are there CONTRADICTIONS in the BIBLE?

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Hard Sayings in the Bible

There are three kinds of hard sayings in the Bible, depending upon the particular nuance of the term hard. Some passages are hard in the sense of difficult to understand (cf. 2 Pet. 3:15-16 where Peter admits this about Paul’s writings). Ironically, other Scripture passages are hard because they are easy to understand but uncomfortable in their demand; that is, they are difficult to accept (see John 6:60). Then some Scriptures are hard because they appear to conflict with other sources of knowledge; that is, they are difficult to reconcile. This kind of difficulty—the question of consistency—is the general concern of this chapter.

The issue of consistency is important in defending the Bible against hostile attacks, but it is also significant for encouraging faith. Several chapters in this volume address the Bible’s consistency with matters of science and ethics. Other chapters deal with consistency issues in the field of theology, either internally or externally—i.e., examining the Bible’s internal theological consistency or comparing the Bible’s message externally to other ancient documents. Still other chapters address questions about the Bible’s consistency with what we know about history from external sources. The primary concern of this chapter, however, is the internal consistency of the Bible on matters of history. That is, do the various portions of the Bible—a volume composed over the course of 1,500 years with the writings of more than a score of people—consistently report the same things? Thus, we are dealing here with passages that are difficult to reconcile with each other.

A good example of the issue that concerns us here is to compare the two New Testament accounts of the death of Judas Iscariot given in Matthew 27:5 (“Then he went and hanged himself”) and Acts 1:18 (“He fell headfirst and burst open in the middle, and all his insides spilled out”). These two Bible passages are difficult to reconcile; is there a contradiction here?

Many others have treated the issue of apparent contradictions in the Bible, and there are several approaches that can be taken. Some choose an
encyclopedic approach of paging through the Bible and addressing apparent contradictions as they arise. Yet a different approach focuses not on the problem passages themselves but explores possible techniques for solving apparent discrepancies. Yet another approach begins by classifying apparent contradictions into like categories based on causation and factors giving rise to discrepancies. Our approach here is something like the last mentioned, and we will employ it with a two-fold methodology. First, we outline several cautionary principles against mistaken claims of contradictions in Scripture. Second, we examine the New Testament resurrection narratives and—using the cautionary principles—respond to charges of inconsistency between the Gospels. At the close of the chapter, we offer a simple outline for responding to people who make claims that the Bible contains contradictions.

Cautions Against Mistaken Claims of Contradiction
It is easy to claim that the Bible contains inconsistencies and contradictions. Such claims are made on media talk shows, on Internet blogs and websites, in conversations among friends, and in best-selling books. But making such claims is not the same thing as proving them. In fact, many such claims stem solely from the reader’s misunderstanding of a writer’s purposes; there is no error in what the author is saying. To avoid mistaken claims, readers should attend to the purposes of the biblical authors. So, here we propose to outline three basic cautionary principles against mistaken claims of contradiction. In proposing these cautions (and several subcategories), we provide examples of mistaken claims about inconsistencies in the Bible. Our suggestion here is that every claim about contradictions in the Bible goes against one (or more) of these cautionary principles.

Misplaced Expectations Do Not Necessitate Contradiction
Bible readers can utilize unfair and foreign expectations in their reading of Scripture. Because this can happen on several different levels, this first cautionary principle can be a complex category. So we offer five different cautions regarding misplaced expectations.
Selection Is Not Denial

Authors cannot write everything. They have no choice but to be selective of what they include in their accounts. The selectivity of an author is related to his purpose for writing and does not entail an absolute denial of events not selected. This is true of authors in all time periods everywhere.\textsuperscript{10} The truthfulness of an author’s report cannot be questioned simply because it does not satisfy a particular reader’s curiosity for information unrelated to the author’s purposes.

For example, each of the four Gospels has information not contained in any of the others. But this does not necessitate that these records are in contradiction with one another. The Gospel of John even reports on their necessary selectivity: “And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which, if they were written one by one, I suppose not even the world itself could contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25; cf. 20:30).

Even the skeptic Bart Ehrman recognizes this when commenting on a comparative reading (“horizontal reading”) of the Gospels:

\begin{quote}
For example, in the accounts of Jesus’ birth in Matthew and Luke, a horizontal reading shows that Matthew tells the story of the wise men coming to worship Jesus, whereas Luke tells the story of the shepherds coming to worship him. There are no shepherds in Matthew and no wise men in Luke. This is not a contradiction: Matthew wants (for important reasons, as it turns out) to tell the story of the wise men, and Luke (for other reasons) wants to tell the story of the shepherds.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

Indeed, no one would conclude from the silence of Mark and John about Jesus’ birth that Mark and John thought Jesus was not born! No, the selectivity of a Scripture writer does not necessitate his denial of unselected events.\textsuperscript{12}
Different Is Not Discrepant

Noting the explainable differences in the advent stories of Matthew and Luke helps us realize that differences between records do not necessitate irreconcilable discrepancy. When it comes to reporting an event, writers must make many choices about what details to include and how to relate it to other events. So, for example, to report two events that happened at the same time, an author must decide which one to mention first. Ehrman claims that the New Testament accounts of Jesus’ death disagree with one another because some report Jesus dying and then the temple curtain being torn (Matt 27:45–51; Mark 15:33–38), while Luke reports the temple curtain being torn and then Jesus dying (Luke 23:44–46). But this kind of complaint ignores the fact that all three Synoptic Gospels note that both things happened at “the ninth hour,” i.e., around 3:00 p.m. (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34; Luke 23:44); the differing orders in which they are written down does not change the fact that the accounts all report the same two events happening at the same time.

We can add here a converse caution about our expectations: similar events need not be the same and their differences could indicate they are completely different events. So, for example, we should not complain that the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30) “contradicts” the parable of the pounds (Luke 19:11–27), with the first having three servants entrusted with varying amounts and the second having ten servants entrusted with the same amounts. These are similar parables with similar lessons, but this does not mean they are contradictory representations of the same event. They may well be similar but completely different events. Jesus was an itinerate preacher who likely gave similar sermons on different occasions. All this to say we should not assume that differences necessitate a discrepancy.

Accuracy Is Not Precision

“Precision” and “accuracy” are not completely synonymous concepts. “It rained last week” can be accurate without being precise. The statement does not say what day or time last week (or even where), but that does not necessarily bring the accuracy of the statement into question. Similarly, “I live three miles from campus” is accurate in terms of miles, even though I might live 3.25 miles from campus or 2.978 miles from campus (and where does “campus” begin, anyway?). Those are issues of how precise we want to make our claim, but
precision is different than accuracy. With this caution in place, we can easily realize that there is no necessary contradiction between reports when, for example, in relation to Peter’s confession, Matthew and Mark report the transfiguration happened “after six days” (Matt 17:1; Mark 9:2) and Luke reports that it happened after “about eight days” (Luke 9:28).15

Now, to be clear here, inaccuracies are still false and are not to be excused as being merely “less precise”! Precise claims can be false and imprecise claims can be accurate. In our ordinary conversations (which are much like how the Bible has been written to us), we can notice when precision words are used and not used—e.g., “exactly” versus “approximately”; “one and only one” versus “a”; “exactly ten” versus “some, a few, several”—and judge the truth or falsity of the claims accordingly. So Scripture can be accurate even when different reports have varying levels of precision.16

Paraphrase Is Not Quotation

In reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, we notice differences in how the quotations are recorded. For example, what does the voice from heaven say at Jesus’ baptism: “This is My beloved Son. I take delight in Him!” (Matt 3:17) or “You are My beloved Son; I take delight in You!” (Mark 1:11 and Luke 3:22)? Of course, the voice probably did not speak in English at all(!), and perhaps not even in Greek (the language in which the New Testament is written). If the voice spoke in Hebrew or Aramaic (the common language of the Jews in the first century), then what we have in the New Testament are paraphrasing translations of the message into Greek. The idea of exact quotation (with the typographical “ ” marks) is a relatively recent literary convention. What writers were concerned about in the New Testament records was getting the message correct. This is not unlike how we report one another’s speech today. Few of us expect exact quotations when we ask questions like, “What did the speaker say in his lecture?” and “What did the president say in his speech?” But we do expect truthful paraphrases.17 This is how the Bible reports speech in its narrative sections (not withstanding the quotation marks used in our modern English translations).18
**Thematic Ordering Is Not Errant**

An author’s selection and ordering of events by theme (and not merely by chronology) does not necessitate that the author is being dishonest. We can observe, for example, that the four Gospels are each largely chronological but none claims to be exactly chronological. They each begin in the beginning—albeit different beginnings, depending upon their different purposes. And they each end at the death and resurrection of Jesus. Nevertheless, none claims that each individual story is told in exact chronological order, and we should not expect it.

In fact, the thematic ordering in the Gospels is well noted. One famous example is found in comparing the accounts of Jesus being tempted (Matt 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13). While both report the same three temptation stories, they place the three in differing orders. Using the more sequential connecting words “then” and “again” (tote and palin), Matthew lists the three temptations in the order: bread making—temple jumping—Satan worshipping. Luke, however, lists the temptations in a different order: bread making—Satan worshipping—temple jumping. But there is no contradiction here when we notice that, with an apparent desire to end the list with a climatic emphasis on the temple in Jerusalem (a thematic concern for Luke), Luke uses the nonsequencing words “and” and “but” (kai and de) to connect the three items. All this to say, we must not wrongly insist that thematic accounts are intended to be chronological.

So we have cautioned ourselves here against wrongful expectations of the Bible. We should expect it to be accurate in its reporting and to tell the truth in all it says. But that does not mean that it gives us all the information that we crave, in the order that we prefer it, and with all the detail we might desire. Reports can be different than our expectations without necessitating contradiction.

Some might level charges of “illegitimate harmonization” for such solutions as I have offered here, and I agree that some well-intentioned scholars have sometimes unnecessarily offered some rather far-fetched solutions in the name of harmonization. But complaints about “illegitimate harmonization” often amount to illegitimate reductionism whereby skeptics claim that life cannot be more complicated than their personal (and prejudicial) expectations allow. Thus, when we think we have found a contradiction between
reports in the Bible, we should be willing to double-check our potentially errant expectations.

**Misconstrued Referents Do Not Necessitate Contradiction**

Our second category of basic cautionary principles has to do with misconstrued referents. The reader’s wrong assumptions about a writer’s intended subject matter do not necessarily involve the writer in contradiction. This confusion of referents can manifest in several different ways. We will discuss here five different kinds of which we should be especially aware of: unrecognized referents, undifferentiated definitions, unclassified causations, unacknowledged attention, and unseen summary.

**Unrecognized Referents**

Matthew 27:7–10 clearly quotes Zechariah 11:12–13 but then attributes the citation to Jeremiah. Is this not a mistake on Matthew’s part, precisely with regard to his (and not the reader’s) misconstrued referent? Not necessarily. Kaiser offers a simple explanation for this apparent contradiction:

Matthew probably attributed the text to Jeremiah because Jeremiah, in many Hebrew manuscripts, headed up the collection of the prophets and his name was used to designate all in the collection. Our book titles with their chapter and verse division are a fairly recent innovation. Also Matthew may have attributed this quotation to Jeremiah because this text was paired with Jeremiah 18:1–4; 32:6–9. Thus he cited the name of the better-known and more prominent prophet.²³

A second example of confused referents involves Jesus’ two differing “for” and “against” statements in the Gospels. On the one hand, “Anyone who is not with Me is against Me, and anyone who does not gather with Me scatters” (Luke 11:23;
Matt 12:30). But on the other hand, “For whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40; cf. Luke 9:50). Ehrman, who calls this one of his favorite examples of divergent reports of Jesus’ words, wonders, “Did he say both things? Could he mean both things? How can both be true at once? Or is it possible that one of the Gospel writers got things switched around?” A moment’s reflection on the actually mentioned referents, however, shows that there is no formal contradiction here at all. Where there are only two options—for or against—both statements have their proper referents: if people are not “for,” they must be “against,” and if people are not “against,” they must be “for.” Complaints like Ehrman’s suffer from unrecognized referents. Rightly recognizing the writer’s referents can restore a respect for the Bible’s reliability.

### Undifferentiated Definitions

The reader’s misapplied definition to a writer’s term does not necessarily entail that the writer is in error. So, for example, in Romans 8:8–9, Paul says that those who are “in the flesh” (en sarki) cannot please God, but then in Galatians 2:20, he remarks that the life he was living “in the [flesh]” (en sarki) he was living by faith in the Son of God. But examining these statements in their contexts, we can easily see that life “in the [flesh]” in Galatians 2:20 is used to refer to life “in the physical body.” In Romans 8:8–9, however, life “in the flesh” is not mere physical life. Rather, in this context, it is used as an ethical label referring to a life “lived in orientation away from God.” Paul is not contradicting himself; he merely uses the phrase “in the flesh” in two different but legitimate ways.

If one author can legitimately use one term in two very different ways, certainly we must allow for two different authors to use one term in two very different ways. For example, Matthew clearly indicates that Jesus saw John the Baptist as the Elijah figure who was widely assumed to come before the great and terrible day of the Lord (Matt 17:10–13; cf. Mal 4:5–6). And yet John records that John the Baptist plainly denied being Elijah (John 1:19–22). But this discrepancy disappears when we note that both records are correct if John the Baptist was not literally the person of Elijah (as per the Gospel of John) but was figuratively playing the role of Elijah (as per the Gospel of Matthew). Matthew even presents Jesus offering this figurative understanding (Matt 11:14), and Luke presents this reconciling view with his description of John the Baptist as one who “will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17 NIV).
So here we see that properly defining the use of the terms (e.g., “is” as either literal or figurative in meaning) can help dispel apparent discrepancies.

**Unclassified Causations**

An extreme example of potentially misconstrued referents is seen in the two reports of David’s pride-motivated census of the Israelites. Second Samuel 24:1 reports, “The Lord’s anger burned against Israel again, and He stirred up David against them to say: ‘Go, count the people of Israel and Judah,’” but 1 Chronicles 21:1 reports, “Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to count the people of Israel.” Did God incite David to perform the census or did Satan incite David to it? The answer seems to be that both are correct but in very different senses. The author of 2 Samuel refers to God as the ultimate cause of all things, but the author of 1 Chronicles refers to the secondary cause, the means by which God accomplished His purpose, i.e., his control through the actions of others.28

A misconstruing of referent with regard to causation can occur in comparing the New Testament accounts of the healing of the centurion’s servant (Matt 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10). Matthew seems to report that the centurion himself asked Jesus to come and perform the miracle, but Luke clearly claims that the centurion sent to Jesus an emissary of Jewish elders and a group of friends to speak on his behalf. So which was it? The solution to this apparent discrepancy is that Matthew reports only the ultimate causation, while Luke reports both the ultimate and the secondary causation. The Greek text of Luke makes this clear because the verbs used for speaking the request are in fact singular—it was the centurion’s request, even when delivered by the plural group of Jewish elders.29 Stein suggests that this is not unlike reporting a conversation between the president of the United States and the premier of Russia. A news reporter could describe the conversation without mentioning the presence of the team of interpreters (“The President said to the Premier . . . and the Premier replied to the President . . .”) and few would charge the reporter with inaccuracy. “The messengers, or friends, of the centurion are an extension of him. Their words are the words of the centurion. Thus, the problem dissipates when it is realized that Matthew chose for the sake of brevity, to omit any reference to the intermediate messengers.”30 This sense of representation has been long noted in a proverbial saying that has come to be called the shaliach principle: “The one sent is as he
who sent him” (Talmud, Berachoth 5:5). Thus, clarifying the references to causes can clear up apparent contradictions.

**Unacknowledged Attention**

Error can occur in our thinking with another, more complex kind of misconstrued referent, one that entails recognizing a more heightened level of attention. Here we are thinking of what Ehrman refers to as one of his favorite apparent discrepancies. In the “Farewell Discourse” passage of John 13–17, Jesus engages his disciples in a last dinner conversation before the crucifixion. Early on in the discussion, Simon Peter asks, “Lord, where are You going?” (John 13:36), and a little later Thomas remarks, “Lord, we don’t know where You’re going. How can we know the way?” (14:5). And yet toward the end of the same discussion, John records Jesus saying, “But now I am going away to Him who sent Me, and not one of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’” (16:5). This looks like a clear enough contradiction or, as Ehrman suggests, an indication that Jesus had a short attention span. But the better suggestion here is that the disciples had the poor attention span. After Peter asks his question about where Jesus was going, he does not pursue the answer but begins to defend his level of commitment and his willingness to die for Jesus (John 13:37). And Thomas’s comment about not knowing where becomes a discussion of the way (John 14:6–11). So, in John 16:5, Jesus does not complain that no one had asked about his destination, for they obviously had broached the topic; rather, Jesus remarks that no one is asking about his destination: no one was pursuing the topic. So we see here that an author/speaker can properly choose to emphasize some things over others. Examining the author’s emphases can help explain apparent errors.

**Unseen Summary**

We have already commented on the need to recognize authorial selectivity. Similarly, we should recognize an author’s choice to recount a long series of events in a shortened summary format. This is to say that authors can write in summary and still be truthful. In fact, this is precisely what we expect of good news reporters: to summarize accurately for us the important events of the day. In accordance with their purposes, some authors will give longer summaries of events and others will give shorter summaries of the same events. So, for example, Mark is correctly known as the shortest Gospel, but he actually tends to tell longer stories (albeit fewer stories). Matthew tells more stories than Mark and
the stories he has in common with Mark he tends to tell with fewer detail and in fewer words. But the length of summaries need not entail errant reporting.

This accounts for Matthew’s summary telling of the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Matt 9:18–25 in 139 Greek words; Mark 5:21–43 in 345 words; Luke 8:40–56 in 287 words). All three Synoptic Gospels tell this story mixed with the interruptive healing of a hemorrhaging woman (Matt 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48). While Mark and Luke report the detail that Jesus was en route to heal the sick girl but learns of her actual death during the interruption, Matthew merely reports from the beginning that Jesus was on his way to raise the dead girl. “Matthew’s account is an inerrant summary of Jesus’ raising of Jairus’s daughter. Difficulties are encountered if the details of this summary are pressed in a way that Matthew never intended.” Seeing summaries helps dissolve suspicions.

Mystery Does Not Necessitate Contradiction

Armed with principles for clearer thinking, the reader will be able to dismiss (in many cases, rather easily) most of the apparent errors and contradictions that are attributed to the Bible. Nevertheless, our discussion of cautionary principles regarding apparent discrepancies in Scripture is not meant to give the impression that we will always be able to have our questions about problematic passages definitively answered. But not having an answer is not the same as saying that an answer does not exist. Thus, we now offer a cautionary principle about acknowledging unsolved mysteries.

For some apparent discrepancies in Scripture, the current suggested solutions seem only possible and otherwise remain mysterious to us. This is the case with the apparent discrepancy between the New Testament accounts of the death of Judas Iscariot (cp. Matt 27:5 and Acts 1:18). It may well have happened that Judas hanged himself (as per Matthew) and the rope (immediately or eventually) broke so that his body fell and ruptured on the ground (as per Acts). While we cannot say definitively that this is how it happened, we can see that there is a possible noncontradictory solution; consequently, there is no necessary discrepancy between these two accounts.
Another example of this kind of difficulty involves the differences in the genealogies for Jesus provided in Matthew 1:1–16 and Luke 3:23–38. That Matthew and Luke have differing authorial purposes for the genealogies is evident from their differing placements of the record (Matthew 1 vs. Luke 3), the differing lengths (Matthew back to Abraham vs. Luke back to Adam), and their differing directions (Matthew forward in time, “father of . . .” vs. Luke backward in time, “son of . . .”). But the real difficulty in comparing these genealogies comes when we note that they do not at all match for the generations between Joseph and David, Matthew tracing Jesus’ ancestry through David’s son Solomon and Luke tracing it through David’s son Nathan.36

Scholars have struggled for hundreds of years to reconcile the genealogies of Jesus with each other and with the Old Testament genealogies and four general explanations (and various permutations of them) have been offered. (1) Some (like Tertullian, c. 160–225) suggest that Luke gives Jesus’ genealogy through Joseph’s lineage and Matthew gives it through Mary’s lineage.37 Conversely, (2) some (like Martin Luther, 1483–1546) suggest that Matthew gives Jesus’ genealogy through Joseph’s lineage and Luke (with his tremendous interest in Jesus’ mother) gives it through Mary’s lineage.38 With a different approach, (3) some (like John Calvin, 1509–64) suggest that Luke gives Jesus’ genealogy through Joseph’s natural lineage (via Heli) and Matthew gives Joseph’s legal lineage (via Jacob).39 Conversely, (4) some (like Julius Africanus, c. 170–245, and differently Augustine, c. 400) suggest that Matthew gives Jesus’ genealogy through Joseph’s natural lineage (via Jacob) and Luke gives Joseph’s legal lineage (via Heli).40 While various scholars will argue for their favorite resolution to this question, for now we have to live with the mystery of not knowing for sure how it all works out. Even without knowing for sure which solution applies, knowing that a workable solution can exist should be enough for us to withhold charges of contradiction in the Bible. Indeed, this is the reminder of A. T. Robertson.

In explaining a difficulty, it is always to be remembered that even a possible explanation is sufficient to meet the objector. If several possible explanations are suggested, it becomes all the more unreasonable for one to contend that the discrepancy is irreconcilable. It is a work of supererogation to proceed to show that this or that explanation is the real solution of the problem. Sometimes, owing to new light, this might be possible, but it is never necessary. And
by reason of the meager information we have on many points in the gospel narrative, it may always be impossible in various cases to present a solution satisfactory in every point. The harmonist has done his duty, if he can show a reasonable explanation of the problem before him.41

This brings us back to our earlier observation: the reader’s dissatisfaction with the completeness (or incompleteness) of a writer’s coverage of an event does not necessarily entail that the writer is in error.

There may well be additional cautionary principles, but those outlined here are the principles that prove most claims of error in the Bible to be insufficient and unconvincing. Furthermore, these cautionary principles may sometimes work together in explaining apparent contradictions in Scripture. For example, the apparent discrepancies between accounts of the sending of the Twelve in the Synoptic Gospels call for a sorting out of definitions and referents as well as noting authorial emphases in the paraphrases of Jesus’ instruction. Does Jesus instruct the Twelve not to take a staff (Greek rhabdon in Matt 10:10 and Luke 9:3) or allow them to take a staff (Greek rhabdon in Mark 6:8)? But a solution is found in noting that the same (rather generic) word could well have two different referents here: the instructions can prohibit a “stick” in the sense of “club-like weapon” (in Matthew and Luke) but allow a “stick” in the sense of “walking staff” (in Mark). Additionally, Mark emphasizes the positive aspect of the instruction with the “go as you are” nature of the command, and Matthew emphasizes the negative aspect with the prohibition against gathering (ktaomai = “acquire”) extra supplies. All three Synoptics specify the prohibition of bringing an extra tunic. Similarly, parallel to the “no staff” instruction, Matthew specifies “no sandals,” which is likely a reference to extra sandals and not a command to go barefoot!42 Thus, we can see several cautionary principles opening up potential solutions and removing charges of contradictions in the Bible.

Defending the Consistency of the New Testament Resurrection Narratives

These cautionary principles are helpful in thinking about Christianity’s central claim: Jesus Christ rose from the dead. This central claim of Christianity is not a
mere philosophical, or even theological, proposition; it is an historical claim. The apostle Paul outlines it well in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8,

For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then He appeared to over 500 brothers at one time; most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one abnormally born, He also appeared to me.

After this Paul gives an extended discussion of the central importance of Jesus’ resurrection to Christian faith (vv. 9–58). The historicity of Jesus’ resurrection is no small matter, for “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is without foundation, and so is your faith” (v. 14), and “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (v. 17), and “[i]f we have put our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone” (v. 19).

The importance of the resurrection can lead to frequent attacks on the Bible’s accounts of it. And it seems to me to represent a fundamental misunderstanding of Christian faith when, in the name of (some kind of) Christianity, scholars suggest that historical discrepancies in the resurrection narratives are no bother at all and that a non-contradictory overall account “may be neither possible nor necessary.” No, the actual resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to Christian faith, and the possibility of a non-contradictory understanding of the Bible’s reports of it is important. So, here we will examine the apparent discrepancies in the New Testament resurrection narratives.

While the resurrection of Jesus is a foundational claim for many passages in the New Testament (e.g., see the sermons in Acts 2:22–24; 4:8–12; 5:30–31; 10:39–40; 13:26–41; 17:22–31), it is the four Gospel passages and the beginning of Acts that come closest to narrating the event: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20–21, and Acts 1. And while all report the same main event none tells
the same collection of episodes in exactly the same way. Indeed, as one scholar opines about the four Gospels, “They differ from one another more in the recounting of the Easter events than in the telling of any other major narrative which they all have in common.” But the cautionary principles we have discussed above have readied us for just such a phenomenon and observing such cautions proves as valuable here as anywhere when considering multiple accounts of the same event. The observation of William Arndt is worth citing at length in this regard.

To begin with, every well-informed Bible reader will admit without hesitation that not one of the four accounts of the resurrection is complete, reporting all the facts. Neither is there one among them which makes the claim of being exhaustive. Each one reports actual occurrences, but not all the pertinent occurrences. It will be allowed by all fainminded persons that reports may be fragmentary, incomplete, and yet true. If this simple principle is borne in mind, most of the difficulties contained in the resurrection story will vanish.

Our procedure here will be to outline the resurrection story in eight major segments. Along the way we will be noting the points of agreement between the narratives and accounting for apparent discrepancies by utilizing the cautionary principles discussed above.

Mary Magdalene and Others Go to the Tomb Early on Sunday Morning

All of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ resurrection agree that Mary Magdalene found Jesus’ tomb empty early in the morning “on the first day of the week.” The Synoptic Gospels all mention that other women also went to the tomb on that Sunday morning, but John’s selective silence about other women is not the same thing as denying that they went (Selection Is Not Denial). Rather, in keeping with his own writing pattern of collecting stories of individual interviews with Jesus, John’s purpose is to focus on the individual Mary and her encounter with the resurrected Jesus (Unacknowledged Attention). Indeed, John hardly denies the presence of other women with Mary Magdalene for he includes them in her report to the disciples of Jesus’ empty tomb, “we don’t know where they have put Him” (John 20:2, emphasis added). None of the Gospel narratives insists
that all of the women arrived at the empty tomb at the same time nor that all of them stayed together the whole time (Selection Is Not Denial).

Some might suspect a contradiction between the report of John 20:1 ("while it was still dark") and Mark 16:2 ("they went to the tomb at sunrise"). But this complaint subsides when we read the more general Matthew 28:1 ("as the first day of the week was dawning") and Luke 24:1 ("very early in the morning") and recognize that the women may well have left their homes "while it was still dark" (as per John’s report) and gotten “to the tomb at sunrise” (as per Mark’s report) (Different Is Not Discrepant, Unrecognized Referents). So far, there is no necessary contradiction in these reports of events on “the third day” (cf. Luke 24:21 and 1 Cor 15:4).

The Empty Tomb Is Open and Angels Are Present

While only Matthew reports how the tomb was opened (Matt 28:2–4, an angel rolled the stone away), the other Gospels all comment that the stone was found removed from the door of Jesus’ tomb (Mark 16:4; Luke 24:2; John 20:1). Clearly silence on how the tomb was opened is not meant to be a denial of it being opened (Selection Is Not Denial)! Furthermore, all four Gospels report angelic appearances on the morning of the resurrection, but their reporting of slightly different activities cannot be taken as denials of each other’s reports (Matt 28:2–7; Mark 16:4–7; Luke 24:2–8; cf. John 20:12–13) (Different Is Not Discrepant, Selection Is Not Denial). Luke reports two angels present, but neither Matthew nor Mark reports “one-and-only-one” angel; their focus on the speaking angel and their silence about a second angelic figure need not be construed as denial (Selection Is Not Denial, Unacknowledged Attention). John confirms the presence of two angels at the tomb, although John reports only their appearance to Mary after she returns to the tomb with Peter and the beloved disciple (Different Is Not Discrepant). Even the slightly differing Synoptic paraphrases of the angelic pronouncement to the women are unproblematic (Paraphrase Is Not Quotation). “There is nothing in any of the three messages which is contradictory to anything in either of the others, the matter is complementary. All that is recorded could have been uttered without hurry in a couple of minutes.” In all this, there is no necessary contradiction between accounts here.
The Women Report the Empty Tomb to the Disciples

Matthew and Luke record rather generically that the women reported the empty tomb (and the angelic announcement) to the disciples (Matt 28:8; Luke 24:9–11), but John (in his emphasis on individual encounters) gives the added information that Mary reported the empty tomb to Peter (John 20:2). Mark’s report is thought by some to be contradictory for he reports simply and starkly, “So they went out and started running from the tomb, because trembling and astonishment overwhelmed them. And they said nothing to anyone, since they were afraid” (Mark 16:8). But this is not contradictory information; Mark is here actually giving unique, additional information (Selection Is Not Denial). Mark alone informs us that unlike their conversational trip to the tomb (Mark 16:1–3), the women were silent while en route back to the other believers.⁵⁶ This is where Mark ends his report—he does not say that the women never told anyone ever;⁵⁷ he just ends his report with the women silently en route (Unacknowledged Attention).⁵⁸ The other Gospels continue the story from here.

It is worth noting here that there is room for multiple reports of the women to Jesus’ disciples. Unlike the Synoptic Gospel narratives, which are a bit more telescoped together in summary format (Unseen Summary), John’s narrative has pulled some of the story out into more detail (Unacknowledged Attention). Thus, for example, John is clear in reporting that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb (John 20:1), then she reported to Peter (20:2), then she went back to the tomb where she saw angels after Peter left (20:10–13), and then she reported again to the disciples after she saw Jesus (20:18). John’s detailed focus on Mary Magdalene does not deny the presence of other women, nor does it necessitate that the other women were always with Mary (Different Is Not Discrepant, Unacknowledged Attention).⁵⁹ John’s level of detail does not deny the Synoptic summaries, which are still correct: the women went to the tomb, they saw angels, and they reported to the disciples (Unseen Summary). The Gospel accounts have no necessary contradictions here.

Peter and Another Visit the Empty Tomb

Both Luke and John report Simon Peter visiting the empty tomb after hearing the report of the women.⁶⁰ John’s specificity that it was Mary Magdalene reporting to Peter does not conflict with Luke’s report, which includes more names: “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other
women with them were telling the apostles these things” (Luke 24:10). And John’s specificity that “the other disciple” (John 20:3–10, possibly John himself) accompanied Peter to the tomb does not contradict Luke’s report that Peter went to the tomb (Luke 24:12) (Different Is Not Discrepant). In fact, Luke himself indicates multiple male visitors to the tomb initiated by the women’s report, for he later records one of the disciples on the road to Emmaus reporting, “Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said” (Luke 24:24). Thus, the broader summary of Luke does not deny the details of John’s lengthier report (Selection Is Not Denial, Unseen Summary). There are no necessary contradictions at this juncture.

**Some Women See the Resurrected Jesus**

Both Matthew and John report women seeing the resurrected Jesus (Matt 28:9–10; John 20:11–18). A hurried read of Matthew’s report on the heels of the angelic appearances to the women (Matt 28:1–8) might lead one to believe that this meeting of Jesus happened prior to their report to the disciples. But being familiar with Matthew’s simplifying and telescoping writing style, however, we can see that he has completely left out (without denying) the visit of Peter (and some others) to the tomb (Luke 24:9–12; John 20:3–10). While Matthew simply jumps from the report to the disciples (Matt 28:8) to the resurrection appearance (Matt 28:9–10), John’s account gives more detail and includes the intervening report to the disciples and Mary’s return to the tomb before meeting Jesus (Selection Is Not Denial, Unacknowledged Attention, Unseen Summary).

Thus, with consideration of the writers’ differing interests, these reports could be of the same event: in somewhat typical Johannine style, John focuses on the individual conversation between Jesus and Mary Magdalene (John 20:14–18); in a somewhat typical Matthean style that prefers pairs when possible, Matthew mentions the presence of a second woman (also named Mary, Matt 28:1) (Different Is Not Discrepant). On the other hand, it is possible that Matthew and John are reporting two different resurrection appearances to the women, and there is room in the Gospel narratives for more than one such event (Selection Is Not Denial). Whether or not we can make a definitive decision about the identity or difference of these resurrection appearances to the women, we can see that there is no necessary contradiction between the Gospel reports at this juncture (Mystery Does Not Necessitate Contradiction). We also note here that...
Matthew alone chooses to narrate the guards reporting the morning’s events to the chief priests (Matt 28:11-15), a unique focus that does not conflict with the other resurrection narratives (Unacknowledged Attention).

**Jesus Appears on the Emmaus Road and to Peter**

With his own unique focus, Luke alone gives the extended report of Jesus’ appearance to the two on the road to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection (Luke 24:13-35; cf. Mark 16:12-13). In the telling of this story, Luke reports that Peter, sometime after his visit to the empty tomb, saw the resurrected Jesus on the day of the resurrection (Luke 24:34). This corroborates Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15:5a (where Paul calls Peter by his Aramaic name, Cephas). While some charge that Paul cites Peter as the first witness of the resurrection and not the women, a careful reading of 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 makes it clear that Paul does not explicitly exclude the possibility of other intervening resurrection appearances. Paul is marshaling the evidence of witnesses, and those he includes are apparently given in chronological order; but he does not claim to comprehensively include all resurrection appearances and we should not force that claim upon him (Selection Is Not Denial).

The uniqueness of these episodes does not represent any contradictions in the accounts.

**Jesus Appears to the Disciples**

Luke and John both mention Jesus appearing rather suddenly to the disciples on the day of the resurrection (Luke 24:36-43, cf. v. 13; and John 20:19-25). As noted above, Luke alone mentions that this appearance to the group of disciples was preceded by an appearance on the road to Emmaus. Conversely, John alone mentions Thomas’s absence. But these selective differences are not in conflict (Selection Is Not Denial, Different Is Not Discrepant). In fact, Luke’s reference to the group of disciples as “the Eleven” (Luke 24:33) fits fine with John’s specification that, apparently late to the meeting, Thomas missed Jesus’ surprise visit and only heard about it after Jesus had departed (John 20:24-25). Paul refers to Jesus appearing to “the Twelve” even though Judas Iscariot is no longer with the apostolic group (1 Cor 15:5b), but this use of the number “twelve” was as a nickname—and not merely the headcount—of the group (Undifferentiated Definitions).

Thus, the differences in detail do not at all render these as contradictory reports of this meeting.
Jesus Appears over Forty Days and Then Ascends

Reading Luke and Matthew too quickly can lead one to assume that the resurrection and the ascension are reported as occurring on the same day (Unseen Summary). But Luke’s second account of the ascension very clearly specifies that it occurred after forty days of resurrection appearances (Acts 1:3).69 Certainly forty days would allow for John’s report of an appearance “eight days later” in Jerusalem (John 20:26–31 ESV) and for the disciples to make a trip to Galilee where they saw Jesus (as per Matt 28:16–20 and John 21:1–25; cf. Mark 16:6 with Matt 28:5–7) and to come back again.70 And someplace during that forty days is when the appearances to the 500 (1 Cor 15:6), to James (1 Cor 15:7), and again to the apostles (1 Cor 15:7; Luke 24:44–49; Acts 1:3–5), could easily have occurred.71 After these came the ascension near Bethany (as per Luke 24:50–53), which is on the Mount of Olives (as per Acts 1:6–12). As narrated, these different episodes by no means necessitate their selecting authors being in conflict (Selection Is Not Denial, Different Is Not Discrepant).

So we can say again, the New Testament resurrection narratives have no necessary contradictions with one another. The differences between the accounts are due to the differing interests and purposes of the writers and not to falsifications of any kind.72 We can thus conclude with Wenham that “the charge of irreconcilability brought against the resurrection stories has not been proved. Rather it has been shown that these records exhibit the characteristics of accurate and independent reporting, for while superficially they show great disharmony, on close examination the details gradually fall into place.”73 It is not that we have all our questions about the events definitively answered. But we need not have all the answers to recognize that non-contradicting solutions are possible (Mystery Does Not Necessitate Contradiction). This is what we have shown in the discussion above. For ease of reference in a visual format, we can place our outline of the eight story segments with their corresponding passages into a chart structure.74
Conclusion

We have been arguing that God has the ability to have superintended the writing of Scripture in such ways that the resulting reports bear nothing but the truth of history. Our claim is that correct interpretation—which includes the kinds of cautionary principles outlined here—will continue to demonstrate that the Bible contains no contradictions. While engaged in a discussion of the interpretation of Scripture, some Sadducees asked Jesus about the idea of resurrection—something they disbelieved. Interestingly Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (Matt 22:29 NIV; cp. Mark 12:24). With reference to this passage, Everett Harrison observes, “How striking it is that the one allusion to error by our Lord in the days of his flesh was not to something in the Scriptures but to failure to know them and interpret them aright.” May God grant us a willingness to know him and his Word aright.
Are there Contradictions in the Bible?


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### A Coordination of the New Testament Resurrection Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Segments</th>
<th>Matt 28</th>
<th>Mark 16</th>
<th>Luke 24</th>
<th>John 20–21</th>
<th>1 Cor 15</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Mary Magdalene and Others Go to the Tomb Early on Sunday Morning</td>
<td>28:1</td>
<td>16:1–3</td>
<td>24:1 (cf. v. 21)</td>
<td>20:1</td>
<td>15:4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Peter and An Visit the Empty Tomb</td>
<td>(cf. v. 7)</td>
<td>24:12 (cf. v. 24)</td>
<td>20:3-10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>E. Some Women See the Resurrected Jesus</td>
<td>28:9–15</td>
<td>16:9–11</td>
<td>20:11-18</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>F. Jesus Appears on the Emmaus Road and to Peter</td>
<td>16:12-13</td>
<td>24:13–35</td>
<td>15:5</td>
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Footnotes


2 On the issue of understanding the Bible, see the article in this book: “Can We Understand the Bible?” by Rick Melick (p. 89).

3 The remarks of Kenneth Kantzer are worth noting here:

   But the faith of some troubled souls is hindered by misunderstanding the Scripture. They are confused by what seems to them to be false statements or self-contradiction. We need, therefore, to clear away such false obstacles to faith. If there remains any obstacle to faith, it should be the stumbling block of the cross or the cost of discipleship rather than an imaginary obstacle that could easily be eliminated. In spite of what we sometimes hear, God never asks us to crucify our intellects in order to believe.

See Kenneth S. Kantzer, “Foreword,” in Gleason L. Archer, Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), B. Regarding the motives of more hostile attackers, see See the articles in this volume, “Does the Bible Condone Genocide?” by Matthew Flannagan and Paul Copan (p. 297); “Does the Bible Condone Slavery and Sexism?” by James Hamilton (p. 335); and “Does the Bible Conflict with Science?” by William Dembski (p. 349). John W. Haley, An Examination of the Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible (Andover, MA: Draper, 1874), 40.

4 See the articles in this volume, “Does the Bible Condone Genocide?” by Matthew Flannagan and Paul Copan (p. 297); “Does the Bible Condone Slavery and Sexism?” by James Hamilton (p. 335); and “Does the Bible Conflict with Science?” by William Dembski (p. 349).

5 See the article in this volume, “Are There Conflicting Theologies in the Bible?” by Craig Blaising; and “Do We Have the Right Canon?” by Wegner, Wilder, and Bock (pp. 375 and 393).


7 This is the approach of Archer’s Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties and of the Hard Sayings books.

8 For this approach see Craig L. Blomberg, “The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization,” in Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 139–74, esp. 145–61, where Blomberg offers solutions in the following categories of technique: textual-critical, linguistic, historical-contextual, form-critical, audience-critical, source-critical, redaction-critical (both stylistic and theological), and harmonization.
25 Are There Contradictions in the Bible?

9 This is the approach of Haley, who offers as origins of apparent discrepancies such things as differences in dates, authorship, timing, reference, arrangement, modes of computation, customs, definitions, and manuscript traditions (An Examination of the Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible, 1–29). So also R. A. Torrey, Difficulties and Alleged Errors and Contradictions in the Bible (Chicago: Revell, 1907), 17–25. Among Torrey’s classifications are manuscript errors, inaccurate translations, false interpretations, wrong conceptions of the Bible, use of language, defective history and background knowledge, finite human minds, and dullness of spiritual perception. John W. Haley, An Examination of the Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible (Andover, MA: Draper, 1874), 40.

10 Paul Feinberg notes, “It must be remembered that from the standpoint of any discipline, even theology, the Scriptures are partial. Often partial is misunderstood to mean incorrect or false. But this idea itself is false. The Bible is a complete revelation of all that man needs for faith and practice. That is, there are many things we might like to know but which God has not seen fit to reveal. It is also true that God has not seen fit to record every detail of every account” (Paul D. Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in Inerrancy, ed. Norman L. Geisler [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980], 301).


12 On such comparative “omissions” of either whole episodes or details within episodes, see Craig L. Blomberg, The Historical Reliability of the Gospels, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 171–80.


14 Ehrman, Jesus, Interrupted, 68.

15 Stein suggests this as the best approach to the apparent discrepancy between Mark’s reporting that Jesus was crucified at “the third hour” (Mark 15:2 Greek) compared to John’s reporting of it at “the sixth hour” (John 19:14–15 Greek): “rounding off” an approximately 10:30 a.m. crucifixion to the 9 o’clock hour by Mark and to the noon hour by John (Stein, Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the New Testament, 66–69).

16 As Feinberg notes in his now classic definition and defense of inerrancy, “Almost any statement is capable of greater precision. Any historiography, even a detailed chronicle, is still only an approximation. . . . The crucial point as I see it for inerrancy is this: Is a sentence as stated true? If so, there is no problem for the doctrine” (Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” 299–300). Are There Contradictions in the Bible?
17 Scholars distinguish between ipsissima verba (the exact words) and ipsissima vox (the exact voice). Since ancient authors were unequipped to service ipsissima verba with modern literary conventions (and inventions!), they were concerned with accurately reporting the intended meanings—the ipsissima vox—of others. See Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” 301; and Darrell L. Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?” in Jesus Under Fire, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 73–99. Blomberg outlines five categories of substantial paraphrasing that nevertheless do not distort the truthfulness of the report (The Historical Reliability of the Gospels, 157–68).

18 A nice example of the first-century approach to “quotation” can be seen in John 4 where Jesus “quotes” the Samaritan woman’s words back to her (John 4:17): “I don’t have a husband,” she answered. “You have correctly said, ‘I don’t have a husband,’” Jesus said. Despite the English translation here (HCSB), the original Greek text gives the woman’s statement in one word order (ouk echō andra) and Jesus’ “quotation” of her in another word order (andra ouk echō). Nevertheless, the woman is convicted by Jesus’ message, and no charge of misquotation is reported. In fact, the reordered words may well be intentionally emphatic (cf. John 4:17–18).

19 Mark starts at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Matthew starts at the beginning of Jesus’ life, Luke starts just prior to the beginning of Jesus’ life, and John starts at the beginning of the universe!


21 The sixteenth-century scholar Andreas Osiander is famed for his insistence that two similar but slightly differing accounts in Scripture must necessarily be two completely different events. This leads him to conclude that Jairus’s daughter was raised from the dead twice, that Jesus was crowned with thorns twice, and that Peter warmed himself at a courtyard fire four separate times (Andreas Osiander, Harmonia Evangelicae [Basel, 1537], cited in Stein, Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the New Testament, 29).

22 Regarding pejorative charges of “harmonization,” Stein aptly observes, “To reject an explanation because it harmonizes difficult gospel passages is certainly as prejudicial as to accept an explanation on the grounds that it harmonizes these passages. The correctness or incorrectness of an explanation is not dependent on whether or not it harmonizes the disputed passages. It depends on whether that explanation correctly interprets the authors’ meanings and logically illustrates that these meanings do not conflict with each other” (Stein, Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the New Testament, 21). For an erudite treatment of harmonization, see Blomberg, “The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization,” 139–74. Are There Contradictions in the Bible?


24 Ehrman, Jesus, Interrupted, 41.


28 In comparing 2 Sam 24:1 and 1 Chr 21:1, see the remarks of Davids, More Hard Sayings of the New Testament, 127 (= Hard Sayings of the Bible, 696), and Kaiser, Hard Sayings of the Old Testament, 131 (= Hard Sayings of the Bible, 241). Elsewhere Kaiser explains again, “It happened that the Old Testament writers did not feel the need to distinguish between primary and secondary causation. For them everything was ordained and designed by God. Even sin itself did not appear uncontrolled; it too was superintended by God. The guilt and the responsibility for sin rested, nevertheless, with those who had sinned” (Kaiser, Hard Sayings of the Old Testament, 170; cf. 194–96 [cf. Hard Sayings of the Bible, 305–6]).

29 Stein points out that Luke 7:3 uses the singular participle erōtōn for “asking” and Luke 7:6 uses the singular participle legōn for “saying” showing that the messages delivered by the elders and the friends (respectively) were really the centurion’s (Stein, Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the New Testament, 37).


31 Ehrman, Jesus, Interrupted, 9.


34 Carl G. Johnson, So the Bible Is Full of Contradictions? (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 68. 280 Douglas S. Huffman


36 The differences between Matthew, Luke, and the Old Testament genealogical records (e.g., Gen 5:1–32; 11:10–26; Ruth 4:18–22; 1 Chr 1:1–3:17) that involve missing names are not really as problematic as one might think. The “father of” and “son of” formulas can be used for “progenitor of” and “descendant of” as reflected in the Jewish claim that “Abraham is our father” (John 8:39) and Matthew’s beginning description of Jesus as “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt 1:1). In fact, Matthew even explains his selection of names as something of a memory tool: three series of 14 memorable names each (Matt 1:17). Note that the number “14” is represented by the Hebrew letters dvd, which is how the voweless Hebrew language spells David (See Douglas S. Huffman, “Genealogy,” in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992], 253–59).

38 Stein favors this solution (Stein, Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the New Testament, 46-50). He suggests that Luke 3:23 be rendered something like, “And when He began his ministry, Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age, being supposedly the son of Joseph, [but actually through Mary was] the son of Heli, . . .” (cp. NASB).


40 A version of this solution combines with proposal 2 above by suggesting that Heli adopted Joseph when Joseph married Heli’s daughter Mary. This approach is favored by John Nolland, Luke 1—9:20 (Dallas: Word, 1989), 170.


42 See Arndt, Does the Bible Contradict Itself? 63-64.

43 “Perhaps there is nothing in the Bible to which unbelievers, in their attempt to prove that our sacred Book contains contradictions, point with greater frequency than the four accounts of the resurrection of our Savior” (Arndt, Does the Bible Contradict Itself? 79).

44 Gerald O’Collins, The Resurrection of Jesus Christ (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1973), 20. See pp. 18-19 for his list of “divergences” between the Gospel accounts. Similarly, Reginald H. Fuller encourages a “resurrection faith” as “not a matter of believing in the historical accuracy of these narratives but of believing the proclamation which these narratives, for all their differences, enshrine” (Reginald H. Fuller, The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives [New York: Macmillan, 1971], 8; cf. 182–83). See also Norman Perrin, The Resurrection According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), 78.

45 Of course, the actual resurrection event itself is not narrated; the Easter stories in the Gospel narratives are of two kinds: the discovery of the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances of Jesus; cf. the skeptical Rudolf Bultmann, History of the Synoptic Tradition, rev. ed., trans. John Marsh (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), 287-91. 284


47 Arndt, Does the Bible Contradict Itself? 80. John Wenham remarks of the resurrection narratives, “One of the most striking things about them all is their selectivity. None of them attempts to tell the whole story; . . . Each of them ruthlessly selects the details which serve his purpose” (John Wenham, Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict? [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 43).

48 See, for example, John’s reports of these individual “interviews” with Jesus: Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), the Samaritan women at the well (4:1-42), the royal official (4:43-54), and the invalid at the pool (5:1-15).

Edersheim suggests, “While the Magdalene hastened, probably by another road, to the abode of Peter and John, the other women also had reached the Tomb, either in one party, or, it may be, in two companies” (Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 2:632).

Arndt, Does the Bible Contradict Itself? 81–82; and Johnson, So the Bible Is Full of Contradictions? 75. As Wenham puts it, “It needs to be remembered, however, that it could have been undeniably dark on the women’s departure and undeniably light on their arrival, particularly if their starting-point were Bethany” (Wenham, Easter Enigma, 81). See also Osborne, The Resurrection Narratives, 198–99. Osborne notes John’s thematic interest in emphasizing darkness: John 3:2; 6:17; 8:12; 9:4; 11:10; 12:35, 46; 13:30; and 19:39.

“Where, out of two or more, only one is spokesman, he is necessarily remembered. The other or others may easily be ignored or forgotten. It is an exaggeration to call such differences absolute discrepancies” (Alfred Plummer, The Gospel According to Luke, 5th ed. [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1922], 547). On this Wenham colorfully remarks, “It should be said once and for all that the mention by one evangelist of two angels and by another of one does not constitute a contradiction or discrepancy. If there were two, there was one. When learned critics make heavy weather about the accuracy of such accounts, they lack common sense” (Wenham, Easter Enigma, 87).


Indeed, even the noted New Testament scholar-skeptic Ehrman demonstrates that the accounts of angelic appearances in the resurrection narratives need not be considered contradictory at all. Ehrman is clear that he does not like such truly workable solutions: none of the Gospels is as complete as he would have them and they don’t all use the same simple vocabulary he wishes of them. Nevertheless, he has to admit that there are no contradictions in the accounts of the angelic appearances. See Ehrman, Jesus, Interrupted, 8.


Offering a blinding glimpse of the obvious, Wenham observes, “It is commonly said that the gospel [of Mark] ends with the women keeping absolute silence. But this is surely absurd. Presumably they said nothing to any one else, perhaps not even to one another, on the way to tell Peter and John. But clearly the whole story came streaming out eventually. How else could anyone have known it?” (Wenham, Easter Enigma, 88–89).
Some manuscripts of Mark have added longer endings (Mark 16:9–20), but the shorter ending (at 16:8) is the generally accepted ending of the original Gospel. On this issue, see David Alan Black, ed., Perspectives on the Ending of Mark (Nashville: B&H, 2008). The shorter ending of Mark does not entail that its author was unaware of any resurrection appearances (see Mark 8:31–38; 9:9, 31; 10:34; 12:10–11, 18–27, 35–37; 13:26–27; 14:28, 58, 62; 16:6; cf. Licona, The Resurrection of Jesus, 348).

Murray Harris suggests that after going to the tomb with two other women (see Mark 16:1; cp. Matt 28:1; John 20:1), Mary Magdalene immediately returned to report the empty tomb and did not see the angels until her later return (John 20:2-13); Murray J. Harris, 3 Crucial Questions about Jesus (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 107–8; cf. Swete, The Appearances of Our Lord After the Passion, 5; and Wenham, Easter Enigma, 83. Gleason Archer, however, suggests that Mary Magdalene was with the other women the whole time, but that, in the excitement, she neglected to mention the angels in her report of the empty tomb (Archer, Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties, 348–49). Even though we might not be able to reconstruct the event with this level of detail, either solution seems workable and respectful of the data (cf. Davids, Hard Sayings of the Bible, 507–8).

Cf. Mark 16:7 where Peter is singled out to receive the message of the angel—something of a confirmation of Peter’s somewhat unique experiences regarding the resurrection (see Wenham, Easter Enigma, 46–47).

“Luke is quite capable of highlighting one person when he knows, and tells us later, that more than one was involved” (N. T. Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003], 613).


Hodges suggests a possible mediating view whereby Mary Magdalene meets Jesus both separately (as per John) and with the other women (as per Matthew); see Hodges, “The Women and the Empty Tomb,” 307–8.


Or perhaps Thomas had been there earlier and left before Jesus appeared to the group suggests Swete, The Appearances of Our Lord After the Passion, 41. Or, yet again, perhaps Thomas had not been at this meeting at all; so James Orr, The Resurrection of Jesus, 183. We don’t need to know the specifics here to recognize the absence of contradiction (Mystery Does Not Necessitate Contradiction).

There seems to be biblical precedent for the use of numbers as group names. E.g., the list of David’s mighty men, “the Thirty,” seems to have had as many as thirty-seven named men in it (see 2 Sam 23:8–39).
Commenting on the last chapter of Luke’s Gospel, Swete notes “that he has been thought by critics who are lacking in the sense of humour to compress the forty days into one and place the Ascension on the day of the Resurrection” (Swete, The Appearances of Our Lord After the Passion, xvii). But reflecting on both the intense selectivity of the resurrection narratives and the rest of Luke’s work, Wenham remarks that “it is unthinkable that Luke . . . could have supposed (or intended his readers to suppose) that the events between the resurrection and the ascension

C. F. D. Moule suggests that the disciples may have followed a typical Jewish festival routine of remaining in Jerusalem for the week-long observance of Passover, going home to Galilee, and then returning to Jerusalem for Pentecost (C. F. D. Moule, “The Post-Resurrection Appearances in the Light of Festival Pilgrimages,” NTS 4 (1957–58): 58–61). Cf. the apocryphal Gospel of Peter, §14; and Swete, The Appearances of Our Lord After the Passion, 52, 92–93.

Michael Licona calls the appearances to the 500 and to James “especially controversial,” but argues that, because they are given in a chronological listing in the earliest tradition (1 Cor 15) and not in the Gospels, “these appearances cannot be quickly dismissed” (Licona, The Resurrection of Jesus, 320).

In fact, the noncontradicting differences between the resurrection narratives are sometimes appealed to as clear evidence that the writers were not in collusion (see, e.g., Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God, 612).

Wenham, Easter Enigma, 124. See also Archer, Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties, 347; and Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God, 612.

This format was first suggested to me by my long-time friend and now colleague, Jonathan Lunde. See also the charts in Nelson’s Complete Book of Bible Maps and Charts, 3rd ed.