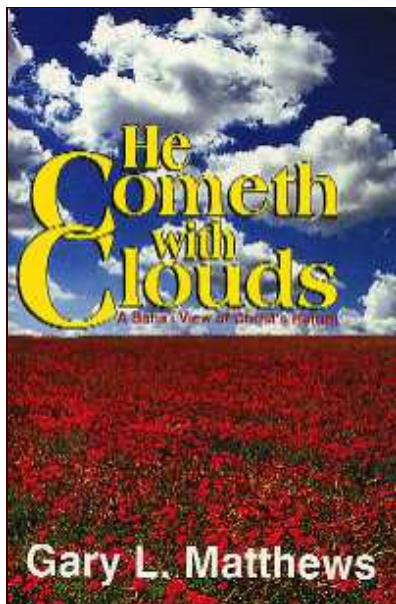




## Contradictions in the Bible?

Gary L. Matthews, author of "He Cometh with Clouds", was asked by one of the friends to comment on this topic: his reply is printed in full.



### Question:

*You do not mention contradictions in the Bible. How do we as Baha'is explain them when we accept the divine inspiration of the Bible. Just one example - conversion of Saul Acts 9 v.7 "men travelling with Saul heard a voice" whereas Acts 22 v.9 says "men travelling did not hear any voice."*

### Answer:

Excellent questions! Let me divide my thoughts into two categories.

One category concerns the specific example you cite ... Bible scholars have written that there's no contradiction in the original Greek text of these Acts passages; the appearance of conflict, they say, arises from an ambiguity in the English translation. I'll explain in a moment why their observations make sense to me.

But the other category concerns contradictions in a broader sense. You've cited just one example, but even if this one turns out to have a logical explanation, it's possible others don't. Most of the so-called "contradictions" flagged by skeptics turn out, on close examination, to be illusory. (See Gleason Archer's "Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties" for an expert and comprehensive study of this field.) But some of the apparent contradictions are tough to explain, as even Archer concedes.

I'm not prepared to state, with any certainty or authority, that there are "real" contradictions in the Bible; but it would not surprise me to learn that there are. Nor would it bother me. The Bible can be divinely inspired in terms of its spiritual and doctrinal content, without being "infallible" on the level of historical detail. Shoghi Effendi wrote, concerning the Witch of Endor incident in the Book of Samuel:

*"We have no way of knowing historically, at present, whether the experience Saul had of Samuel was an actual spiritual intercourse. It is not the product of imagination, however, as the Bible unmistakably affirms it.*

*(Lights of Guidance, Pages: 515-516; emphasis mine)*

I take this to mean that, as history, the story may or may not be accurate. But either way, there's a spiritual point or lesson that is divinely inspired. So we're talking about differing levels of intent.

There's another example concerning the Isaac/Ishmael thing: Which son did Abraham

almost sacrifice? This isn't a contradiction internal to the Bible. But the Bible says Isaac; the Qur'an says Ishmael; and Baha'u'llah says Ishmael. Is the Bible "wrong"? Technically, perhaps. But the spiritual point revolves around Abraham's willingness to obey God at all costs, and has nothing to do with which son was involved.

Moreover, there's a letter from the Guardian (it's in "Unfolding Destiny") stating that the Bible's identification of Isaac may, in this case, reflect a copying error from the ancient original text – which of course is lost. The Bible may have said Ishmael originally, and been historically correct. The "inspiration" (whatever it means) applies to the originals. Although Baha'u'llah, in the Kitab-i-Iqan, explains that God has through the centuries protected the integrity of the Bible's doctrinal content, He doesn't insist this applies to every literal detail of history.

There's also the complex question of what scholars call "variant readings": We don't have the original manuscripts of any Bible book. We have only copies from later eras. Many of these conflict in their wording; and it's a pain to choose which is most accurate. None of these discrepancies amount to much – they're basically scribal errors equivalent to what we today would call "typographical errors". Not one of them changes the meaning of a single important Christian or Jewish doctrine.

These are very complex questions. Some day, I'll have published my own book on this subject, and tried to explore it as thoroughly as I'm able. (Not being a trained scholar, I have obvious limitations here.) Be that as it may, different Baha'is obviously have very different perspectives. So, for that matter, do different Christians. Even Christians who believe – as most all do – that the Bible is divinely inspired, often admit that there are "human elements" and manuscript authenticity issues worth studying. But they believe (as do Baha'is) that these don't compromise the Bible spiritual message.

The Baha'i position, as I understand it, is that the Bible is an "authentic Book" of divine revelation, but "not wholly authentic" in terms of literal history. We cannot necessarily take it as a historical authority in every instance – yet if the Bible "unmistakably affirms" a thing, we can be sure it is not a "product of imagination". 'Abdu'l-Baha says that "all the Texts and Teachings" of the Old and New Testaments have "intrinsic spiritual meanings" not to be taken literally.

Moderate as it is, this position strongly affirms the doctrinal authority of the Bible. It is, in fact, a considerably stronger pro-Bible position than is typical of today's theologians and Bible scholars. What's being taught in the seminaries and divinity schools is, by and large, a humanistic view of the manuscripts. While we're a long way from the evangelical proponents of inerrancy, we're closer to them, I'd guess, than we are to today's ultra-liberal Christians. The Baha'i Faith looks pretty mainstream Christian!

This complexity arises, of course, from the fact that none of the Bible's 66 books were written directly by a Manifestation of God. A Manifestation, such as Muhammad or Baha'u'llah, brings the "Most Great Infallibility" to bear on His own compositions. So these are, in my view, the "Word of God" in a strong sense that isn't relevant to biblical studies.

I do not, however, believe it is wise or useful to emphasize this distinction when speaking with Christians – not in the early stages of teaching. What is useful is to affirm the Bible, ignore the question of contradictions (unless the Christian brings it up), and downplay the importance should the question ever arise.

Now ... Back to your question about Acts 9:7 and Acts 22:9.

According to Gleason Archer, there are two distinctly different Greek words for "hearing". One means to register sounds, physically, with the ear. The other means to hear with an understanding of the meaning. We have this distinction in English, though we use a single word for both meanings, relying on context to convey the difference: You may "hear" a conversation going on in the next room, in that you're aware of loud voices – perhaps even ear-blasting yelling. But if the words are muffled or garbled (or perhaps in a different

language), you may say, "I can't hear what they're saying!" Or you may tell a friend, "Sorry – I didn't hear you", meaning you heard the sounds but didn't catch the meaning or the words.

In the Greek of Acts, one account says Saul's companions "heard the voice" (in the sense that they were aware of someone speaking). But the context makes it fairly clear they couldn't understand anything Saul was told. The other account says they did not "hear" in the sense of hearing intelligibly. The word used is quite different, and there's no contradiction.

On a practical level, you'll find that just about any "contradiction" you can dredge up from the Bible has some such explanation. And even if it doesn't, it remains as frivolous as this one would be, if it were genuine. We needlessly derail our teachings efforts if we allow seekers to drag us off onto these kinds of tangents.

Anyway, thanks for writing. These are important questions, and I doubt I've written the last word on them (or that anyone ever will).

Gary L. Matthews