

BRAIN TEASERS

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The following examples provide occasions for working through paradoxes, apparent contradictions, hard sayings, and ambiguous comments. A summary of ways to resolve difficulties accompanies the course description and agenda sheets: “Resolving Apparent Contradictions in Scripture.”

(a) Indicate the class, the assignment number, and your name at the top of the paper.

(b) Repeat the text of the brain teaser at the outset of the paper; otherwise, your answers will not be readily retrievable for future use.

(c) If you use any helps of some sort, indicate them at the end of your presentation. In most cases the intent is that you do the best you can without assistance, and then look at resources, if you like, that deal with the passages in order to check yourself or raise points that did not occur to you. The idea is to practice interpretation skills rather than to carry on research.

(d) To make each effort a conscious one, indicate at the end of your essay the mechanism or mechanisms you appealed to in resolving apparent discrepancies. The idea here is to become more consciously aware of the thinking pattern that goes into the interpretation work.

(e) Normally presentations should take at least one page of typed comments.

(f) Write up the explanation in a way that is appropriate for public use as in a Sunday school class, a church newsletter, or Bible study; that is, put the presentation in good structure and style. A component of one letter grade is applied to structure, style, and grammar.

(g) Late work is not acceptable because we may discuss the cases briefly in class.

Many brain teasers do not deal with very substantive issues and that is intentional. On matters that are not controversial, our minds are not distracted with preconceived conclusions that our solutions must fit with. The same mechanisms that we bring to bear on non-controversial and admittedly secondary matters can then be used more deliberately on substantive issues. These exercises on unimportant points provide opportunities to practice using mechanisms and thought patterns on important questions.

In interpretation work, it is desirable to look for more than one meaning. We can fall into the habit of stopping with the first idea that comes to mind as if what automatically occurs first to us is naturally the meaning. That may reflect intellectual laziness or a simplistic assumption about the clarity of language communication. In working on alleged discrepancies, *etc.*, a reader does well to propose as many options as he can think of. That keeps him from fixing on one “solution” too soon. As a matter of fact, much of what interpretation ends up doing is limiting the range of options rather than finding the interpretation of a text. (1) The first step is to think up as many readings as possible. They may be thought of on the basis of the wording taken by itself. (2) The next step is to see whether any of these initial impressions are eliminated because they are contradictory to the

near and distant context or to the nature of the case. (3) The final step is to see whether any of them are foreign to the context and to the nature of the subject. By “foreign” we mean pertaining to a subject no relevant to the present discussion and purpose of the author.

1. According to Matthew 8:5-13 a centurion came to Jesus asking him to heal a sick servant. In Luke’s account (7:2-10) he sends elders of the Jews asking Jesus to heal that servant. Did the centurion come to Jesus or not? Which account is wrong here?

2. On the cross Jesus promised the repentant thief that he would be with him in Paradise (Luke 23:43). Later, after the resurrection and before the ascension, he told Mary Magdalene not to cling to him because he had not yet ascended to the Father (John 20:17). The Father is surely in Paradise, isn’t he? NOTE: the King James Version at this point reads, “*Do not touch me,*” which is probably not the point of Jesus’ comment.

3. John 3:17 claims that God did not send his son into the world to judge the world; yet 9:39 says that for judgment Christ came into the world. What is the truth of the matter? Similar passages are 5:22; 8:15; 12:47-48; contrast Acts 17:31.

4. Psalm 16:10 says, “*You will not leave my soul in Sheol, and you will not allow your [Holy One(s)/Beloved] to see corruption*” (cp. Acts 2:27; 13:35). (There are some less important manuscripts that read *Beloved* here; a few others read plural on “holy ones.”) Jesus was in the tomb for three days (Matthew 27:57-28:1); cp. the case of Lazarus, whose body had been in the grave four days and his sister feared it would be decaying and giving off an odor by that time (John 11:39).

Did Jesus not, in fact, resurrect but was taken immediately to heaven after the burial? Would his body not have seen corruption if it had lain entombed for at least thirty-four hours?

5. 1 John 1:8 declares, “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*” 1 John 3:6 and 5:18, however, say, “*Whoever abides in him does not sin; whoever sins has not seen him or known him.*” “*We know that everyone who has been begotten by God does not sin, but the One/one begotten by God keeps him/himself and the Evil One does not touch him.*”

Does the person who has been begotten by God sin or not? (“One/one” is a variant translation depending on whether the reference is to the “begotten one” of the previous clause or to Christ.)

6. Romans 13:8 says, “*Do not owe any person anything.*” Jesus commands his disciples not to turn away from those who would borrow (Matthew 5:42; Luke 6:34-35). If you lend money to someone, are you not causing him to sin by putting him in a situation where he disobeys Paul’s commandment not to owe anyone anything?

7. According to Matthew 28:2-6 an angel descended from heaven, rolled away the stone, and told the women to tell Jesus’ disciples that he had risen from the dead. In Luke 24:2-7 and John 20:12 there are two angels present in meeting the women as a group and then Mary Magdalene alone at the tomb.

A similar thing happens between the accounts of the blind man/men near Jericho; Matthew 20:29-34 has two blind beggars whereas Mark 10:46-52 has one. In Matthew’s account there are two Gadarene demoniacs (8:28-34), but in Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-39 there is one. Matthew 21:2 mentions two donkeys involved in the triumphal entry—a donkey and her colt, but Mark 11:2 and Luke 19:30 refer to only one.

Were there two or one angel, blind man, demoniac, or donkey?

8. In Matthew's account Christ predicts, "*Truly I tell you that tonight, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times*" (26:34); similarly, Luke 22:34 says, "*I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you deny three times that you know me.*" On the other hand, Mark 14:30 words it somewhat differently: "*Truly I tell you that today, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.*"

How is it possible for Peter to deny Jesus three times before the rooster crows twice without denying him after the rooster crows once? yet Jesus says Peter will deny him before the rooster crows period.

9. Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 10:34 that he did not come to bring peace on the earth but a sword. Nevertheless, Paul declares that the fruit of the S/spirit is love, joy, peace, *etc.* Did Jesus not come to bring the fruit of the S/spirit?