

How Do I Know the Bible is True?

Objection 3: The Bible is full of contradictions.

When someone raises this objection, a reasonable first response is, “Show me one.” Often, the person cannot do so. However, it must be acknowledged that there are numerous places in Scripture where there are seemingly conflicting testimonies and apparent contradictions. If the Bible comes from God, and if God neither lies nor makes mistakes, how do we reconcile these Bible difficulties?

The law of non-contradiction

First, we should examine the Bible the same way we examine other documents, using the traditional rules of logic and reason. A good place to start is by applying the law of non-contradiction, which maintains that “nothing can both be and not be.” For example, it cannot be day and night in the same place at the same time. Therefore, if a passage of Scripture violates the law of non-contradiction, its trustworthiness is undermined. At the same time, two statements may differ without being contradictory.

For example, in Matthew’s Gospel we read that Jesus meets two blind men (Matt. 20:29-34). Mark and Luke, however, mention only one blind man. Are these contradictory statements? Not necessarily. If Jesus meets two men, He certainly meets one. In addition, when the three Gospel accounts are read in their entirety, it becomes clear that Bartimaeus picks up an unnamed blind companion during the time Jesus visits Jericho. Finally, “Matthew was concerned to mention all who were involved in this episode (just as he alone of the Synoptists recorded the fact that it was really two maniacs that met Jesus on the territory of Gadara [Matt. 8:28], whereas both Mark and Luke speak only of one demoniac possessed by the Legion demons)... As for the second blind beggar, neither Mark nor Luke finds him significant enough to mention” (Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, p. 333).

By the way, apparent contradictions such as this actually provide supporting evidence for the veracity of the eyewitnesses. They show that the New Testament writers didn’t “get their story straight” in order to concoct a hoax. Just as four eyewitnesses to an auto accident would report what they saw from their different vantage points, so the four Gospel writers sought to communicate to their readers the details they felt were most important. Their testimonies are consistent even though their stories vary in detail.

Translation and context

Next, we should consider translation and context. Some Bible passages appear contradictory because of the nuances of Bible translation. A case in point: The Book of Acts has two accounts of Paul’s conversion experience. Acts 9:7 (KJV) says the men journeying with Paul hear a voice but see no one. Acts 22:9 (KJV) says they do not hear the voice. The two passages appear

contradictory, but the Greek clears it up, as do some modern translations. The construction of the verb is different in each account. W.F. Arndt explains: “In Acts 9:7 it (the verb ‘to hear,’ *akouo*) is not the same in both accounts. In Acts 9:7 it is used with the genitive, in Acts 22:9 with the accusative. The construction with the genitive simply expresses that something is being heard or that certain sounds reach the ear; nothing is indicated as to whether a person understands what he hears or not. The construction with the accusative, however, describes a hearing, which includes mental apprehension of the message spoken. From this it becomes evident that the two passages are not contradictory” (*Does the Bible Contradict Itself?* quoted in “Bible Contradictions – Appearance or Reality?” found in www.allabouttruth.org.)

Some additional considerations

There are other considerations that may help clear up Bible difficulties:

- **Time.** Some seemingly contradictory statements are separated by years – even hundreds of years – and must be seen in their proper time frames. For example, Gen. 1:31 records that God was satisfied with creation, while Gen. 6:6 says He was sorry that He made man. Contradictory? No. Keep in mind that hundreds of years, including the fall of man, came between the first and second statements.
- **Context.** A careful study of the chapters and books in which the apparent contradictions occur often reveals subtle differences that aid understanding.
- **Sense.** Words and phrases can be used literally or figuratively. For example, in Matt. 11:14 Jesus identifies John the Baptist as Elijah, yet John denies being Elijah (John 1:21). Contradiction? No. In Matthew, Elijah is described as the spiritual antitype of the great prophet (see also Luke 1:17).
- **Quotations.** Many references to Old Testament passages are not word-for-word quotes in the New Testament. Rather, they are paraphrases or summaries. Many of the apparent discrepancies in the Gospels, Acts and the writings of Paul – minor as they are – disappear once we judge ancient historians by the standards of their day rather than ours. As Craig L. Blomberg writes, “In a world which did not even have a symbol for a quotation mark, no one expected a historian to reproduce a speaker’s words verbatim” (“The Historical Reliability of the New Testament,” *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, p. 207).
- **Understanding.** Some critics assume that passages they can’t explain cannot be explained by anyone. But lack of understanding does not necessarily imply errors in transmission.
- **Perspective.** When two or more writers provide separate accounts of the same events, differences in names, numbers, and conversations may be accounted for by each writer’s perspective: What did he see? Who did he interview? What was most important to record? Who is the audience to whom he wrote? Should numbers be exact or rounded?

Rick Cornish summarizes: “Skeptics play a constructive role. Their challenges force us to study and sometimes reevaluate our interpretations. But until they improve their own game, we need not worry about their accusation that ‘the Bible is full of errors and contradictions.’ It’s not” (5 *Minute Apologist*, p. 68).

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Objection 4: There are so many translations of the Bible that it's impossible to know which one is right.

It's true there is an alphabet soup of Bible translations available today, from the KJV to the NJB and the TNIV to the HCSB. This has led some people to ask, "Which version is right?" and others to conclude that because there is so much variation between translations, none of them is correct. Keep in mind, however, that the *autographs*, or original documents, of Scripture are inerrant – not the subsequent copies and translations. Even though there are dozens of English translations that differ in varying degrees from one another, we have a high degree of confidence that the source documents from which these versions come are accurate representations of the autographs.

Andreas J. Kostenberger writes: "[T]he task of translating the Bible from its source languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) into a receptor language such as English involves many issues related to the nature of language and communication.... The goal, of course, is the production of an English version that is an accurate rendering of the text written in such a way that the Bible retains its literary beauty, theological grandeur, and, most importantly, its message" ("Is the Bible Today What Was Originally Written?" found in www.4truth.net).

General translation classifications

There are four general classifications of Bible translations: formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, optimal equivalence, and paraphrase.

Formal equivalence. Often called a "word-for-word" or "literal" translation, the principle of formal equivalence "seeks as nearly as possible to preserve the structure of the original language. It seeks to represent each word of the translated text with an exact equivalent word in the translation so that the reader can see word for word what the original human author wrote" (The Apologetics Study Bible, p. xviii). Advantages of formal equivalence include: (a) consistency with the conviction that the Holy Spirit inspired not just the thoughts but the very words of Scripture; (b) access to the structure of the text in the original language; and (c) accuracy to the degree that English has an exact equivalent for each word. Drawbacks include sometimes awkward English or a misunderstanding of the author's intent. The only truly formal equivalence translation is an interlinear version that tries to render each Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek word with an English equivalent without changing the word order. Translations that *tend* to follow a formal equivalence philosophy are the King James Version (KJV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the English Standard Version (ESV), and The Amplified Bible (AMP – a word-for-word translation that features additional amplification of word meanings).

Dynamic equivalence. Often referred to as “thought-for-thought” translation, dynamic equivalence attempts to distinguish the meaning of a text from its form and then translate the meaning so that “it makes the same impact on modern readers that the ancient text made on its original readers” (The Apologetics Study Bible, p. xviii). Strengths include: (a) a high degree of readability and (b) an acknowledgement that accurate and effective translation requires interpretation. Drawbacks include: (a) the meaning of a text cannot always be neatly separated from its form; (b) the author may have intended multiple meanings; and (c) difficulty in verifying accuracy, which may affect the usefulness of the translation for in-depth study. Examples of translations that *tend* to employ dynamic equivalence are the New International Version (NIV), the Contemporary English Version (CEV), and the Good News Translation (GNT – formerly Today’s English Version [TEV] and Good News Bible [GNB]).

Optimal equivalence. Optimal equivalence as a translation philosophy recognizes that form cannot be neatly separated from meaning and should not be changed unless comprehension demands it, according to The Apologetics Study Bible: “The primary goal of translation is to convey the sense of the original with as much clarity as the original text and the translation language permit. Optimal equivalence appreciates the goals of formal equivalence but also recognizes its limitations” (pp. xviii – xix). The theory is to translate using formal equivalence where possible and dynamic equivalence where needed to clarify the text. The main advantage of optimal equivalence is the combination of accuracy and readability. The only drawback is that some people prefer either a more formal equivalence or dynamic equivalence translation. Translations that employ optimal equivalence include the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB); the NET Bible; and God’s Word.

Paraphrase. Paraphrased versions of Scripture are loose translations that are highly readable and contemporary but lack the accuracy of word-for-word translations and at times add meaning beyond what a thought-for-thought translation would allow. “These translations place primacy on clarity and are willing to skip some of the finer nuances in the text to make sure the reader is getting the main point of each verse,” notes Ray Clendenen, associate editor of The Apologetics Study Bible. Examples of paraphrased translations include The Living Bible (TLB) and The Message.

Today the Bible is translated into more than 2,000 languages, covering more than 90 percent of the world’s people – and 1,000 new translations are in the works, according to Rick Cornish in *5 Minute Apologist*. As far as English translations go, there are good reasons for so many of them. “One reason relates to the original language,” writes Cornish. “As more manuscripts are discovered, scholars learn those ancient languages better and correct previous misunderstandings. A second reason is the changing nature of modern languages. What made sense in one generation makes less sense in the next and eventually, no sense or the wrong sense” (*5 Minute Apologist*, p. 73).