

## 7. Alleged Contradictions

The other end of the spectrum from the set of undesigned coincidences in the Gospel records are the set of alleged contradictions between them. The case that is made about these is as follows:-

- The Gospel accounts contain places where a detail in one account is in complete contradiction to a detail in another account.
- If the Gospels were clear and accurate records of real events then the details would fit together exactly.
- Therefore the Gospels are not clear and accurate records of the events that they describe.

The trouble with this argument is that it requires various pre-conditions to be effective. At the least it requires that the contradictions be real; if the contradictions are simply imagined then the argument falls completely.

Some also argue that the existence of a small number of contradictions may not affect the substantial accuracy of a document. A document might be substantially accurate and still contain a small number of lapses of memory which appear as inconsistent details. However, this article will argue that no real contradictions exist in the Gospel records. The proposed contradictions can all be reconciled, sometimes with difficulty but often with great ease.

The Bible in general, and the Gospels in particular, contain places where there are apparent contradictions. These contradictions, however, are generally apparent rather than real. They can usually be shown to be examples of places where the accounts appear to differ but are really describing the same thing as one another. They fall into three main categories:-

- 1) Places where inconsistent assumptions about the situation being described surface as apparent inconsistencies in the detail of the events described. By sorting out the assumptions the apparent contradictions are resolved.
- 2) Places where different people see different things within the same incident.
- 3) Places where the language of the different accounts is translated inconsistently, leading to an apparent inconsistency in the accounts. For example, a failure to understand an idiom may lead one to conclude that there is a discrepancy between accounts.
- 4) Slightly more complex apparent contradictions where some study is required in order to understand the issue. This category is very rare.
- 5) Manufactured contradictions where passages are compared with other passages about different events so that there is no reason to suppose that the two accounts would have more than a passing similarity.

### 7.1 Inconsistent Assumptions

Here the reader makes unfounded assumptions about the text which force the interpretation of it into lines which are astray from the original narrative. The result can be an apparent contradiction in the text. This is all the more so if different assumptions are made for different parts of the text, but it is not necessary to have two sets of dissimilar assumptions. There are several examples of alleged contradictions of this kind in Bart D. Ehrman's "Misquoting Jesus". Ehrman was so convinced of his assumptions that he allowed his interpretation to contribute to the overthrow of his faith.

#### *The Day of the Crucifixion*

For example, consider the problem of the day of the crucifixion. Was Jesus crucified on the eve of the Passover, or on the Passover day itself. The problem is that the Last Supper is described as happening on the eve of the Passover (Matthew 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7) while the crucifixion of Jesus happens the next morning and is also described as happening on the eve of the Passover (John 19:14-16). This is cited as a contradiction in many works on the subject, among them JTE<sup>84</sup> p56

The solution to the problem is extremely simple. Jewish days begin at sunset, not at midnight. The last supper took place just after sunset, and the crucifixion in the next day. In Jewish terms, the terms of the writers of the Gospels, these are both the same day. There is no contradiction other than with the assumption that the new day starts in the middle of the night. Once the true situation is realised the problems are removed.

#### *The Gadarene Swine*

A similar example concerns the location of the miracle of the Gadarene swine. In some manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel this is described as happening in "the country of the Gadarenes" (Matthew 8:28). However, the best manuscripts of Mark describe this as happening near Gergesa (Mark 5:1, Luke 8:26). This also is sometimes cited as a contradiction in the accounts.

The point here is that Gergesa was a small town on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, close to the shore. It was in territory controlled by the larger town of Gadara, one of the ten cities that made up the Decapolis. Thus a considerable stretch of the shores of Galilee was both in the area of Gergesa and Gadara. There was another city called Gerasa which was much further from the Sea of Galilee (the modern town of Jerash); some commentators confuse the two and this adds to further confusion in their discussions.

This apparent contradiction is also, in part, a matter of manuscript variation. The manuscripts of the three Synoptic Gospels all have a choice of place name, offering either "Gadara", "Gergesa" or "Gerasa". Erasmus, producing the Textus Receptus on which the Authorised (King James) Version is based decided that Matthew should have "Gergesa" while Mark has "Gadara". The modern UBS text has decided to choose the exact opposite. While the geography of the day ensures that the same piece of ground could be under the jurisdiction of both Gadara and Gergesa, it is possible that the original text was "Gergesa" (or "Gadara") throughout. If this is the case then there is no hint of any contradiction.

To some extent the apparent contradiction of the place of the Gadarene could have been manufactured by textual critics.

#### *Jesus in Egypt*

The Matthew birth narrative (Matthew 2:19-22) says that after the visit of the wise men to Bethlehem Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Egypt to avoid further peril from Herod the

Great. Only later did they return to Nazareth. Luke 2 doesn't mention the visit to Egypt, but simply says that the family returned to Nazareth after they had fulfilled the commandments of the Law of Moses about new babies. Ehrman supposes that this shows that the family did not go to Egypt, but this is merely an assumption. The fact that Luke does not mention the visit doesn't mean that it didn't occur.

## 7.2 Contradictions from Assumptions

One of the most common sources of apparent contradictions is where the real contradiction is not in the text, but in the interpretation placed on that text by the person who proposes the contradiction. Because that person is convinced of his interpretation the contradiction appears to be sound to him, although someone who has looked more carefully at the text doesn't see any contradiction at all. There are some examples of this in Bart D. Ehrman's "Misquoting Jesus".

## 7.3 Differences of Viewpoint

On some occasions different accounts of the same incident are given by people from different viewpoints. On such occasions the witnesses may see slightly different things and might report them differently. However, this is merely a difference of point of view. It is not a contradiction in the accounts.

One example is the angels seen in the tomb of Jesus shortly after Jesus' resurrection. According to Luke's Gospel, there were two angels in this tomb. The Gospel describes them in the words "While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel." (Luke 24:4). However, in Matthew and Mark there is only one person there "And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed." (Mark 16:5). The differences here can be accounted for by the differences of viewpoint of Matthew's source and Mark's source.

However, there is another possible explanation for this one, which is common in many of the accounts of scripture. In the New Testament in particular it is common for the writers to mention only the significant members of a group of people. Thus one writer might mention a group of several people as doing something but when another writer hears a spokesman for the group only the name of the spokesman is given.

This occurs in the account of the women who visited the tomb of Jesus. Most Gospels mention several of these women, but the early part of John 20 only mentions Mary Magdalene.

- 1 Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.
- 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." (John 20:1,2)

In this passage it initially looks as though only Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. However, her own words show that she was part of a group: "They have taken the Lord... and we do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:2).

Thus there were several people in the party, but John's Gospel only mentions one of them. One could consider this to be an undesigned coincidence. John's Gospel mentions only one

woman but the detail of the verb being in the first person plural shows that in fact there were several in the party. The other Gospels indicate that there were several women in the party.

The difference in outlook between different cultures often gives rise to apparently odd manners of speech. For example, one might ask how many months in a year have 28 days. One answer, obvious to modern westerners, would be “Just February”. However, one might also give the answer “All months - most have 28 days and more”. These two answers are not contradictory - they are simply the result of different outlooks.

#### **7.4 Language Problems**

Sometimes a failure to understand language leads to an apparent contradiction between accounts. For example an idiom in one account can produce an apparently different result from a simple statement in another account. One example is the healing of a blind man near Jericho. The account of Matthew says that this incident occurred as they (Jesus and the disciples) left Jericho (Matthew 20:29). Luke 18 says that the incident occurred “As he drew near to Jericho” (Luke 18:35)

There are several points about this passage which suggest that there might be two separate healings of blind men in Jericho within a short time of one another. However, this detail is not one of them. The phrase “As he drew near to Jericho” is an idiom which simply means “when they were near Jericho”. It does not imply a direction of travel.

#### **7.5 Complex Parallel Passages**

These are alleged contradictions where a cursory reading suggest that there are discrepancies between different accounts. To understand these it is often necessary to put together a large number of separate elements, because the reason for the apparent contradiction is hidden in some other, apparently unrelated passages.

One example of this kind of alleged contradiction is the genealogies of Matthew and Luke. The Matthew genealogy contains the significant generations between Abraham and Jesus. Luke contains a genealogy which goes from Adam to Jesus. The two genealogies are essentially the same up to David, but then diverge from one another. Two names are the same in the remaining genealogies, but all the others are different.

There are several alternative possible explanations for the two genealogies, but the most probably correct explanation is that one of the genealogies (the one in Matthew) is clearly the genealogy of Joseph while the other one (the one in Luke) is the genealogy of Mary. Luke’s genealogy is essentially a list of names; the list does not indicated whether a paternal line or a maternal line is indicated at any point. However, while this is a likely conclusion we cannot be certain that the reality is that one of the other explanations is the genuine one.

At this point critics usually suggest that there would be no point in including a genealogy of Joseph in the genealogy of Jesus as Joseph is not the father of Jesus. It is, of course, incorrect to claim that the genealogy is irrelevant. Joseph was the husband of Mary (as Matthew 1:16 points out). Under the Law of Moses the husband was important in determining a woman’s eligibility for an inheritance. The law concerned is that of the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 36). The important point is that a woman could inherit from her ancestors, but was required to marry someone else who was in line for that

inheritance for it to remain hers. Mary was a descendent of David, and Jesus was thus a descendent of David as well (Acts 2:30 - the verse is emphatic about Jesus being a physical descendent of David). However, Mary would have lost her genealogy, as would Jesus, had she married someone who was not a descendent of David. The genealogy in Matthew is thus an essential part of the genealogy of Jesus because of the technicalities of Jewish Law.

A similarly complicated explanation is required for the accounts of the death of Judas Iscariot. There are several possible alternative explanations, but it is difficult to decide which of them is the best.

## 7.6 Manufactured Contradictions

The shortage of real contradictions in the text of the Gospels is a problem for those who wish to cast doubt on the Gospels. There are thus a number of commonly cited alleged contradictions which in reality are differences between accounts of quite different events.

For example, the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand are two completely separate events. There are undesigned coincidences within the account of the feeding of the five thousand which show the differences between the two accounts:-

- The accounts include references to the presence of green grass at the feeding of the 5,000 which matches the time of year at which the miracle took place. The feeding of the 4,000 merely mentions the ground; there is no reference to grass in it.
- The accounts use a the word “*Kophinos*” (Gk “κοφίνος”) to describe the baskets used in the feeding of the five thousand, whereas the baskets at the feeding of the 4,000 are consistently referred to as “spuris” (Gk “σπυρίς”).

The two occasions are clearly different but the critics tend to assume that they are both distorted accounts of the same event. As a consequence they can pick out contradictions in detail between them. These are not, in fact, failings in the real accounts, but rather they are demonstrations that the accounts of the two events are separate, accurate and that there is no confusion between the two.

It is surprising how often an instance like this can start as a claim of contradiction only to show up as an undesigned coincidence when it has been examined thoroughly.

Other instances where contradictions are claimed between different events include:-

- The cleansings of the temple (John 2:13ff, Matthew 21:12ff, Mark 11:15ff and Luke 19:45ff). In fact John’s Gospel describes a cleansing of the temple at the start of Jesus’ ministry while the Synoptic Gospels describe a different episode in the week before Jesus’ crucifixion.
- The instance where a woman pours perfume on Jesus at a meal. Again, there are two instances involved and the details are quite different between them.

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### **7.7 Conclusion - Contradictions**

There are, in fact, remarkably few places where one can find anything resembling a real contradiction anywhere in the Bible. There are several places where there are apparent contradictions, but further analysis indicates that these are not, indeed, really contradictory. Indeed the literature on contradictions is a fruitful source of further undesigned coincidences as it often points out places where there are insignificant details which appear to be opposed to one another and are therefore clearly independent. The agreement between these details is often not immediately apparent, but when the situation is analysed another undesigned coincidence often appears.

Many of the newer undesigned coincidences discussed above are the result of noticing a claim of a contradiction between different accounts and tracking through the text to note that the apparent contradiction was in fact merely a sign of independence between two accounts by different people. A closer inspection showed that the accounts were, in fact, in complete agreement with one another, down to tiny details.