

38 FOUNDATIONS 108 – Contradictions or Complementary Accounts in the Bible?

Eyewitness Variation, Copying Errors, and How to Tell the Difference

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Have you ever heard someone argue that the Bible is full of contradictions?

This claim has had a resurgence in recent years, thanks to popular authors and social media accounts repeating the same information to new audiences.

Christians shouldn't be afraid of questions like this. Peter told us to expect them:

“but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15, LSB).

In the last article, we looked at some of Bart Ehrman's work that took apart the claim that Christianity borrowed its story from older dying-and-rising god myths.

He's the agnostic scholar who showed that Osiris never came back to life.

This time, we're going to examine some of his other claims.

Ehrman has written several bestselling books arguing that the Bible can't be trusted the way Christians trust it. In *Jesus, Interrupted*, he lists places where the Gospels seem to disagree with each other. In *Misquoting Jesus*, he argues that scribes changed the text as they copied it over the centuries.

Put those together, and you get a claim many of us have heard: “The Gospels contradict each other, and the copies we have aren't even reliable.”

Those are two different questions, and each one has its own tool.

Where Ehrman's Doubts Began

Ehrman tells his own story in *Misquoting Jesus*.

He grew up evangelical, studied at Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College, and went on to Princeton Seminary.

At Princeton, he wrote a paper on Mark 2:26, where Jesus refers to a time “when Abiathar was high priest.” The Old Testament account seems to name Abiathar's father, Ahimelech, as the priest at that moment (1 Samuel 21).

Ehrman worked hard to explain the difficulty away. His professor wrote one sentence in the margin: “Maybe Mark just made a mistake.”

Ehrman says that sentence went straight through him. Once he accepted that Mark could have erred, he writes, “the floodgates opened.”

Ehrman says he finally walked away from the faith years later, over the problem of suffering. But that margin note changed how he read the Bible from then on.

Daniel Wallace, a textual critic at Dallas Theological Seminary, reviewed *Misquoting Jesus* and noticed something important. Ehrman had been taught an all-or-nothing view of Scripture. If one detail fell, everything fell, like a row of dominoes.

When the first domino tipped, the rest followed.

A Brief Word About Confirmation Bias

Have you ever argued with someone and been determined to prove you were right?

Maybe you even looked things up to settle it. But if you’re honest, you probably searched for the information that backed you up and skipped past anything that didn’t.

I’ve done that. I think we all have at times.

That habit has a name: confirmation bias. It’s the tendency to notice evidence that supports what we already believe and overlook evidence that doesn’t.

It matters here because the “Gospels contradict each other” claim often depends less on the evidence than on what a reader brings to it.

Once someone decides the Bible is a flawed human book, every difference between the Gospels starts to look like proof. Explanations that scholars have offered for centuries become easy to skip.

I wrote last time that everyone has a bias. The real question is whether the bias controls the conclusion, or the evidence does.

Gordon Fee, a respected New Testament scholar, saw this tendency in Ehrman’s earlier work. He said Ehrman “too often turns mere possibility into probability, and probability into certainty.”

Believers fall into the same trap from the other direction.

Daniel Wallace admits that he kept preaching the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11) as true history, even after he concluded it wasn’t originally part of John’s Gospel. For years, he says, it was his favorite passage that wasn’t in the Bible.

Bias is a human problem, and the cure is the same for all of us.

Use critical thinking. When you hear a claim about the Bible, ask where it came from. Who said it? What evidence do they point to? Can that evidence be checked by someone else?

A lot of misinformation about the Bible circulates as fact. Some of it comes from skeptics, and some of it comes from well-meaning Christians who repeat things they never verified.

A claim isn't true just because it sounds confident, gets shared thousands of times, or agrees with what we already believe.

Find the original source whenever you can. If a claim can't be traced back to evidence anyone can examine, hold it loosely, no matter which side it supports.

Check the evidence, especially when it might prove you wrong.

What a Contradiction Actually Is

Two statements contradict each other only when both cannot be true at the same time and in the same sense.

"Mary went to the tomb" and "several women went to the tomb" can both be true. One account names the person it's focused on. The other gives the whole group.

That's exactly what we find in the Gospels.

John's account mentions only Mary Magdalene going to the tomb (John 20:1). Matthew, Mark, and Luke name other women with her.

But look at what Mary says when she runs back to Peter: "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and **we** do not know where they have laid Him" (John 20:2).

We.

John focuses on Mary, but he lets slip that she wasn't alone. Nobody inventing a story would bother to include that small detail.

Another example is the centurion whose servant was sick.

In Matthew, the centurion comes to Jesus himself (Matthew 8:5-13). In Luke, he sends Jewish elders and friends to speak for him (Luke 7:1-10).

We talk this way all the time. If the news says "the governor signed the bill," nobody assumes he drove to every office personally. Messengers speaking for someone were treated as that person speaking.

What a Detective Expects

J. Warner Wallace (no relation to Daniel) spent his career as a cold-case homicide detective. He was an atheist when he first examined the Gospels using the same methods he used on murder cases.

His experience taught him that true eyewitnesses never tell a story exactly the same way. Each one remembers different details, focuses on different people, and tells it in a different order.

When witnesses match word for word, a detective gets suspicious, because it suggests they compared notes.

Four Gospels that line up in every detail would be harder to trust.

The early church knew the differences were there. Around AD 170, a man named Tatian blended all four Gospels into one smooth story. The church kept all four separate accounts anyway. Around AD 400, Augustine wrote a full book working through the differences.

None of this was hidden. Christians have been looking at these questions for sixteen hundred years.

When the Answer Isn't Tidy

Not every difficulty has a neat solution, and pretending otherwise would be dishonest.

Even Mark 2:26 has proposed answers. The phrase Mark uses could mean “in the passage about Abiathar,” which is how Old Testament sections were often referred to. Mark uses the same kind of phrase in Mark 12:26, where “in the passage about the burning bush” points to a section of Exodus.

Scholars still debate whether that explanation is correct.

A question still being studied doesn't prove the text is wrong. It means we don't have every answer yet. As we saw with the Hittites and Belshazzar in Foundations 104, “unexplained” has a way of becoming “explained.”

Where Textual Criticism Fits

Ehrman's second claim is about the copies.

We don't have the original handwritten Gospels. We have thousands of handwritten copies in Greek, made over many centuries. Wherever those copies differ, scholars call it a “variant.”

There are an estimated 400,000 variants, and only about 138,000 words in the Greek New Testament.

That sounds alarming until you see what most variants are.

The vast majority are spelling differences, word order changes, or small words like “the.” Wallace points out that Greek can say “Jesus loves Paul” at least sixteen different ways with the same meaning, because Greek word order is flexible. Every one of those would count as a “variant.”

Textual criticism compares thousands of copies against each other. Scholars ask which copies are oldest, which reading shows up across different regions, and which mistake a tired scribe was most likely to make.

By Wallace's estimate, only about one percent of variants both change the meaning and have a real chance of being original. Most modern Bibles footnote those so readers can see them.

Ehrman himself agrees on the bottom line. In the appendix to the paperback edition of *Misquoting Jesus*, he said his position doesn't conflict with his mentor Bruce Metzger's view that "the essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants."

Ehrman still argues that some variants matter for how we read particular passages, and he and Wallace continue to disagree about which ones. On the core beliefs of the faith, though, the two scholars land in the same place.

What "Inspired" Really Means

Paul wrote that all Scripture is "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). The Greek word is *theopneustos*, and that's exactly what it means.

Inspiration describes how the original writings came from God through human authors. It doesn't promise that every scribe who copied those writings over the next fourteen hundred years would do it perfectly.

So does that mean every copy since the originals is flawless? No.

Could some mistakes have crept in? Yes. Scribes were human. They got tired, skipped lines, and misspelled words.

Can those mistakes be identified? Yes. That's what textual criticism does, and it works because we have thousands of copies to compare.

Do those mistakes make the whole Bible untrustworthy? Absolutely not.

The Bible was built with redundancy. If one scribe in Egypt made a mistake, copies made in Asia Minor or Rome didn't share it. The mistake stands out the moment you compare them.

That redundancy runs through the text itself. Kings and Chronicles cover much of the same history. Psalm 18 and 2 Samuel 22 record nearly the same song. Four Gospel writers tell the life of Jesus from four angles.

God knew what would happen to His Word in human hands, and He built in the means to check it.

The Bible is 66 books, written by more than 40 authors, over roughly 1,500 years, in three languages – Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, from places as far apart as Babylon, Jerusalem, and Rome. Yet it tells one story. Bible teacher Chuck Missler often described it as an integrated message system whose origin is from outside our time domain.

Some people are determined to tear that confidence down, and the tactic is very old.

Jesus called Satan "the father of lies" (John 8:44). His first recorded words in Scripture were a question:

"Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" (Genesis 3:1, LSB).

He didn't need to deny God outright. He only needed Eve to wonder whether God really meant what He said. Adam was standing right there with her (Genesis 3:6), and doubt did the rest.

That question is still being asked today, in bestselling books and viral videos. "Can you really trust the Bible? Did God really say that?"

Some people ask it sincerely, and only God knows each heart. But the message that God's Word can't be trusted has the same shape as the first lie ever told.

There's a difference between the Bereans' question and the serpent's. The Bereans asked, "Is this so?" because they wanted to find the truth. The serpent asked, "Has God said?" because he wanted to bury it.

We should ask the Bereans' question every time.

Check It for Yourself

The next time someone tells you the Gospels contradict each other, ask two questions.

First, is this a difference in the copies? If so, textual criticism can usually tell us what the original said, and your Bible's footnotes will show you where the questions are.

Second, is this a difference between the accounts? If so, ask whether both statements could be true at the same time. Most of the time, they can.

The Bereans tested what Paul told them against the Scriptures every day (Acts 17:11). Do the same with Ehrman's claims as well as anyone else's, including mine.

Four witnesses telling the same story from four angles gives you more of the truth than any one of them could alone.

For Further Study

Daniel B. Wallace, "The Gospel According to Bart," a review of *Misquoting Jesus*, available at bible.org.

J. Warner Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity* (David C Cook, 2013).

The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (csntm.org), where you can view high-resolution images of actual Greek manuscripts for yourself.

Be a Berean.

If you're struggling:

- Christian Faith-Based Resources: <https://mentalhealthhotline.org/christian-faith-resources/> or call 1-866-903-3787 (24/7)

- The Hope Line: <http://thehopeline.com/> Chat with trained professionals for free 24/7.
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 (call or text)

You matter. Your story doesn't have to be tidy to be true, and you don't have to work through the hard parts alone. Please stay.

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