

How did King Saul die?

- A. He killed himself (1 Sam. 31:4-6)
- B. He was slain by an Amalekite (2 Sam. 1:8-10)
- C. He was killed by the Phillistines (2 Sam. 21: 11-13)
- D. He killed himself and God put him to death (1 Chron. 10:4, 13-14)



KNOW YOUR BIBLE

In class today we discussed the above meme that I nabbed from an atheist Facebook page (with a little tasteful editing). The meme is attempting to point out contradictory accounts of the death of King Saul in the Old Testament.

Our focus in class was

- 1) Understanding what a contradiction is;
- 2) How to think through this particular “contradiction” by looking at each passage in context;
- 3) Discussing the reason atheists and skeptics use this tactic and why it is effective.

Technically, a contradiction occurs when two or more claims conflict with one another so that they cannot simultaneously be true in the same sense and at the same time. To put it another way, a Bible contradiction exists when there are claims within the Bible that are mutually exclusive in the same sense and at the same time. I used the example in class that it would be contradictory to say it is 100 degrees F and 0 degrees F at the same time in the same place.

That is to say that just because there are some differences in texts recording the same events doesn't mean that they are contradictory. In class, I mentioned that there are differences between the gospel accounts of some of the same events, but these are mostly a matter of the intent of the author (for Jewish audience vs a Gentile audience) or their particular perspective (are they telling a quick account or trying to focus on a message). In this case and many other examples like it all it takes is a little investigation and knowledge of the Bible to solve.

The meme indicates 4 passages detailing Saul's death. Firstly, note that the author references very narrow sections of the passages, only 3 verses per account. Using our motto tactic of "Never Read a Bible Verse" we know to take a closer look at the context of each by reading the passage in its context, whether the entire chapter up to the verses or in some cases the chapter(s) leading up to them, as well as reading beyond.

So now on to the example at hand. For the sake of brevity, I'll only list the Scripture references with the hopes that you'll read them for yourselves.

1. "He killed himself. (1 Samuel 31:4-6)"
 - a. In the meme's context, we see Saul asks his armor bearer to kill him so he is not killed by "these uncircumcised". The armor bearer refuses out of fear, so Saul falls upon his own sword, and then the armor bearer does likewise after seeing Saul was dead.
 - b. In book context, this is the very last chapter of 1 Samuel and is also detailing the end of Saul's reign.
 - c. In chapter context, we see that Saul is losing a battle to the Philistine army. He has been hit by the Philistine archers and is wounded, possibly fatally. It is then he seeks to save face in a way by dying to his armor bearer, and then kills himself.
 - i. I pointed out in class the difference between descriptive and prescriptive text.
 1. Descriptive = explains things as they happened.
 2. Prescriptive = encourages or discourages certain behaviors by example or commandment
 3. Descriptions of acts in the Bible even by "heroes" are not necessarily prescriptions for our behavior.
 4. I referred to some of the less than noble acts of Jacob or Abraham or in this case Saul to evidence this.
 5. Also pointed out that it is a boost in our confidence in the veracity of the Scriptures that we do see the flaws in the "heroes" of God's story because you would expect cultures to embellish their family history to the good by hiding flaws.
 6. Saul choosing to commit suicide to save face is **not** a prescription for us to do the same in a similar situation.
 - d. We can thus take this account for granted as the true one in order to compare to the other alleged contradictions.
2. "He was slain by the Amalekite (2 Samuel 1:8-10)"
 - a. In the meme's context, an Amalekite is telling about Saul asking for the Amalekite to slay him, so he did and took Saul's crown and jewelry to David.
 - b. In book context, this is the first chapter in 2 Samuel leading from the end of Saul's reign and life and into David's reign as King.
 - c. In the passage's context, David is approached by a man in rent clothes and dirt on his head (a sign of mourning) and bows down to David, and then recounts him

escaping the camp of Israel after many fled and many were killed, including Saul and his son Jonathan.

- d. David asks who he is and how he knows Saul is dead, and the man says he came upon Saul leaning on his spear, that he is an Amalekite, and that Saul asked him to slay him. Then David has the Amalekite killed for killing the LORD's anointed.
 - e. The claimed contradiction here is that the Amalekite killed Saul rather than Saul killing himself.
 - f. Some investigation reveals that the Amalekites tended to be hired mercenaries and would thus fight for whichever army would benefit them the most. The Amalekite is thus an unreliable narrator. More likely, he saw that Saul was dead and took it as an opportunity to win the new King's favor (David) by reporting that he was the one who killed Saul, and bring the crown and jewels as evidence.
 - i. Note that it was well known Saul sought to kill David.
 - ii. Also note the Amalekite said that Saul was thrust on a spear rather than a sword. Not a total contradiction as the Amalekite may have not taken notice of what specific weapon Saul was on, but a point against his story indeed.
 - iii. Note too that the Amalekite did not mention the armor bearer who in the first account killed himself near Saul.
 - g. Also Saul wanted to avoid the dishonor of being killed by non-Jews; he would not likely have settled for an Amalekite.
 - h. In summary, this is not a contradiction so much as the recounting of an unreliable narrator (the Amalekite) who tried to gain favor but instead lost his life.
3. "He was killed by the Philistines (2 Samuel 21:11-13)"
- a. In the meme context, David goes to get the bones of Saul and Jonathan and others from Jabesh-gilead who stole them from where the Philistines had hanged them in Beth-shan as war trophies. The phrase in focus here is "when the Philistines had slain Saul in Giliboa."
 - b. There are 2 ways to look at the solution to this contradiction.
 - c. Looking into the surrounding context here isn't nearly as revealing as looking at the Hebrew.
 - i. The Hebrew word for "slain" or "killed" here seems to be more properly translated "struck".
 - ii. However, in class Kenny noted that the word is translated "killed" in several translations.
 - iii. I don't really have an answer for the reason for that, but placing it here on record.
 - d. We can also recognize that to say that the Philistines killed Saul can also be understood to mean that they defeated Saul, which they did as noted in the first passage we looked at.
4. "He killed himself and God put him to death (1 Chronicles 10:4, 13-14)"
- a. This one is pitting the context of the passage against itself.

- b. In Old Testament context, the books of Chronicles were largely retellings of passages from the books of Kings.
 - i. That's why if you read the Bible in a year, it seems like you rehash the same information a couple or three times.
 - c. In chapter context, the first part surrounding and including verse 4 from the meme's reference is an almost word-for-word retelling of Saul's death from 1 Samuel 31.
 - d. The end of this chapter (vs 13-14) says this:
 - i. "So Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the LORD, even against the word of the LORD, which he kept not, and also for asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit, to enquire of it.
 - ii. "And enquired not of the LORD: therefore he slew him, and turned the kingdom unto David the son of Jesse."
 - e. The problem here is not contradiction—it is a fundamental misunderstanding of the sovereignty of God.
 - f. Saul transgressed (broke) God's laws many times.
 - i. The fact that this passage specifically calls out Saul seeking the witch to summon Samuel's spirit indicates this particular transgression was exceptionally grievous.
 - g. The LORD pronounced judgment on Saul for these transgressions. Saul would pay for his sin.
 - h. Whether Saul was killed by himself, the Philistines, his armor bearer, the Amalekite, or a lightning bolt from heaven, God's judgment was still carried out on Saul.
5. Thus, we see that despite differences in the accounts, a little investigation and critical thinking reveals that there are no contradictions in this attempted attack by the atheist Facebook group.

However, this exercise brings up an important point: why do atheists and skeptics use tactics like this? For the past few decades, particularly with the explosion of internet and social media, atheism has grown rapidly and has evolved into an evangelical, proselytizing movement. Sadly, a great many of these atheists come from evangelical Christian backgrounds. So, they know something already about the basic beliefs of Christianity and therefore know where to undermine it.

By questioning the Bible's authority, they are able to shake the foundations of an unprepared believer. If the Bible has contradictions, what else might it be wrong about? And unfortunately this has had an effect. The churches in the West (especially the US and UK) have failed to adequately train people in their faith, and so when stepping onto shaky ground, the foundation is easily toppled.

That's why it is so important to Know your Bible (as the meme ironically advises). Know how to maneuver around these attacks. This is my heart for Christians. This is what I wish to convey when I teach.

Finally, despite most internet skeptics accusing Christians of not knowing their Bibles and also being too dimwitted to see such an “obvious contradiction”, a good deal of them also don’t know the Bible. Rather they parrot talking points from their own groups of like-minded echo chambers and have never attempted reasoning these things out in their own minds. Likewise, it is important that we too do not just parrot what we know about the Bible from our own groups of like-minded echo chambers. We must actively engage our Bible, studying and seeking out the basis of our beliefs.

Addendum: I mentioned also the Skeptics’ Annotated Bible (<https://skepticsannotatedbible.com/>) which I don’t recommend going to lightly, particularly if you are on shaky ground with your beliefs. I warn not because I don’t trust in the veracity of our faith or the authority of the Bible, but because this is spiritual warfare. The enemy can sneak up on you when you are not prepared to enter into the fight, in this case a war for your mind.

See <https://veritasdomain.wordpress.com/2021/07/17/bible-contradiction-how-did-saul-die/> for more information on the topic at hand.

See <https://veritasdomain.wordpress.com/2016/12/02/collection-of-posts-responding-to-bible-contradictions/> for a huge list of other bible contradiction responses.