

Do the Gospels Contradict Each Other?

A Guided Reflection Worksheet for Seekers and Believers

Focus Truth

The four Gospels contain real differences, but differences in detail, wording, emphasis, or arrangement are not automatically contradictions. Examine each passage based on what each writer actually claims.

Before You Begin

This worksheet will help you examine differences between Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John without dismissing them too quickly or forcing easy explanations. You will consider what actually counts as a contradiction, how ancient writers selected and arranged material, why wording can vary, and how to approach harder passages honestly. The goal is not to make every difficulty disappear, but to learn how to ask better questions.

① Define What Counts as a Contradiction

A contradiction is more than two accounts giving different details. It occurs when two claims cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time. Before calling two Gospel passages contradictory, we need to ask what each writer actually says and whether one statement truly rules the other out.

How would you define a contradiction in your own words?

Why is a difference in detail not automatically a contradiction?

What would you need to see before deciding that two Gospel accounts cannot both be true?

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② Distinguish Omission From Denial

One Gospel may mention a person or detail that another leaves out. That omission is not the same as saying the person or detail was absent. The resurrection accounts show why this matters: the writers name different women at the tomb, but they do not all claim to give a complete list of everyone present.

Why is leaving out a detail different from denying that the detail existed?

How can one writer focus on one person while another names several people from the same event?

What does the example of the women at the tomb teach us about reading parallel Gospel accounts carefully?

What kind of wording would turn a difference in detail into a genuine contradiction?

Finish the sentence: Before calling two accounts contradictory, I should...

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③ Notice Different Wording and Emphasis

The Gospel writers sometimes report the same teaching or event with different wording. Jesus likely taught primarily in Aramaic, while the Gospels were written in Greek, and ancient writers could summarize or paraphrase speech while preserving its meaning. Different wording therefore gives us something to examine, but it does not automatically mean one writer is wrong.

Why Wording Can Vary

- Jesus likely taught primarily in Aramaic, while the Gospels were written in Greek.
- Ancient writers could summarize or paraphrase speech while preserving its meaning.
- Different writers could emphasize different parts of the same statement or event.
- Different wording should be compared carefully before it is labeled a contradiction.

Why should we avoid expecting the Gospels to function like modern audio transcripts?

How could translation, summary, or paraphrase preserve meaning without preserving identical wording?

Why might two Gospel writers emphasize different parts of the same statement or event?

What would you want to compare before deciding that two differently worded sayings actually conflict?

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④ Consider Order, Arrangement, and Authorial Purpose

Ancient biographers could select, arrange, and compress material as they shaped an account for their readers. The Gospel writers reported history, but they also explained who Jesus was and why His life mattered. A change in sequence or emphasis therefore deserves investigation before we assume the writer made a mistake.

Ways Gospel Accounts Can Differ

Type of Difference	Question to Ask
Different details	Does one account deny what the other adds?
Different wording	Could both preserve the same basic meaning?
Different participants named	Is either writer claiming to give a complete list?
Different order	Is chronology required, or could material be arranged thematically?
Different emphasis	What is each writer trying to highlight for the reader?

Why might an ancient writer arrange events by theme as well as chronology?

How does recognizing authorial purpose change the way you read a difference in order?

Why is “the order is different” not the same claim as “one writer is false”?

What questions would you ask before deciding that a difference in arrangement is historically serious?

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⑤ Make Room for the Harder Passages

Some Gospel differences are more difficult than others. The genealogies, the accounts of Judas's death, the placement of the temple cleansing, and details surrounding the resurrection have all produced serious discussion. Honest study means neither dismissing those questions nor forcing a neat explanation when the evidence does not provide one.

Harder Examples Worth Studying

- The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke differ in significant places.
- Matthew and Acts describe Judas's death in ways that are not easy to place together.
- John places the temple cleansing differently from Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
- The resurrection accounts contain several details that require careful comparison.

Why is it important to acknowledge difficult passages instead of pretending every answer is obvious?

What is the difference between a possible harmonization and an explanation the text actually gives us?

Why can “we do not know exactly” sometimes be a more responsible answer than a strained solution?

Which difficult Gospel difference would you most like to study more carefully?

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⑥ Respond With Patience and Honesty

The existence of four distinct Gospels gives us four voices to compare rather than four identical copies. Their differences should be examined carefully, but careful study does not require either quick dismissal or defensive explanations. The goal is to understand what each writer actually claims and judge the evidence fairly.

Which distinction in this worksheet seems most helpful when you compare the Gospels? Why?

Which kind of Gospel difference still raises the biggest question for you?

Does preserving four distinct accounts increase or decrease your confidence in examining them? Why?

Finish the sentence: The next Gospel difference I want to examine carefully is...

One-Sentence Takeaway

The four Gospels contain real differences, but differences in detail, wording, emphasis, or arrangement are not automatically contradictions. They should be examined in light of what each writer is actually claiming.

Closing Prayer

Creator, give us patience and honesty as we compare the Gospel accounts. Help us resist quick conclusions, whether we are trying to dismiss the Gospels or defend them too easily. Teach us to recognize the difference between a true contradiction and a difference in detail, wording, emphasis, or arrangement. Where questions remain difficult, give us humility to keep studying and courage to follow the truth wherever it leads. Amen.

Continue the Journey

Keep asking honest questions, keep reading carefully, and keep seeking the truth

You do not have to stop here.

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