

Alleged Bible Contradictions

By Travis Dickinson

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, students will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Read Exodus 20:12 and Luke 14:26. Prepare to share any differences you see.

Assignment Two

Read Matthew 28:2–3; Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4; and John 20:11–12. Prepare to share any differences you see.

Assignment Three

Read Matthew 28:8 and Mark 16:8. Prepare to share any differences you see. Then try to reconcile these two passages. (Hint: Perhaps there were two phases in the women's reaction).

Scripture to Memorize

"The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting."

Psalm 119:160

Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will understand how alleged contradictions in the Bible can be addressed and resolved.

Travis Dickinson is associate professor of Philosophy and Christian Apologetics at Southwestern Seminary. Travis's writing and research focus is primarily in the areas of philosophy, Christian apologetics, and faith and culture. He is the author of *Everyday Apologetics* (Seminary Hill Press, 2015) as well as a several articles. He blogs at www.travisdickinson.com and www.theologicalmatters.com. Travis has been teaching courses in Christian apologetics for over fifteen years and has addressed apologetics and evangelistic ministry in more than thirty-five countries. He is a frequent conference speaker to adults, college students, and youth. Travis has a PhD and an MA in philosophy from the University of Iowa, an MA in philosophy of religion and ethics from Talbot School of Theology, an MA in Christian apologetics from Biola University and a BA in education from Alaska Bible College. He is married to Shari and has four children.

It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

Suppose you were a seminary professor of apologetics. Suppose the seminary president came to your office, along with his administrative team, Bob and Joe. Suppose later you bumped into one of your friends and told him: "The president came to my office."

Suppose even later you ran into Joe's parents and told them: "Joe came to my office with the president." And suppose that evening you told your spouse: "The president, Joe, and Bob came by my office." Were your three different accounts of this meeting contradictory?

Contradictions

A contradiction exists when two or more statements cannot be true at the same time. If a person says "A is true" and then later says "A is not true," this is a contradiction since these cannot both be true at the same time.

Discussion Question

In the **Real-Life Scenario** above, the three accounts are indeed different. However, different accounts are not the same thing as contradictory accounts. The same event can be described by merely highlighting different, though consistent details. If the president, Joe, and Bob all came to your office, then these different statements are all true at the same time. The president was there. Joe was there. Bob was there.

Alleged Contradictions in Scripture

Studying the Passage

One alleged contradiction concerns the women to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection. We, in fact, find a different list of women in each of the four gospels:

Matthew 28:1: "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary"

Mark 16:1: "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome"

Luke 24:10: "Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them"

John 20:1: "Mary Magdalene"

Discussion Question

What are the differences in these accounts? Do you see any contradictions?

Studying the Passage

If the passage from John said Mary Magdalene came by herself, then it would be impossible to reconcile these passages. But as it is, to claim that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb is perfectly consistent with saying that Mary Magdalene *and* other women came to the tomb.

Why would the Gospel authors not include everyone who was there? Bible scholars tell us that each Gospel had a somewhat different audience. Mary Magdalene is mentioned in each account. She, as with the seminary president in the **Real-Life Scenario**, would clearly be the person of prominence in the group. We typically mention people of prominence but may leave out others who do not play important roles.

Assignment One Feedback

The student who completed **Assignment One** during the week can now report on the differences seen in Exodus 20:12 and Luke 14:26.

Discussion Question

Do the Exodus and Luke passages contain contradictory commands?

Studying the Passage

Here we want to consider the context. The Exodus passage is straightforward. We are called to honor our parents. How about the Luke passage? This passage comes in a broader context of Jesus teaching in parables. As a master teacher, Jesus colored these accounts with big and exaggerated terms. He does this because we can sometimes get our point across more effectively when we exaggerate in these ways.

A mother might tell you that “the kids are bouncing off the walls.” If you took her literally, then you would miss what she is saying. She is intentionally exaggerating to effectively get her point across that the kids are having an energetic moment.

Read Luke 14:25–27 out loud.

Discussion Question

What is the overall point Jesus communicated in Luke 14:25–27?

Studying the Passage, v. 27

Verse 27. carry his own cross. Jesus commanded His followers to carry their cross. But we don’t ever see the disciples carrying literal crosses around town. They understood that Jesus was calling them to be completely sold out:

- So much so that it is as if they are on their way to being executed on a cross
- So much so that it is as if they hate all other things, including their parents

So we can see honoring one’s father and mother is consistent with having complete allegiance to Christ.

Assignment Two Feedback

The student who completed **Assignment Two** during the week can now report on the differences seen in Matthew 28:2–3; Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4; and John 20:11–12.

Let’s first confront the fact that two of the accounts call these individuals men and two call them angels. It is not uncommon in Scripture to call angels “men” (consider Genesis 19:1–22). These figures are clearly more than just men, given their description (consider Luke 24:4) and the reaction of the witnesses (consider Mark 16:5). So these were no mere men but were angels.

Was it a single angel, or were there two angels? The same principle applies as was mentioned in the section above. When there are two individuals, it is not contradictory to focus on and only mention one. So the right reading seems to be that two angels were present and one of them perhaps played a more prominent role.

Assignment Three Feedback

The student who completed **Assignment Three** during the week can now report on the differences seen in Matthew 28:8 and Mark 16:8. Then the student can try to reconcile these two passages.

Discussion Question

Suppose four witnesses had the same testimony—word for word. Should we trust this testimony? Or would it suggest that something “fishy” is going on?

Rather than casting doubt on historical accounts in the Bible, compatible differences of detail actually provide reason to think the accounts are reliable. Having four consistent yet different accounts means we have four independent sources in the Gospels. If various accounts are independent (that is, not relying on one another), then they *should not* be identical in the details they emphasize. For two witnesses to employ the same details in their descriptions of an event is virtually impossible. Having different details actually supports their authenticity and paints a fuller picture of these events.

On Your Own

Start a journal of questions you have about Scripture. Whenever you have a question, take it to trusted leaders in your church. Leave space to write how you get your questions resolved.

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven.

Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart (the real you) for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something in your life for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit says to you below and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes

Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service

5 minutes

Prayer

7 minutes

At Home: Nail It Down

The Bible is an amazing set of documents. It speaks to us in a way no other book does. It is the revealed Word of God, and in it are words of life. However, it is a sophisticated book as well. It was written by many different authors, and it contains different kinds of literature (such as history, poetry, prophecy, etc.). The Bible teaches many different things, and it was written over the better part of two millennia! Given this sophistication, it is no wonder it contains some differences and potential discrepancies.

However, this monumental work does not have a single, clear contradiction. To be sure, minor details can be difficult to reconcile. But different accounts are not the same thing as contradictory accounts. The same event can be described in many ways, highlighting different, though consistent details.

Just how many women were at Jesus's empty tomb? Well, we don't know the exact number, and no crucial detail of the resurrection depends on this issue. But the accounts are clearly not contradictory.

Rather than casting doubt on reports in the Bible, compatible differences of detail actually provide reason to think the accounts are reliable. The reason is having consistent though different accounts means we have independent sources in the Scriptures. If various accounts are independent (that is, not relying on one another), then they *should not* be identical in the details they emphasize.

The Bible clearly is the Word of God, and it does not contain error. The Bible is trustworthy and thus provides a solid foundation for the faith and life of a disciple.

Parent Question

Why are differences in biblical accounts a good thing? Why are these not contradictions?

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to teenagers who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.

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