

INTRODUCTION

Two weeks ago we looked at some guidelines for handling difficult passages.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR HANDLING DIFFICULT PASSAGES

1. **APPROACH DIFFICULTIES WITH THE RIGHT ASSUMPTIONS**
2. **BE SURE YOU KNOW WHAT THE TEXT SAYS**
3. **BE SURE YOU KNOW WHAT THE TEXT MEANS**
4. **DON'T CONFUSE IMPRECISION WITH ERROR**
5. **REMEMBER THAT WE DO NOT HAVE THE ORIGINAL WRITINGS**
6. **DON'T CONFUSE PERSPECTIVE WITH FALSE TESTIMONY**
7. **REMEMBER THAT SOME STATEMENTS IN SCRIPTURE ARE GENERAL STATEMENTS**
8. **REMEMBER THAT LANGUAGE ABOUT THE WORLD IS EVERYDAY LANGUAGE**
9. **REMEMBER THAT THE BIBLE RECORDS THINGS THAT IT DOES NOT APPROVE**

Tonight I'd like to take some difficult passages and seek to answer them with these guidelines. Specifically, I'd like to deal with some of the Bible difficulties brought up in the book that Todd Tindall gave me.

Numerical Difficulties

2 KINGS 8:26—Was Ahaziah 22 years old when he began to reign in Judah, or was he 42 years old?

2 Kings 8:26 (NKJV) ²⁶ [Ahaziah was twenty-two years old when he became king](#), and he reigned one year in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Athaliah the granddaughter of Omri, king of Israel.

2 Chronicles 22:2 (NKJV) ² [Ahaziah was forty-two years old when he became king](#), and he reigned one year in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Athaliah the granddaughter of Omri.

PROBLEM: According to the statement in 2 Kings 8:26, Ahaziah was 22 years old when he began to reign in Judah. However, in 2 Chronicles 22:2 (KJV) we find the claim that Ahaziah was age 42 when he took the throne in Judah. Which is correct?

SOLUTION: This is clearly a copyist error, and there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that Ahaziah was 22 years old when he began to reign in Judah. In 2 Kings 8:17, we find that Joram, father of Ahaziah and son of Ahab, was 32 years old when he became king. Joram died at age 40, eight years after becoming king. Consequently, his son Ahaziah could not have been 42 when he took the throne after his father's death, otherwise he would have been older than his father.

1 KINGS 4:26—How can this verse say Solomon had 40,000 stalls when 2 Chronicles 9:25 says he had only 4,000 stalls?

1 Kings 4:26 (NKJV) ²⁶ [Solomon had forty thousand stalls of horses for his chariots](#), and twelve thousand horsemen.

2 Chronicles 9:25 (NKJV) ²⁵ [Solomon had four thousand stalls for horses and chariots](#), and twelve thousand horsemen whom he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king at Jerusalem.

PROBLEM: In recording the prosperity of Solomon, this passage states that he had 40,000 stalls of horses for his chariots. However, 1 Chronicles 9:25 affirms that Solomon had only 4,000 stalls for horses. Which one is right?

SOLUTION: This is undoubtedly a copyist error. The ratio of 4,000 horses to 1,400 chariots, as found in the 2 Chronicles passage, is much more reasonable than a ratio of 40,000 to 1,400 found in the 1 Kings text. In the Hebrew language, the visual difference between the two numbers is very slight. The consonants for the number 40 are *rbym*,^í while the consonants for the number 4 are *rbh* (the vowels were not written in the text). The manuscripts from which the scribe worked may have been smudged or damaged and have given the appearance of being forty thousand rather than four thousand.

2 SAMUEL 8:4—Did David capture 1,700 horsemen or 7,000 as 1 Chronicles 18:4 says?

2 Samuel 8:4 (NKJV) ⁴ David took from him one thousand chariots, seven hundred horsemen, and twenty thousand foot soldiers. Also David hamstrung all the chariot horses, except that he spared enough of them for one hundred chariots.

1 Chronicles 18:4 (NKJV) ⁴ David took from him one thousand chariots, seven thousand horsemen, and twenty thousand foot soldiers. Also David hamstrung all the chariot horses, except that he spared enough of them for one hundred chariots.

PROBLEM: After David had defeated Hadadezer, he took prisoners from Hadadezer's army. According to 2 Samuel 8:4, David captured "one thousand, seven hundred horsemen" (the word "chariots" added by some translations is not in the Hebrew text). However, the passage in 1 Chronicles 18:4 states that David captured 7,000 horsemen. Which number is correct?

SOLUTION: This is undoubtedly a copyist error. Probably an early copyist inadvertently omitted the word "chariot" that we find supplied in some translations. This in turn created a problem for a later copyist who would have recognized that it was not proper Hebrew structure to write "one thousand seven thousand horsemen," so he would have reduced the second "thousand" to "hundred" resulting in the reading we now have in 2 Samuel 8:4. It is probably the 1 Chronicles passage that retains the correct number.

2 KINGS 24:8—How old was Jehoiachin when he became king?

2 Kings 24:8 (NKJV) ⁸ Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months. His mother's name was Nehushta the daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem.

2 Chronicles 36:9 (NKJV) ⁹ Jehoiachin was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months and ten days. And he did evil in the sight of the LORD.

PROBLEM: The record in 2 Kings 24:8 states that Jehoiachin was 18 years old when he became king. However, in 2 Chronicles 36:9 we find the claim that Jehoiachin was age 8 when he became king. Which is correct?

SOLUTION: This is probably a copyist error. Most likely, Jehoiachin was 18 when he became king. The observation that he "did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father had done" (2 Kings 24:9), is a description of an older man rather than a young boy. Additionally, the fact that the Chaldeans condemned him to prison in 597 B.C., indicates that they considered him to be a responsible adult.

1 SAMUEL 16:10—Did Jesse have eight sons as indicated in this verse, or only seven as indicated in 1 Chronicles 2:13–15?

1 Samuel 16:10 (NKJV) ¹⁰ Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these." (implies eight sons)

1 Chronicles 2:13-15 (NKJV) ¹³ Jesse begot Eliab his firstborn, Abinadab the second, Shimea the third, ¹⁴ Nethanel the fourth, Raddai the fifth, ¹⁵ Ozem the sixth, and David the seventh.

PROBLEM: Although 1 Samuel 16 only names the three oldest brothers of David, verse 10 states that Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel before he brought David out. However, 1 Chronicles 2:13–15 indicates that David was the seventh son of Jesse. How many sons did Jesse have?

SOLUTION: The passage in 1 Chronicles records the names of seven sons of Jesse, perhaps because one of David's brothers died, and his name was not preserved as late as the composing of 1 Chronicles. It is not an uncommon practice for the surviving children to speak of their family in terms of the remaining number, so that any member of a family which would have been composed of eight sons, identifies himself as one of a group of seven brothers. This would very likely be the case in David's family if the brother had died before marriage, leaving no posterity, and had made no significant contribution during the rise and reign of David. There would have been no reason to retain his name among the genealogical records of the sons of Jesse.

2 Samuel 6:23—Did Michal have no children or five children?

2 Samuel 6:23 (NKJV) ²³ Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death.

2 Samuel 21:8 (NKJV) ⁸ So the king took Armoni and Mephibosheth, the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, and the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul, whom she brought up for Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite;

Two possibilities:

1. It should read “five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul.” The NIV may be correct in following the two Heb. mss. and a few other mss. that have “Merab.”
2. Merab, Michal's sister, was the wife of Adriel; but Michal adopted and brought up the boys under her care.

2 SAMUEL 24:13—Why are the numbers of the years of the famine different from those in 1 Chronicles 21?

2 Samuel 24:13 (NKJV) ¹³ So Gad came to David and told him; and he said to him, “Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land? Or shall you flee three months before your enemies, while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' plague in your land? Now consider and see what answer I should take back to Him who sent me.”

1 Chronicles 21:11-12 (NKJV) ¹¹ So Gad came to David and said to him, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Choose for yourself, ¹² either three years of famine, or three months to be defeated by your foes with the sword of your enemies overtaking you, or else for three days the sword of the LORD—the plague in the land, with the angel of the LORD destroying throughout all the territory of Israel.’ Now consider what answer I should take back to Him who sent me.”

PROBLEM: God spoke to Gad and instructed him to offer David three alternative punishments for his sin. According to 2 Samuel 24:13, the famine was to be seven years. However, according to 1 Chronicles 21:12, the famine was to be three years. Which one of these is correct?

SOLUTION: There are two possible ways to reconcile these accounts. Some commentators propose that the prophet Gad actually confronted David on two occasions. This proposal is based on the difference in language used to present the alternatives to David. In the 2 Samuel passage, Gad presents the alternatives as a question, “Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land” (v. 13). In the 1 Chronicles passage the alternatives are presented more along the lines of a command, “Choose for yourself, either three years of famine, or three months to be defeated” (vv. 11–12). Those who offer this solution assume that perhaps the 2 Samuel passage records the first encounter of Gad and David in which the alternatives are presented for David's consideration, and that after some fasting and prayer, Gad returned for David's decision by which time God had reduced the duration of the famine from seven to three years in response to David's supplication.

Another group of commentators suggests that the record in 2 Samuel is a copyist error. They point out that there are more reliable manuscripts which preserve the number “three” for the duration of the famine and that the NIV has employed this manuscript reading in its translation.

Chronological Difficulties

MATTHEW 4:5–10 (cf. Luke 4:5–12)—Is there a mistake in recording the wilderness temptation of Christ by Matthew or Luke?

PROBLEM: According to both Matthew and Luke, the first temptation was to turn stones into bread to satisfy Jesus' hunger. The second temptation listed by Matthew took place at the pinnacle of the temple. The third temptation listed by Matthew involved all the kingdoms of the world. However, although Luke mentions these same two events, he lists them in reverse order—the kingdoms of the world are mentioned second and the pinnacle of the temple is mentioned third. Which is the correct order?

SOLUTION: It may be that Matthew describes these temptations *chronologically* while Luke lists them *climactically*, that is, *topically*. This may be to express the climax he desired to emphasize.

Matthew 4:5 begins with the word “then” while verse 8 begins with the word “again.” In Greek, these words suggest a more sequential order of the events. In Luke’s account, however, verses 5 and 9 each begins with a simple “and” (see NASB).

The Greek in the case of Luke’s account does not necessarily indicate a sequential order of events. Furthermore, there is no disagreement on the fact that these temptations actually happened.

MARK 15:25 (cf. John 19:14)—Was Jesus crucified in the third hour or the sixth hour?

Mark 15:25 (NKJV) ²⁵ Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him.

John 19:14-16 (NKJV) ¹⁴ Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, “Behold your King!” ¹⁵ But they cried out, “Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar!” ¹⁶ Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. Then they took Jesus and led Him away.

PROBLEM: Mark’s Gospel account says that it was the third hour (9 a.m. Jewish time) when Christ was crucified (15:25). John’s Gospel says that it was about the sixth hour (12 noon Jewish time) when Jesus was still on trial (19:14). This would make His crucifixion much later than specified by Mark. Which Gospel is correct?

SOLUTION: Both Gospel writers are correct in their assertions. The difficulty is answered when we realize that each Gospel writer used a different time system. John follows the *Roman* time system while Mark follows the *Jewish* time system.

According to Roman time, the day ran from midnight to midnight. The Jewish 24 hour period began in the evening at 6 p.m. and the morning of that day began at 6 a.m. Therefore, when Mark asserts that at the third hour Christ was crucified, this was about 9 a.m. John stated that Christ’s trial was about the sixth hour. This would place the trial *before* the crucifixion and this would not negate any testimony of the Gospel writers.

This fits with John’s other references to time. For example, he speaks about Jesus being weary from His journey from His trip from Judea to Samaria at the “sixth hour” and asking for water from the woman at the well. Considering the length of His trip, His weariness, and the normal evening time when people come to the well to drink and to water their animals, this fits better with 6 p.m., which is “the sixth hour” of the night by Roman time reckoning. The same is true of John’s reference to the tenth hour in John 1:39, which would be 10 a.m., a more likely time to be out preaching than 4 a.m.

MARK 16:2—Was Mary at the tomb before sunrise or after? Also, who came to the tomb?

John 20:1 (NKJV) ¹ Now the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

Matthew 28:1 (NKJV) ¹ Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.

Mark 16:1-2 (NKJV) ¹ Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. ² Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen.

Luke 24:10 (NKJV) ¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary *the mother* of James, and the other *women* with them, who told these things to the apostles.

PROBLEM: Mark states that Mary was there “very early in the morning ... when the sun had risen” (v. 2). But John says it was “early, while it was still dark” (John 20:1).

SOLUTION: There are two general possibilities here.

One possibility suggests that the phrase “when the sun had risen” (Mark 16:2) merely denotes early dawn (cf. Ps. 104:22), when it was “still dark” (John 20:1), relatively speaking.

Another view holds that Mary came alone at first when it was still dark before sunrise (John 20:1), and then again later after sunrise, she returned with the other women (Mark 16:1).

- In support of this is the fact that only Mary is mentioned in John, but Mary and the other women are named in Mark.
- Also, Luke (24:1) says it was “very early in the morning,” implying after sunrise, when the “women” [not just Mary] had come.
- Likewise, Matthew (28:1) speaks of it being “after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn” that “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.” Only John mentions Mary being there alone “while it was still dark” (John 20:1).

MARK 16:8—Did the women tell of their experience at the tomb or not?

Mark 16:8 (NKJV) ⁸ So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

But see what follows Mark 16:8 ... **Mark 16:9-11 (NKJV)** ⁹ Now when *He* rose early on the first *day* of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons. ¹⁰ She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. ¹¹ And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe.

Matthew 28:8-10 (NKJV) ⁸ So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. ⁹ And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, “Rejoice!” So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “**Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.**”

PROBLEM: Mark says that the women returning from the empty tomb “said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8). But Matthew asserts that they “ran to bring His disciples word” (Matt. 28:8; cf. v. 9).

SOLUTION: In response, it should be observed that Matthew does not actually say the women told the disciples, but they went back with the *intention* to tell them. Also, since Mark reveals that they did not speak because “they were afraid,” it may be that *at first* they held their peace (as Mark indicated), and then *later* spoke up (as Matthew may imply). It is also possible that the women left the tomb in two groups at slightly different times, Mark referring to one and Matthew to the other.

Mark 16:34-4—Was the tomb open?

Matthew 28:2 (NKJV) ² And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it.

Mark 16:3-4 (NKJV) ³ And they said among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?” ⁴ But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away—for it was very large.

Account Difficulties

MATTHEW 28:5—Why does Matthew say there was only one angel at the tomb when John says there were two?

Matthew 28:5 (NKJV) ⁵ But the angel answered and said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.

John 20:12 (NKJV) ¹² And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.

PROBLEM: Matthew 28:5 refers to the “angel” at the tomb after Jesus’ resurrection, and yet John says there were “two angels” there (John 20:12)?

SOLUTION: Matthew does not say there was *only* one angel. John says there were two, and wherever there are two there is always one; it never fails! The critic has to add the word “only” to Matthew’s account in order to make it contradictory. But in this case, the problem is not with what the Bible actually says, but with what the critic adds to it. Matthew probably focuses on the one who *spoke* and “said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid’ ” (Matt. 28:5). John referred to how many angels they *saw*; “and she saw two angels” (John 20:12)

MATTHEW 27:54 (cf. Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47)—What did the centurion really say about Christ on the cross?

Matthew 27:54 (NKJV) ⁵⁴ So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, “Truly this was the Son of God!”

Mark 15:39 (NKJV) ³⁹ So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, “Truly this Man was the Son of God!”

Luke 23:47 (NKJV) ⁴⁷ So when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, “Certainly this was a righteous Man!”

PROBLEM: Matthew records the centurion saying, “Truly this was the Son of God,” while Mark says substantially the same thing, adding only the word “man,” rendering it, “Truly this Man was the Son of God.” Luke records the words of the centurion as follows: “Certainly this was a righteous Man!” What did he really say?

SOLUTION: The centurion could have said both things. In accordance with his own emphasis on Christ as the perfect man, Luke may have chosen to use this phrase rather than the ones used by Matthew and Mark. There is no major difference between Matthew and Mark, for in Greek the word “man” is implied by the masculine singular use of the word “This.” It is also possible that Luke may have been paraphrasing or drawing an implication from what was actually said.

Christian scholars do not claim to have the exact words of the speakers in every case, but only an accurate rendering of what they really said. First of all, it is generally agreed that they spoke in Aramaic, but the Gospels were written in Greek. So the words we have in the Greek text on which the English is based are already a translation. Second, the Gospel writers, like writers today, sometimes summarized or paraphrased what was said. In this way, it is understandable that the renderings will be slightly different. But in this case, as in all other cases, the essence of what was originally said is faithfully produced in the original text. While we do not have the *exact words*, we do have the *same meaning*. Finally, when the sentences are totally different (but not contradictory), then we may reasonably assume that both things were said on that occasion and that one writer uses one and another writer the other. This is a common literary practice even today.

MATTHEW 27:37 (cf. Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19)—Why are all the Gospel accounts of the inscription on the cross different?

PROBLEM: The wording of the accusation above Christ’s head on the cross is rendered differently in each Gospel account.

Matthew: “*This is Jesus the king of the Jews*” (27:37).

Mark: “*The king of the Jews*” (15:26).

Luke: “*This is the king of the Jews*” (23:38).

John: “*Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews*” (19:19).

SOLUTION: While there is a difference in what is omitted, the important phrase, “the king of the Jews,” is identical in all four Gospels. The differences can be accounted for in different ways.

First, John 19:20 says, “Then many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.” So then, there are at least three different languages in which the sign above Christ’s head was written. Some of the differences may come from it being rendered in different languages.

Further, it is possible that each Gospel only gives part of the complete statement as follows:

Matthew: “*This is Jesus [of Nazareth] the king of the Jews.*”

Mark: “[*This is Jesus of Nazareth] the king of the Jews.*”

Luke: “*This is [Jesus of Nazareth] the king of the Jews.*”

John: “[*This is] Jesus of Nazareth the king of the Jews.*”

Thus, the whole statement may have read “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.” In this case, each Gospel is giving the essential part (“the king of the Jews”), but no Gospel is giving the whole inscription. But neither is any Gospel contradicting what the other Gospels say. The accounts are divergent and mutually complementary, not contradictory.

MATTHEW 27:5 (cf. Acts 1:18)—Did Judas die by hanging or by falling on rocks?

Matthew 27:5 (NKJV) ⁵ Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself.

Acts 1:18 (NKJV) ¹⁸ (Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out.

PROBLEM: Matthew declares that Judas hanged himself. However, the Book of Acts says that he fell and his body burst open.

SOLUTION: These accounts are not contradictory, but mutually complementary. Judas hung himself exactly as Matthew affirms that he did. The account in Acts simply adds that Judas fell, and his body opened up at the middle and his intestines gushed out. This is the very thing one would expect of someone who hanged himself from a tree over a cliff and fell on sharp rocks below.