

Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels, Part 2

Dr. Timothy McGrew
St. Michael Lutheran Church
August 20, 2012

2 Peter 3:16— There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

Our goals for this evening

To examine a list of nine more alleged contradictions in the Gospels, most of them dealing with events surrounding Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

To assess the claim that these are actual, and serious, contradictions that should make us doubt the substantial historical trustworthiness of the Gospels.

Contradictions: real and apparent

Contradiction: Two claims *contradict* one another when one of them must be false if the other is true. At least one of the two claims must be mistaken.

Apparent contradiction: Two claims *apparently* contradict one another when it *seems* that they cannot both be true.

Five common sources of apparent contradiction

1. Carelessness—interpreting a phrase or sentence without regard to genre or narrative context.
2. Completeness—assuming that every account of an event includes every significant detail about it.
3. Conflation—treating two different events or persons as the same.
4. Confusion—treating the same event or person as different (common with names)
5. Context—ignoring facts about the language and culture of the events, or assuming that those are identical to the cultural context we share today.

The source of most of the apparent contradictions we will examine in this lecture is 2, the assumption of *completeness*.

The accusation

“[T]he sources [regarding Jesus' resurrection] are *hopelessly contradictory*, as we can see by doing a detailed comparison of the accounts in the Gospels.” —Bart Ehrman, *The Historical Jesus* (2000), p. 90 [emphasis added]

A litany of alleged contradictions in the Gospels

1. Was Jairus's daughter already dead (Matthew 9) or just dying (Mark 5) when he came to Jesus?
2. Did Jesus die on the day of preparation for Passover (John 19) or on the day of Passover itself (Mark 15)?
3. How many women went to the tomb on Sunday morning? (Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20)
4. What were their names?
5. Was the stone rolled away before they arrived or after they got there?
6. What did they see there? One man? Two men? or two angels?
7. What were they told to do? To tell the disciples to go to Galilee, or not?
8. Did they tell the disciples, or not?
9. Did the disciples go to Galilee, or not?

"It depends which Gospel you read. You get a different story every time."

Objection 1: Jairus's daughter

Matthew 9:18—... a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live."

Mark 5:22-23—Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name, and seeing him, he fell at his feet and implored him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live."

According to Matthew, Jairus says that his daughter has just died; according to Mark, Jairus says that his daughter is at the point of death. Which way was it?

Comparing Matthew and Mark

Matthew's account is shorter and simpler than Mark's. It may be simply a compressed telling of the story in which the fact that the girl has died is presented up front. According to several scholars (Stein, Blomberg, Witherington), such usage would be within the conventions of reportage of the time and would not have been considered to be an error by the standards of Matthew's contemporaries.

An alternative resolution

According to Chadwick, Matthew's expression "has died even now" (ἄρτι ἐτελεύτησεν) is so close in meaning to Mark's "at the point of death" (ἐσχάτως ἔχει) that a person full of anxiety might say "she is dead by now" and mean what we would express by saying "she is at the point of death." When he left his house to seek out Jesus, Jairus realized that she was in the process of dying. In his appeal to Jesus, he may well have used words that expressed his fear that the worst had already come to pass.

Objection 2: The day of the crucifixion

Mark 14:12—And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, “Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?” [The Last Supper follows]

John 19:14—[Describing the scene where Jesus is condemned to be crucified] Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. ...

The apparent contradiction

In Mark, the Last Supper takes place on the first day of Passover; Jesus is arrested that night and crucified on the next day, the first day (as the Jews reckon days) of Passover.

According to Ehrman, John tells us that the crucifixion took place on the day of preparation for Passover, the day before the Passover.

What John really says

John does *not* say that it was the day of preparation *for* the Passover; he says that it was the day of preparation *of* Passover. Mark uses the same term, but he also tells us what it means:

Mark 15:42—And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, *that is, the day before the Sabbath*, ...

In other words, “preparation” means preparation *for the Sabbath*.

Reading John more closely

John 19:31—Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away.

John agrees with Mark that it was the day *before* the Sabbath. This is what he means by “preparation.”

Two more questions

1. What does John mean when he says, “for that Sabbath was a high day”?

He means that it was a *particularly special feast day*, not just any Sabbath day, but Sabbath *in Passover week*.

2. What about John 18:28?

Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.

Doesn't this contradict the claim that Passover had already taken place?

Some facts about Passover

Passover is not just one day; it is a week long festival. Throughout the Gospel of John, the word "Passover" occurs eight other times and always refers to the festival as a whole, not to the opening meal.

The *seder*, or supper, that begins the Passover celebration is not the only ritual meal eaten during Passover; in fact, there is another ritual meal, the *chagiga*, eaten at mid-day the following day.

If the chief priests had entered Pilate's dwelling and been "defiled" by so doing, the defilement would expire at sundown; all they would need to do is wash, and they would be ceremonially clean for the evening meal. Therefore, they must be concerned about some meal *other* than the evening meal.

So John's account fits perfectly with Mark's. The concern of the chief priests is not and could not be about the Passover *seder*; for then their worry would make no sense. The *seder* was already over, having been eaten the previous evening. They are concerned about some other meal in Passover, probably the *chagiga*.

Objections 3 & 4: How many women? And who?

Mark 16:1—When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

Matthew 28:1—Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

Luke 24:10—Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, ...

John's account

John 20:1—Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

Is John suggesting that Mary was the only one who came?

Reading a little further in John

John 20:2—So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

Mary’s choice of words reveals, in passing, that there were other women; John’s report of these words shows that he knows this.

The source of Ehrman’s confusion

The appearance of contradiction arises only if we assume, quite unjustly, that each account is intended to be complete, to give us a comprehensive list of the women. Luke explicitly says that there were others besides those he names. John tacitly shows that he knows there were others besides Mary.

Objection 5: The stone

Matthew 28:1-5—Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, ...”

Mark and Luke on the stone

Mark 16:3-4—And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large.

Luke 24:2—And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ...

The apparent contradiction

According to Ehrman, Matthew intends us to understand that the women were witnesses to the descent of the angel and the rolling away of the stone. But Mark and Luke clearly state that it had been rolled away already when they arrived.

The key question: Does Matthew intend us to understand that the women were witnesses to the descent of the angel and the rolling away of the stone?

What Matthew actually says

The entire passage regarding the angel (verses 2-4) is introduced by the Greek particle γάρ, “For ...” Its purpose is to explain the earthquake and the state of affairs as the women found it upon arrival.

Matthew uses an aorist participle, which could be (and in some versions is) translated with the English past perfect: "... for an angel of the Lord had descended ... "

Both considerations remove the appearance of contradiction; Matthew is not claiming that the women saw the descent of the angel and the unconscious guards.

Pressing the objection

Question: How did Matthew know about the descent of the angel if not by the testimony of the women?

Answer: We do not know for sure, but it may have been from something said later by one or more of the guards themselves. Matthew apparently had other sources of information about them (cf. Matthew 28:11-15).

Objection 6: Man or angel? One or two?

Mark 16:5-6—And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, ...

Matthew 28:5—But the angel said to the women ...

Luke 24:4—While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ...

John 20:11-13—But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

Angels appear as men

Genesis 18:1-2—And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him.

Hebrews 13:2—Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Part of the objection is answered

Mark and Luke give a description of what the women saw; Matthew and John give an interpretation (perhaps the women's own interpretation) of what they saw. There is no contradiction between the description ("men") and the interpretation ("angels")

How many angels were there?

Matthew and Mark focus on the one who spoke and do not mention the other. But omission is not the same thing as denial. Neither of them says that there was one and only one.

The scene with Mary Magdalene in John 20 occurs later, after Peter and John have come, inspected the empty tomb, and gone away again.

Objection 7: What were they told?

Matthew 28:7—“... Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.”

Mark 16:7—“... But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”

When did he tell them that?

Matthew 26:32—“... But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.”

Matthew and Mark record the reminder Jesus gave them and follow it up with an instruction to go to Galilee. Matthew and John both report post-resurrection appearances of Jesus in Galilee (Matthew 28, John 21). Luke omits the reminder and the instruction:

Luke 24:5-8—And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.” And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest.

What the Synoptics report and omit

Mark	Matthew	Luke
Reminder of Jesus’ words	Reminder of Jesus’ words	Partial reminder of Jesus’ words
Instruction to go to Galilee	Instruction to go to Galilee	
	Subsequent appearance in Galilee	
		Appearances in Jerusalem
		Ascension

Explanation of the omissions

Mark—The text of this Gospel is incomplete, the original ending following 16:8 having been lost.

Matthew—Having recorded Jesus’ promise to meet his followers in Galilee, Matthew includes both the instruction to meet him there and the appearance there. His Gospel

terminates rather abruptly; perhaps, like Josephus (*Against Apion* 1.325), he was running out of space on his scroll.

Luke—Like Matthew, Luke likely filled one scroll with his Gospel and compressed many events that occurred across an undefined period of time into one terse narrative leading up to the ascension.

Luke could afford to do this since he had a “volume two,” the book of Acts, in which he gives a clearer sense of the timeline (Acts 1:3).

Pressing the objection

Question: Why does Luke leave out the appearances in Galilee and the instruction to go there?

Answer: We do not know for sure. But Luke was not an eyewitness; he relied on sources (Luke 1:1-4). He would naturally give priority to material not found in Mark.

Luke’s Gospel, like Matthew’s, is about the length of one full scroll, so there may not have been space to do more.

Objection 8: Did they tell the disciples?

Mark 16:8—And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Luke 24:10-11—Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

The apparent contradiction

According to Luke, the women went and told the disciples what they had seen and heard. But Ehrman insinuates that according to Mark, they said nothing to anyone—and those words do appear in Mark.

The solution

Because Mark’s Gospel as we now have it is broken off at 16:8, we can only conjecture as to how it ended. The most plausible reading of the phrase “said nothing to anyone” is that the women did not run screaming into Jerusalem and tell all to the first male they met; rather, they ran straight to the disciples without telling anyone else.

Mark’s normal usage

Mark 5:37—And he allowed no one to follow him *except* Peter and James and John ...

Mark 9:8—And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them *but* Jesus only.

Mark 10:18—And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.”

Objection 9: Did the disciples go to Galilee?

Matthew and John report that they did; Mark breaks off before that would be reported.

Luke does not mention it, but he does not say that they did not, and he does not claim to be giving a complete account of all that Jesus did after His resurrection.

Acts 1:3—He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Summary: Answering Ehrman’s questions

Question 1

Ehrman: “Was Jairus’s daughter sick but still alive when Jairus came to ask Jesus to heal her, as in Mark, or did she just die before Jairus came, so that he asked Jesus to raise her from the dead, as in Matthew?”

Jairus’s daughter was dying, on the point of death, when he came to Jesus; he may well have feared that she was dead already by the time he reached Jesus. If Matthew’s language is not simply a terse summary, it may reflect Jairus’s fear that the worst had already happened. All accounts concur that he had the faith to follow Jesus up into the room even after she had died.

Question 2

Ehrman: “The Gospel of John says explicitly that Jesus died on the day of preparation for the Passover, the afternoon before the Passover meal was eaten.”

No, it doesn’t. John does not say that Jesus died on the day of preparation *for the Passover*; it says that he died on the day of preparation of Passover, that is, the day before the high Sabbath in Passover. Details in John’s text show that he has the same timeline in mind as the authors of the Synoptic Gospels: Jesus died on a Friday afternoon on the first day of the Passover festival.

Questions 3 & 4

Ehrman: “How many women went to the empty tomb? What were their names?”

We do not know exactly how many women, went to the tomb, but there were at least five: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, Salome, and at least one more unnamed woman, and perhaps several others (Luke 24:10).

Question 5

Ehrman: “Was the stone rolled away before the women arrived or after they got there?”

The stone was rolled away before they arrived. Matthew’s account in 28:2-4 gives an explanation for what they found when they did arrive—the guards apparently gone, the stone rolled away—not a description of events that unfolded before their eyes.

Question 6

Ehrman: “What did they see there? One man? Two men? or two angels?”

They saw two angels, in appearance like young men, one of whom spoke and was therefore the only one mentioned in Matthew and Mark.

Question 7

Ehrman: “What were they told to do? To tell the disciples to go to Galilee, or not?”

They were told to tell the disciples that Jesus would go before them into Galilee, a fulfillment of his promise before his death. They were not told that this would be the first time they would see Jesus; none of the Gospels says that they were to go to Galilee right away.

Question 8

Ehrman: “Did they tell the disciples, or not?”

Yes. The attempt to press the abrupt termination of Mark into service as an argument against this is disingenuous.

Question 9

Ehrman: “Did the disciples go to Galilee, or not?”

Yes. Although Mark is broken off before the place where we would expect a description of this, and Luke does not mention it, both Matthew and John describe (different) scenes in which Jesus appears to his disciples in Galilee.

Bart’s parting shot

“We should not say that these are a bunch of details and don’t affect the larger picture. The larger picture is made up of *nothing but details*. The big pictures are vastly different too, as you’ll see once you allow yourself to admit that the details are all different up and down the line.

“In my opinion, now, the accounts in the Gospels cannot be reliable because they differ in hundreds of ways, both big and small, and they contain numerous historical errors.”

This rhetorical flourish is misleading. Just as two paintings can depict the same scene even though they have not a single identical brushstroke, so two accounts can describe the same events even though they emphasize and omit different sets of details. Even if Ehrman were right—which he is not—that these are real, irreconcilable contradictions, it would not follow that the principal events are not well attested. All of the Gospels agree that Jesus died by crucifixion, that he was buried in a tomb, that he rose from the dead the third day afterward, that the first visitors to the tomb on Easter morning were some of the women who had been his followers. Mark’s Gospel breaks off here, but all of the others agree that he was seen by many of his disciples and followers. Luke actually depicts the ascension (in Luke 24, and again in Acts 1); John foreshadows it (John 20:17). None of the Gospels contradicts any of these points.

Summary of the conclusions from the first seven lectures in this series

There is strong external and internal evidence for the traditional *authorship* of the Gospels. (Lecture 1)

There is strong external and internal evidence for the *historical reliability* of the Gospels and Acts. (Lectures 2 and 3)

The most commonly claimed historical errors in the Gospels turn out, on examination, not to be errors at all. (Lectures 4a and 4b)

The most commonly alleged contradictions in the Gospels turn out, on examination, not to be contradictions at all. (Lectures 5a and 5b)

John 20:30-31—Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

This talk is the seventh – numbered 5b – in a series:

1. Who Wrote the Gospels? (January 23)
2. External Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels (February 13)
3. Internal Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels (February 27)
- 4a. Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels, Part 1 (May 21)
- 4b. Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels, Part 2 (June 11)
- 5a. Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels, Part 1 (July 16)
- 5b. Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels, Part 2 (August 20)
6. The Resurrection of Jesus (April 9)

If you enjoyed it, please check YouTube for videos of the other talks! If you found it online, you can find links to videos of the other talks at

<http://www.apologetics315.com>

Meanwhile, if you would like more to read, please check out the free resources at the Library of Historical Apologetics:

<http://historicalapologetics.org>