ...

Matthew 2:11—And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother ...

Luke 2:4—And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, ...

The complaint stated:

“Matthew 2:1-12, 22-23 says Joseph was originally a resident of Bethlehem, whereas Luke 1:26-27, 56; 2:4-5, 39 says he was originally a resident of Nazareth.” —Joseph Sandoval, *Can Christians Prove the Resurrection?* (2010), p. 260

But is that really what Matthew says?

Matthew never says that Joseph and Mary were living in Bethlehem already. The first time Bethlehem is even mentioned is in 2:1, as the place where Jesus was *born*.

He doesn't mention a house until the wise men come, and he does not call it the house where Jesus was *born*, but rather *the place where the child was*.

It is important to read the text for oneself and not take someone else's word for what it says.

A complaint about this answer

"If Mary and Joseph were living somewhere other than Bethlehem, why didn't Matthew say so?"

Answer: None of the Gospels professes to give a complete account of the life of Jesus. That was not their purpose.

John 20:30—Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book ...

The complaint arises from a misplaced expectation of completeness.

Alleged contradiction #4

Mark 3:18—... Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, ...

Luke 6:16—... and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

The complaint stated: "Mark says that Thaddeus was a disciple but Judas son of James was not; Luke says the opposite."

The answer: It appears that these are two names for the same person, just as Cephas, Simon, and Peter are all names for the same person. The objection arises from a confusion in which two names for the same person are mistaken for names of two different people.

Alleged contradiction #5

Matthew 8:5—When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him ...

Luke 7:3—When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant.

So did the centurion come himself, or did he send others as messengers?

The answer: In the world of the first century, it was common to speak of someone's performing an action when it was by his authority, or by his provision, or by his request, that it was done.

Matthew speaks of the action as belonging to the centurion because he initiates it. Luke, with greater detail, informs us that he sent the messages by means of others.

Two illustrations of this usage

Matthew 27:59-60—And Joseph [of Arimathea] took the body ... and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock ...

John 4:1-2—... the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), ...

The objection regarding the centurion arises from missing part of the cultural and linguistic context.

Alleged contradiction #6

John 2:12-20—Jesus goes up to Jerusalem and chases the money-changers and animal merchants out of the Temple with a whip. This is at the beginning of his ministry

Matthew 21:12 ff; Mark 11:15; Luke 19:45—Jesus chases the money-changers and animal merchants out of the Temple. This is at the end of his ministry.

Are these two passages descriptions of the same event?

The curious case of Jonathan Edwards, revisited

In the two accounts of the life of Jonathan Edwards, it seemed that one or the other of the accounts must be wrong, since no man can die in his mid 50s both in 1758 and in 1801. And yet, despite appearances, *both accounts are perfectly true*.

Astonishing as it may seem, all of the facts listed are true of two different men, a father and a son, both named Jonathan Edwards. *We are inclined to underestimate the extent to which different people or different events may resemble one another*. Perhaps some clever scholar centuries from now, recovering only incomplete information, will inform us that there was only ever one Jonathan Edwards!

There is nothing wrong with assuming, provisionally, that two very similar accounts in different sources refer to the same event or person. This is often the simplest explanation. But when otherwise reliable sources close to the event also report different details or settings, it is reasonable to ask whether the accounts might refer to two distinct events or persons rather than just getting it wrong about one and the same event or person.

Application to the cleansing of the Temple

It appears most reasonable to say that Jesus chased the money-changers and merchants out of the Temple twice. The coincidences between the two accounts are striking, but they are less striking than the case of the two Jonathan Edwards's. And the differences in time are clearly described.

The Gospel authors have shown themselves to be historically reliable in other respects, so they deserve the benefit of the doubt here.

Other plausible instances of conflation

The location of “the” Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7; Luke 6:17-49)

Plausibly Matthew 5-7 gathers together much teaching of Jesus, not all of it necessarily delivered on one occasion

The anointing of Jesus with perfume (Matthew 26:6 ff; Mark 14:3; Luke 7:37 ff; John 12:3)

The differences in these accounts suggest that they are not all one event

Alleged contradiction #7

Matthew 27:3-10—Judas throws the 30 pieces of silver into the temple and goes and hangs himself; the chief priests buy a field with the money.

Acts 1:18—Judas acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.

Two difficulties in these passages

1. How did Judas die—by hanging, or by falling?
2. Who purchased the field—Judas himself, or the chief priests?

How did Judas die?

A clue: when a living person falls, he does not generally burst open. But this is what we might expect if

1. Judas was already dead, and it was his dead body that fell, and
2. The body fell from some height.

The cliffs overlooking the valley of Hinnom could well be the place where Judas hanged himself and his dead body fell and burst open.

Who purchased the field?

Remember the case of the centurion: an action done by someone’s authority or through his provision is considered to be his action. There is even an old legal maxim regarding this: *Qui facit per alium, facit per se*—he who acts through another does the act himself.

Thus, the chief priests purchased the field with the money Judas had provided. That is why it is fair for Peter to say in Acts 1:18 that Judas purchased it.

Summary of the alleged contradictions considered in this lecture

1. Matthew and Luke present conflicting genealogies for Jesus.

Conflation of two distinct genealogies

2. Matthew claims that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, but Luke claims that Jesus was born during the census of Quirinius more than a decade later.

Carelessness in reading Luke, ignoring both Luke 1:5 and Acts 5:37

3. Matthew has Mary and Joseph living in a house in Bethlehem when Jesus was born, while Luke says they were living in Nazareth and traveled to Bethlehem for a census.

Careless reading and assumption of completeness

4. Mark says that Jesus had a disciple named Thaddeus, but he doesn't list Judas. Luke lists Judas but not Thaddeus.

Confusion: these are two names for the same person. Information about the cultural context shows how probable this is.

5. Matthew says that the centurion came to Jesus himself, but Luke says that he sent messengers instead of coming himself.

Context: Matthew uses a common figure of speech, ascribing to a person actions that are done at his bidding, on his behalf, or by his authority

6. In the Synoptics, the cleansing of the temple comes at the end of Jesus' ministry; in John, it comes at the beginning.

Conflation: the two events appear to be distinct. Objection arises from the insistence on completeness

7. How did Judas die? And who purchased the field?

A look at the geographical context provides a plausible resolution of the two accounts of Judas's death. Consideration of the same principle seen in the case of the centurion (#5 above) resolves the question of who purchased the field.

Preliminary conclusion

So far as these alleged contradictions are concerned, those who charge that the Gospels are “hopelessly contradictory” have not made their case. Each of these objections can be either decisively or plausibly resolved in a manner that reconciles the sources without straining.

But we have not yet looked at the death, burial, and resurrection accounts in the Gospels. These will form the subject of the next lecture.

This talk is the sixth – numbered 5a – in a series:

1. Who Wrote the Gospels? (January 23)
2. External Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels (February 13)
3. Internal Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels (February 27)
- 4a. Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels, Part 1 (May 21)
- 4b. Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels, Part 2 (June 11)
- 5a. Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels, Part 1 (July 16)
- 5b. Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels, Part 2
6. The Resurrection of Jesus

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