

DAN BARKER'S DISCREPANCIES

In common with all skeptics who wish to deconstruct Christianity, Barker alleges the Bible is replete with mistakes and discrepancies, indeed outright contradictions. Chapter 13 of his book *Godless* is titled, *Bible Contradictions*. Chapter 14 is titled, *Understanding Discrepancy*. And it should be no surprise chapter 15 asks, *Did Jesus Really Rise From the Dead?*

Barker sallies forth this way:

“Paul said that ‘God is not the author of confusion’ (I Corinthians 14:33), yet never has a book produced more confusion than the bible. There are hundreds of denominations and sects, all using the ‘inspired Scriptures’ to prove their conflicting doctrines. Why is this? Why do translations differ? Why do educated theologians disagree over Greek and Hebrew meanings? Why such muddle? ‘If the trumpet give an uncertain sound,’ Paul wrote in I Corinthians 14:8, ‘who shall prepare himself to the battle? So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For ye shall speak into the air.’ Exactly! Paul should have practiced what he preached. For almost two millennia, the bible has been producing a most ‘uncertain sound.’” (1)

Now let's be honest. For those of us who love the Bible, Barker has hit upon a troubling theme. There is no denying that when it comes to interpreting the Bible confusion often reigns supreme. After decades of my own study of the Scriptures there are still unsolved questions, apparent discrepancies, and some things I find hard to reconcile.

However, such challenges are not insurmountable, and they don't require mental gymnastics and leaps of logic to harmonise. After all, if the God of the Bible is communicating to us through His “word” He certainly expects us to use our minds to intelligently grasp His message --- “in understanding be mature” is His call to us (I Cor. 14:20). The atheist and the theist both accept these as reasonable criteria.

There is a *caveat*. We must let the Bible speak to us out of its own historical setting and culture. Context is king.

It will not be possible in this brief article to examine every single alleged discrepancy Barker cites, but I will try to pick a fair sampling of representative cases he cites. Ready? Good!

Jesus Made a Mistake!

A favourite ‘port of call’ for skeptics of all hues --- and Barker is no exception --- is to allege that Jesus was just plain wrong when he said Abiathar was the high priest when David and his hungry men went into the temple to eat the shewbread. Bart Ehrman in *Misquoting Jesus* admits this ‘contradiction’ helped turn him from Bible believer into agnostic and Bible skeptic.

Barker presents his case thusly:

I Samuel 21:1-6 “Then came David to Nob to Ahimelech the priest ... So the priest gave him hallowed bread: for there was no bread there but the shewbread.”

Versus

Mark 2:26 “How he [David] went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him?”

So, which one was it? Did David go to Abiathar the high priest or did he go to Ahimelech the priest?

Barker's commentary on this apparent contradiction is that some apologists claim, “that ‘days of Abiathar’ (a priest after the time of David) is metaphorical. If this defense is allowed, then there could be no possible

contradiction anywhere, inside or outside of the bible. We can simply claim metaphor where we don't like what the actual text says." (2)

Mr Barker, I agree! Some of the explanations by Christian apologists are dishonest machinations. No, these apparently contradictory texts must be squarely faced. Was Jesus mistaken?

The first thing to note is that Jesus was in a serious debate with the Pharisees. If Jesus had his historical facts wrong these "experts in the Law" would have been the first to jump down his throat. Their acceptance of Jesus' history is tacit agreement they accepted his account.

The next thing to carefully note is what the text actually says. Far from saying that Abiathar was the high priest when David entered the Temple, Jesus says, "in the days when Abiathar was the high priest". (It can also be translated, "in the time when Abiathar was the high priest" as per NASB.) (3)

Remember what I said earlier about reading the Bible from its own setting and culture? If we would only do this, many of the alleged discrepancies would disappear, and this is a good case in point. We note that when Jesus was crucified Caiaphas was high priest in the time his father-in-law Annas was still alive (John 18:13). Observe that Luke describes those days as being "in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas" (Luke 3:2).

There was only one high priest actually serving in Israel at any one time, but here is clear Biblical precedent for Jesus' own method of description, and why the Pharisees accepted Jesus' version of history. When David ate the sacred bread Abiathar was not serving as the high priest. His father Ahimelech was. But evidently it was a common form of Jewish expression when a father and son were both still alive, to locate their combined tenure under the heading of, "in the high priesthood of father so-and-so and son-so-and-so."

There is a very good reason why Jesus mentioned Abiathar rather than his father Ahimelech in connection with David. David had very little interaction with Ahimelech but he did have heavy involvement with his son Abiathar. In fact, after king Saul had killed Ahimelech (1 Sam. 22), Abiathar found protection under David, becoming his priest (1 Sam. 23: 6,9; 2 Sam. 8:17). Eventually under David Abiathar was lifted up to high priestly status (1 Chron. 15:11; 1 Kings 2:35). Relevant to David, Abiathar was the main player.

Suggestion: Before scrapping the Bible, before alleging Jesus made a mistake, how about we read it carefully in its own context, taking note of its own cultural idioms!

Did Michal Have Children?

2 Samuel 6:23 "Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no child unto the day of her death."

Versus

2 Samuel 21:8 "But the king took the two sons of Rizpah ... and the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul."

Barker gives no commentary here but thinks the mere quoting of two verses proves his case of another contradiction. Does he count on his readers being lazy and not checking it out? I note he alleges that,

"Theists are afraid people will think for themselves; atheists are afraid they won't." (4)

Well, in this case we don't have to do too much thinking. We just have to finish quoting the full verse (a habit Barker seems fond of doing as I noted in my previous article, *Dan Barker's Deconversion*). 2 Samuel 21:8 goes on to say,

"...and the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul, whom she brought up for Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite ..."

Thus, these sons were Michal's adopted children. There is no contradiction here. And even if Michal had "borne" children to her second husband, don't forget that relative to the royal throne and kingly line, Michal had no children.

Suggestion: Before alleging discrepancies in the Bible, how about we quote it accurately!

When Was Jesus Crucified?

Mark 15:25 "And it was the third hour, and they crucified him."

Versus

John 19:14-15 "And it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, 'Behold your king! But they cried out ... crucify him!'"

Barker comments,

"It is an *ad hoc* defence to claim that there are two methods of reckoning time here. It has never been shown that this is the case." (5)

Ad hoc? Everybody knows the Jews reckoned the hours by dividing the night and day into 12 divisions each, beginning at sunset and sunrise. And it is true that for a long time many historians doubted the Romans used a different method for keeping time. But for well over a century now, historians have known that Plutach, Pliny, Aulus Gellius and Macrobius (to name a few) specifically say the Roman civil day was reckoned from midnight to midnight. My kids think I am a little behind the times, but not even they would think I am over a century behind!

Given that all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) agree that Jesus was crucified at the beginning of the third hour (i.e. 9 a.m.) the only question to settle is whether John computes his time by the Jewish or the Roman method.

Before looking at that question, please observe that John puts his sixth hour at *the beginning of the last trial* before Pilate. He also states this was "about" the sixth hour. If John is using Roman time this means Jesus' last trial before Pilate would have been about 6 a.m., which would have meant there was ample time for the trial to be completed, and for Jesus to be led away outside the city walls and to be crucified at 9 a.m. as the Gospel of Mark reports.

If John is using the Roman method then the time he says Jesus was crucified harmonises perfectly. If he is working by Jewish reckoning, then Barker is correct and we have a major "discrepancy".

So, is John using Roman time? One passage in John 20:19 when compared with Luke 24:29,36 indicates he is. According to Luke it was "toward evening", and the day was "now nearly over" as the risen Jesus and the two disciples approached Emmaus. They "ate supper" together. Jesus then left and the two disciples "arose that very hour and returned to Jerusalem" (Lk 24:33). Once back in Jerusalem the two from Emmaus reported the events to most of the apostles who were bunkered down behind locked doors "for fear".

However, while they were narrating these startling events, Jesus appears in that locked room right in front of them --- in Jerusalem. When John reports this appearance of Jesus, he says it "was evening on *that day*, the first day of the week" (John 20:19). That is, it was evening of the day when Mary Magdalene had seen the Lord (John 20:18).

If John had been using Jewish time keeping, evening would have been a new day, another day, and not "*that day*" which had been "the first day of the week." So John is certainly reckoning time by the Roman method!

Thus, when John tells us Jesus was crucified "about the sixth hour" he is in total agreement with the Synoptic writers. There is nothing *ad hoc* here Mr Barker, and it is clearly shown this is the case. (6)

Did Paul's Men Hear a Voice?

Acts 9:7 "And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man."

Versus

Acts 22:9 "And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me."

Barker devotes a whole section to this apparent discrepancy, and I judge this to be his most serious attempt at reasonable exegesis. After all, Paul's conversion is crucial to the whole development of Christianity, so it is obvious a good skeptic will try to discredit it.

So, on that fateful day, did Paul's travelling companions hear a voice or not hear the voice? According to Barker, "Luke has made a mistake" and,

"There are two approaches that defenders of the bible have used to try to clear up this discrepancy. The first claims that "hear" should be translated as "understand" in Acts 22:9, meaning that although the men heard the voice, they did not *hear* (understand) the voice. The second defence claims that the word "voice" should really be translated as "sound" in Acts 9:7, meaning that the men heard *something*, but did not know it was a voice." (7)

Barker will have none of this. Firstly, he outright says the word translated "hear" (*akouo*) "does not mean 'understand'". (8) To be sure, there is no argument that the primary meaning of "to hear" has to do with the physical hearing. Our English word 'acoustic' derives from it. But the Greek-English Lexicons I have access to say *akouo* can mean to understand, to take in or admit to mental acceptance.

Ultimately, it is the context a word is used in that determines how its author intends it to be heard (i.e. understood!). And there are many times when "hear" means to comprehend, to understand. For example,

"And with many such parables He was speaking the word to them as they were able to hear (*akouein*) it." (Mark 4:33)

Evidently the disciples had no trouble in acoustically hearing the words Jesus spoke, but they did have trouble understanding the message behind the words. Here "hear" means comprehend. Again,

"Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear (*akouein*) my word" (John 8:43).

The problem was not wax blocking their ears. They could acoustically hear but were failing to hear in the sense of understand, as context indicates. Then a few verses further down,

"He who is of God hears (*akouei*) the words of God; for this reason you do not hear (*akouete*) them, because you are not of God" (John 8:47).

Context here determines that these folk were physically hearing Jesus but not hearing him in the sense of obediently understanding. Barker goes to great lengths to explain this all away, and I have no intention of boring you to tears with his intricate argumentation. I will let you decide whether *akouo* in these contexts can or cannot mean 'understand'. Perhaps the Lexicons are onto something?

Secondly, Barker enters into some serious discussion about Greek tenses that govern *akouo*. Christian defenders often argue that when *akouo* takes the Genitive case it refers to the actual sound of a voice, but when it takes the Accusative case it is the message that is intended. So in Acts 9:7 where the Genitive case is used Paul's friends did hear the audible sound of the Voice, but did not understand its message. However, in Acts 22:9 where the Accusative case is used the men did not hear the voice in the sense of understanding the content of the message the voice was communicating.

Barker agrees that the two Greek cases are in the text but,

"Greek scholars who have more than a superficial knowledge of the language would never use this argument." (9)

How much research has Barker done? It's not hard to find any number of serious Greek scholars who do in fact use this argument. The prince of Greek grammarians, A.T. Robertson declared this nuance "perfectly proper". (10)

Professor Daniel Wallace says both *akouo* and *phone* ('voice') are capable of different nuances. *Akouo* can mean hear/understand and *phone* can mean sound/voice,

"Thus, no contradiction may be charged legitimately, even without the 'case' argument." (11) (12)

Now, in fairness to Barker, he cites a number of passages in the New Testament where these different "cases" do not affect the meaning of *akouo* at all (e.g. Matthew 7:24 cp Luke 6:47 and Matthew 26:65 cp Mark 14:64). So, is there any way to solve the matter? Yes there is and you don't need to be a Greek scholar or professor to work this out.

Let The Bible Interpret Itself!

There is another classic Bible example of men acoustically hearing the sound of "a voice out of heaven" but not hearing the message (Barker in his extensive exegesis "Hear Or Understand?" fails to notice this key parallel.)

In John chapter 12 Jesus is troubled about his upcoming trial and crucifixion. He wonders whether he should be praying for God to save him from the ordeal (v. 27-28).

Just then "a voice from heaven" thunders out a message of encouragement to Jesus. Jesus hears the voice in the sense of understanding the message behind the words, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." But "the multitude therefore, who stood by and heard it, were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, 'An angel has spoken to him'" (v.29).

Here is a clear-cut instance where people hear a voice whose message is heard as an unintelligible sound, but the intended recipient perfectly well understands. This is *exactly* what Paul's companions experienced on that road to Damascus! Like Jesus, Paul hears the voice and understands its message. We know he understood it because he acted on it. Like the crowd with Jesus, Paul's friends hear the sound of the voice but are unable to grasp its meaning. Indeed, upon seeing the bright light and hearing the sound of the voice those men "stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one" (Acts 9:7).

Remember, this is in the days before modern cinema with acoustic (!) surrounds. Hearing a booming voice at noon, but seeing no man caused these men to be transfixed with fear. Furthermore, the risen Jesus was only addressing one man, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" The message was not intended for anybody else but Paul.

Resurrection Shenanigans!

It comes as no surprise that Barker no longer believes Jesus Christ literally, physically rose from the dead. Barker is convinced the resurrection of Jesus as told by the New Testament is full of contradictions. For example,

Matt. 28:10 "Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and take word to my brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they shall see me.'"

Versus

Luke 24:49 "And behold ... you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

So how can the disciples immediately after the resurrection be commanded to go to Galilee and also be commanded to tarry at Jerusalem?

The solution is not far to find. The command to wait in Jerusalem means they are to make Jerusalem their headquarters there until they receive the promised power of the holy Spirit. The text plainly states so. No

missionary work, no preaching of the Gospel, no evangelism is to be carried out until they are “clothed with power from on high”.

This command to make Jerusalem their ‘headquarters’ would not preclude a brief excursion to Galilee. Indeed, the Scriptures tell us Jesus appeared to the disciples several times over a period of 40 days ... a period of almost 6 weeks! The Gospel writers give us “snapshots” of some of those appearances, and Matthew gives us one “photo”, not the whole family album!

But, it is objected, Jesus first appeared to the 11 disciples in a locked room in Jerusalem (Lk. 24:33,36-37; John 20:19) and he first appeared to the eleven on a mountain in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-17).

But the observant reader will note Matthew does not say this was Jesus’ first appearance. Matthew has just pulled out one of the ‘family snapshots’ from his album of memories and in the process has simply passed over the earlier appearances to highlight what suits his re-telling. Matthew is not being exhaustive. And in fact, in verse 16 Matthew mentions Jesus had indicated what mountain in Galilee the disciples were to go to, yet he does not mention this when he quotes Jesus in verse 10.

Aha! Now some might think I am getting myself further into a tangle of discrepancy because in Acts 1:9,12 it says Jesus ascended from Mount Olivet, but in Luke 24:50-51 Christ ascended from Bethany. Perhaps Luke really is confused after all?

One has to wonder whether anybody who proposes a geographical contradiction --- and especially from the same writer --- would not first familiarise themselves with the geography of the area. *Bethany is on the eastern slope of Mount Olivet.* Anybody coming back from Bethany returning to Jerusalem would have to pass over the mountain. A glance at the map is sufficient to defuse this alleged discrepancy.

The Anvil and the Hammers

Many years ago I remember reading about a certain well-educated skeptic scorning the unshaken faith of a humble Christian man. “Ha ha. How stupid and ignorant you are to trust in that old book!” To which the humble believer responded, “Sire, the Bible is an anvil that has worn out many a hammer.”

When carefully, prayerfully, and contextually read, the Bible has withstood the onslaughts of the ages. Yes, there are “some things hard to be understood” (2 Pet. 3:16). Would we expect anything less from the Mind of *God*?

I understand Barker’s stumbling at alleged discrepancies in the Bible. But as we have briefly seen, part of his difficulty is that in each case he fails to observe the context --- whether cultural or literary --- and what the full text says. I am sure that when he was a Christian evangelist he heard the expression, “A text out of context is just a pretext.” His alleged discrepancies fall into that trap.

Speaking personally, the things I don’t yet get don’t bother me too much. Questions that troubled me years ago are now happily and reasonably resolved. There is just far too much evidence to satisfy my mind that when I open this precious Bible I know I am going to meet the Living God of Heaven and earth. I don’t know about you, but my feet are firmly planted on the promises of God’s Word that is forever settled in the heaven.

Besides, if all my questions were answered, perhaps I might not continue on in this enthralling adventure with the sense that every day I am going to hear something new in my walk with the God of the Bible, that just makes me want to shout, “Glory to God!”

ENDNOTES

1. Barker, Dan. *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America’s Leading Atheists.* Ulysses Press, Berkeley, CA., 2008. p222
2. Ibid, p 231
3. The Greek construction in Mark 2:26 *epi* + Genitive noun is used frequently in the NT to mean ‘in the time of’ or ‘in the time under’, e.g. in Luke 4:27, “There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet.”
4. *Godless*, Op. Cit. p216

5. *Godless*, Op.Cit. p243
6. For a detailed study of this subject see A.T. Robertson's, *A Harmony of the Gospel For Students of the Life of Christ*. Harper & Row, New York, 1950, pp284
7. *Godless*, Op. Cit. p243
8. *Ibid*, p243
9. *Ibid*, p246
10. Robertson, A.T. *Historical Grammar of the New Testament*. Hodder & Stroughton, London, 1919. p506
11. Wallace, Daniel. *Greek Grammar Beyond The Basics*. Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996. pp133-134
12. Other 'heavy' Greek scholars who use the "case" argument include W.E. Vine, M.A., and Gleason Archer.
13. *Godless*, Op. Cit. p281