The Bible is full of contradictions

Does the Bible really contradict itself?
THE BIBLE IS FULL OF CONTRADICTIONS

Introduction
There has been a chart which has been published in recent years for atheists and critics which creatively lists 439 contradictions in the Bible. It must be said that a lot of these objections are foolish; being the result of not reading all of the text properly. Some of them however are worthy of our consideration.

If you have checked out our church website and noted in particular the first info video, you will have seen an explanation of what we believe about the Bible. Here is our full doctrinal statement on it:

We accept the Bible (39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament) as the written Word of God.

Historically, conservative evangelicals have viewed the Bible as being the “plenary verbal inspired” word of God. Plenary simply means “complete” or “full”, verbal recognizes God has spoken through human authors. In light of this we believe the Bible to be infallible (without mistakes) and inerrant (without error) meaning it is fully trustworthy. The Scriptures are the authoritative and normative rule and guide of all Christian life, practice and doctrine. They are totally sufficient and must not be added to, superseded or changed by later tradition, extra-biblical revelation or worldly wisdom. Every doctrinal formulation, whether of creed, confession or theology, must be put to the test with the full counsel of God in Holy Scripture. Each book is to be interpreted according to its context and purpose and in reverent obedience to the Lord who speaks through it in living power. All believers are exhorted to study the Scriptures and diligently apply them to their lives.

There are two things to note about this:
1. God has spoken through human authors. This is important to remember. This means that he was working in and through their human experience so that we have the mind of God in the pen of man.

For example when David wrote Psalm 23 we are not to think of him sitting down and either experiencing a trance so that he was not in control of his “pen”; nor did he sit and wait for a dictation. David freely, willingly and yet in a mysterious way under the gracious inspiration of the spirit, penned those words. They were his words and yet they were God’s words. A helpful verse from the doctrinal statement is 2 Peter 1:21.

“For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

Both man and God were involved in the process - man was actively speaking but while he was doing this he is passively being moved along by the spirit.

2. We also need to realise that the writers of scripture had their own personalities and gifting, lived in particular times and cultures and had their own purposes of writing. They also wrote different genres of scripture which means we must respect the way they are designed to be read. For example, the OT speaks of God saving his people with an outstretched arm (Jeremiah 32:21). John records Jesus’ words that God is spirit (John 4:24). This on the surface looks like a contradiction. However if you understand the genre then it is clear. The mention of an outstretched arm was written as poetry to metaphorically speak of God saving – it is anthropomorphism (attributing a human characteristic to something that is not human). They were not being literal but Jesus was - God is spirit.

A lot of the apparent contradictions could be dealt with by understanding this. Others however are not as obvious and it is to these that we now turn.

* For access see: www.bibviz.com
Let’s ask the question in a straightforward way: *Are there contradictions in the Bible?* A couple of things may be said in response to this:

Firstly, we must distinguish between what actually is a contradiction and what is an *apparent contradiction*. We want to affirm that there is none of the former but plenty of the latter! We’ll come to these in a few minutes.

Secondly, we also must realise that the Bible is perfect in the original languages. We no longer have the originals (known as autographs) but have thousands of copies of the originals. It is these *copies* that have some human error – though minor ones. Scholars note 2 types of errors:

1. Errors regarding names of places
2. Errors regarding numbers

It is the last one which has most relevance to us as there are a number of examples we could give.

To help get an order of things I have divided the contradictions into 3 categories:

1. Counting and Numbers
2. Narrative
3. Doctrine

The majority of the following contradictions are taken from a book from a Muslim scholar entitled “101 contradictions in the Bible.”

**Counting and Numbers**

What I mean by this is that Contradictions and inconsistencies appear in parallel passages of the historical OT books where numbers are different. Let me make you aware of some of them:

*Was Ahaziah 22 (2 Kings 8:26) or 42 (2 Chronicles 22:2) when he began to rule?*

This is an example of a *copyist error*. In fact most English Bibles has 22. The reason for this is because we can tell from the context which number is right. We read in 2 Kings 8:17 that Ahaziah’s father was 32 when he became king and he died 8 years later at the age of 40. We can conclude from this that Ahaziah could not have been older than his father when his father died! The right age is 22.

*2 Samuel 24:9* *says the population of Israel was 800,000 but 1 Chronicles 21:5 says it was 1,100,000*

There have been a few explanations given to explain this but let me give you the most straightforward one which I think makes the most sense. In the Samuel account there is a Hebrew word used which is absent in 1 Chronicles and that is the description of the men as being *valiant*. The word refers to men who are experienced in war – men of battle. In other words the counting in Samuel is a lot more restrictive – it is only referring to the men who had *experience of war*. We know from the law that you could only fight from the age of 20 and over so it is highly probably that here, this number amounted to around 300,000. Thus Chronicles records every *type of man* whereas Samuel only includes men who had fighting experience.

*Did David capture 1700 horsemen (2 Sam 8:4) or 7000 (1 Chron 18:4)?*

Once again a copyist error in the Samuel account seems to have been involved here. The reason why there is evidence to say Samuel is wrong is because the LXX (The Greek translation of the Hebrew OT which the NT writers used) is in agreement with the Chronicles record. Suggestions have been made as to explain it but I’ll not bore you with it.

*2 The scholar’s name is Shabir Ally. You can get a pdf copy of all the contradictions listed here: https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~wwu/YaBBAttachments/101_Contradictions_In_The_Bible.pdf*
Did Solomon have 40,000 stalls (1 Kings 4:26) or 4,000 (2 Chron 9:25)?

There are three ways to explain this. One is simply a copyist error as with the constant copying, distortion could have been over this figure so as to miss or add an extra digit. A second suggestion is that the stalls were large stalls that housed 10 horses so that 4,000 large stalls equalled the equivalent of 40,000 small stalls. A third suggestion is that the number in kings refers to the initial number of stalls under Solomon with the number in chronicles referring to the number at the end of his reign. We know that his reign lasted for 40 years which inevitably mean a lot of changes would take place. We also know that one of the laws for a king in Deut 17:16 was that he was not to acquire many horses meaning that the lower number shows a desire to meet the requirements of the Law from what he originally inherited.

Did 200 singers (Ezra 2:65) or 245 singers (Neh 7:67) accompany the assembly?

Ezra and Nehemiah arrived at different times so Nehemiah's list may have been an updated one to take into consideration changes in the population due to birth and death. Ezra may also be using rounded off numbers in some cases. There may also be some scribal errors in the copying. In conclusion we can see 3 main reasons for inconsistencies and apparent contradictions when it comes to numbers:

1. Scribal error in transmission of copies
2. The writer was not being precise but giving a rough figure
3. Some of the counting was of a specific group

Ask yourself this: Do the differences call into question any major doctrine? Is it logical to conclude that because one record says 4000 and another 40,000 or one says 200 and another 245 that the incident never happened? I'll say more at the end why it is actually a lovely thing that differences appear amidst multiple copies.

Narrative

What is meant by this is that there are contradictions within parallel passages of events and incidents' in both the historical books of the OT and the gospels in the NT. We'll focus on the gospels but I will refer to the one I mentioned last time at 4-1-2 in the chapter of the census.

Did God stir David to take a census (2 Sam 24:1) or did Satan (1 Chron 21:1)?

The answer of course is both. God in his sovereign design, without taking part in evil or being polluted by evil, used the evil one to inspire David to take a census. We read in the Chronicles account that Joab was basically disgusted at David's decision which shows the severity of it. This does not contradict, it harmonises.

Did Jesus ride into Jerusalem on one colt (Mark 11:7) or a colt and a donkey (Matt 21:7)?

This is a foolish contradiction to bring up because you can't ride on two animals at the one time. If you read v7 closely you can see (and this is reflected also in the Greek) that the them does not refer to the animals but the cloaks! It is interesting that every gospel records this incident and says that Jesus rose in on a colt. However Matthew says a colt and a donkey. Why is this? Ask yourself “what is a colt?” It is a young donkey. Being young, the colt would want to stay close to its mother especially in a noisy environment which the entrance would have been. Thus when you harmonize the gospels it is clear that what happens is that Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem on cloaks which have been placed on a colt with its mother walking beside it to keep it calm. No contradiction.

Did Peter deny Christ 3 times before the cock crowed (John 13:38) or 3 times before the cocked crowed twice (Mark 14:30, 72)?
Two explanations can be given. Firstly, there are some early manuscripts in Mark that don’t mention the cock crowing twice. It is possible therefore that “twice” is a later addition for an unknown reason. However assuming this is the original of Mark (and bear in mind the Apostle Peter himself was behind the apostolic authority behind Mark) the difference is the equivalent of “before the bell rings for dinner” and “before the second bell rings for dinner”. It was known that cocks crowed more than once. Mark is more specific whereas the other gospels are more general in making us aware of Peter denying 3 times in total before the cock finished crowing.

Was Jesus on the cross (Mark 15:23) or in Pilates court (John 19:14) at the 6th hour on the day of the crucifixion?

One suggestion is that Mark and John are using two different time methods so that Mark is referring to the Hebrew understanding whereas John is referring to the Roman understanding meaning John is referring to 6am whereas Mark is referring to 9am.

Another suggestion is that John is not intending to be precise with the clear mention of the word “about”.

Did Judas die by hanging himself (Matt 27:5) or by falling headlong off a cliff (Acts 1:18)?

Is this a contradiction? No. The way to harmonize this is that Judas hung himself, probably over a cliff and when he died and his body began to decompose his body fell down and his body burst.

The last 3 of the narrative contradictions are to do with the resurrection and the events of that morning.

Did the women buy spices before the Sabbath (Luke 23:55-24:1) or after the Sabbath (Mark 16:1)?

Some explain this by saying that there were two different groups of women. Although this is not a complete impossibility I think the answer is a lot more straight forward to that. I believe there was one group of women (though this does not mean they left to go to the tomb together) but notice the language carefully. Luke does not say the women bought spices; he says they went and prepared spices indicating that the women already had spices in their possession at home. Mark says they bought spices. The picture is this:

After Jesus’ body was taken to be buried the women went home to prepare spices. They either discovered that they did not have enough or, as an act of devotion they decided to buy more. However the next day was a Sabbath (which actually started the Friday evening) so they were forced to rest and in the morning (or late Saturday night) they bought more spices to anoint Jesus.

It is interesting how Luke first introduces these women to us in his gospel. He mentions them by name at the beginning of chapter 8 immediately after he records a woman’s devotion to Jesus using perfume and wiping his feet with her hair. These women would follow in her footsteps as it relates to that devotion.

When did the women visit the tomb?
The 4 gospels read as follows:

“At dawn” (Matt 28:1)
“Very early...just after sunrise...” (Mark 16:2)
“Very early in the morning” – (Luke 24:1)
“Early...while it was still dark” (John 20:1)

All are right. There is enough evidence for us to see that this took place early in the morning where it was in that “in between stage” of being neither pitch black or fully bright. Depending on the eyewitness they will describe it in different ways as evidenced in the gospels.
Was there 1 angel (Matt 28:2-3) or two angels at the tomb (Luke 24:4)?

A bit like the issue with the donkey and colt, there was two angels but Matthew only mentions 1 because of the earthquake it produced and the message it gave. It need not be contradictory – there can still be two angels with one playing a major role.

Did Mary Magdalene see Jesus on her first visit (Matt 28:8-10) or second visit? (John 20:14-16)

When you compare the beginning of John 20 with the other gospels we see that John gives us more information. What seems to have happened is that the women planned to meet at the tomb together to anoint the body. However when they discover the body is not there, Mary Magdalene rushes (possibly with a few others) to tell the disciples. While she is away the angels tell the women not to look for the living among the dead – they then go to tell the disciples. There would be a number of different ways to and from the tomb so apparently as the women leave the tomb and Mary Magdalene (along with John and Peter) return to the tomb it seems that they don’t cross each other’s paths. John and Peter return home and Mary stays at the tomb where she meets the risen Christ whom she initially does not recognize.

Doctrine

There are also apparent contradictions when it comes to doctrine. Let me give one major and well known example:

Is justification by faith (Romans 4:1-5) or by works (James 2:21-24)?

Do Paul and James contradict each other? Absolutely not! The context and content of each book helps us see this.

In Romans, Paul is teaching the church which consists of both Jews and Greeks what it means to be saved. Salvation is by faith and this is true regardless of ethnicity. The “justification” that Paul is referring to is initial conversion.

In James, his purpose is addressing the evidence of saving faith. Notice that James also quotes from Genesis 15:6 and affirms justification by faith (James 2:23). However, when James wants to support justification by works he supports it from an event from Abraham’s life which happened after his justification in Genesis 15. He refers to the offering of Isaac in Genesis 22 (see James 2:21-22)

In other words, James affirms justification by faith just like Paul, but using Abraham as an example, justifying faith will inevitably produce works which we see in the life of Abraham when he offered up his son.

As Luther said all those years ago: “You are saved by faith alone but it is a faith that will not remain alone”

Jesus’ Understanding of the Scriptures

It is to be expected that those outside of the church reject its authority; but it is a real tragedy that in the name of Jesus, modern evangelicals are weakening their view of scripture. They do this totally ignoring the fact that they are at odds with Christ’s own view of scripture.

1. He declared that not one tiniest grammatical mark of the OT was to be thrown down (Matt 5:17ff)

2. He claimed scripture could not be broken (John 10:35)

3. He relentlessly quoted scripture to support his beliefs (Matthew 4:1-11) doing what Adam in the garden should have done when the first voice of Satan appears by questioning: Did God really say?
4. He quotes Moses’ words attributing them to God (Matthew 19:4-6) and claimed human writers *spoke in the spirit* (Matthew 22:43)

5. When the Sadducees (a group that rejected much of the OT scriptures) saw an apparent contradiction within the law, Jesus rebukes them for not knowing the scripture (Mark 12:24)

According to Jesus therefore, every assault on the word of God is a result of ignorance of it. Jesus believed in the divine inspiration of scripture – *all of scripture*. It wasn’t simply a record containing the word of God; but was in totality God’s word. This is the Jesus that God raised from the dead, vindicating everything he ever said and did. It would be wise to have the same view of the Bible as Jesus did.