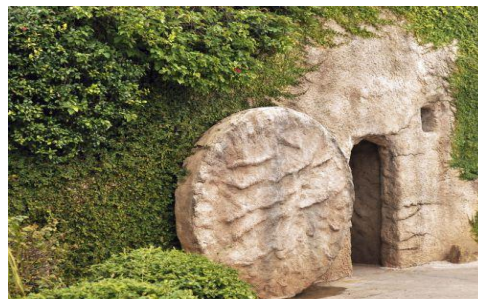

Harmonizing the Resurrection Accounts, Part 1

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Anyone who has read through the gospels can see that there are differences between them. Matthew does not read the same as Mark, and Mark is very different from Luke. John is the most unique of the four gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called “The Synoptic Gospels.” “Syn” means “same” or “similar” as in “synonym.” “Optic” means “to see.” “Synoptic” means that these three gospels “see the same.”

That is not to say that they are all exactly alike. They are not. It is to say that the three synoptic gospels all see very much the same material, from a very similar perspective. There is a lot of overlap between the three in terms of the material they cover. Many of the miracles, discourses, and events from the life of Jesus are recorded in more than one of those three books. John is not a “synoptic gospel” because so much of John includes material not found in the other three.

For instance, six out of the seven miracles in John are unique to John.ⁱ There are seven extended discourses in John not recorded in the other gospels. There are also unique characters included by John which do not appear elsewhere: Nicodemus and the woman at the well in Samaria. In short, John has a penchant for providing information, details, and perspective that is entirely unique.

When we get into the final four chapters of John’s gospel, we are plunged into material that finds a lot of parallel in the other gospels, namely, the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Though John still provides a lot of unique details, we find much more overlap with the other gospels.

When we compare passages in different gospels that describe the same event, we inevitably find there to be differences in the way that the authors record the event. Unbelievers and skeptics will often point to these differences as examples of “contradictions” in the New Testament. Most of these alleged contradictions are not contradictions at all and are, in fact, quite easy to reconcile. Typically, some thoughtful analysis of the context, wording, or the perspective of the author will make the “contradictions” vanish. Occasionally, a bit more is

needed. There are a few passages of Scripture that require some rigorous thought and research before the solution presents itself. This is most certainly true concerning the differences between the gospels regarding the events immediately surrounding the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The accounts of the resurrection, the order of events, the testimony of the witnesses, and the appearances given in the four gospels provide the most challenging parts of the New Testament record to reconcile. Though they are challenging, they are not impossible. I will show in this article and the one to follow how the resurrection narratives can be harmonized without ignoring any of the details. Further, I intend to provide a framework for thinking about “contradictions” that can serve you well as you study Scripture on your own and encounter other alleged contradictions. In this first article, we will consider the nature of the harmonization challenge that is before us, look at some examples of the details that are often cited as contradictory, and study some principles to keep in mind when assessing alleged contradictions.ⁱⁱ

The Challenge

It is no secret that the resurrection narratives in the four gospels present a challenge to the serious Bible student. There are differences in the accounts of the four gospels, which some have alleged to be “irreconcilable contradictions.” For atheists, skeptics, and those who doubt the authenticity of the New Testament record, the closing chapters of the gospels provide a goldmine of supposed contradictions and discrepancies. They allege the resurrection accounts to be so different as to undermine the credibility of the entire New Testament.

Paul Wilhelm Schmiedel, a radical liberal German theologian from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, said this: “The Gospels...exhibit contradictions of the most glaring kind. Reimarus...enumerated 10 contradictions; but in reality their number is much greater.”

Henry Alford, an Anglican scholar who lived in the 1800s, said, “Of all harmonies, those of the incidents

of these chapters are to me the most unsatisfactory. ... They seem to me to weaken instead of strengthening the evidence....? I have abandoned all idea of harmonizing throughout.”

Another liberal theologian, Percival Gardner-Smith, said this:

No ingenuity can make the narration of Luke consistent with that of Mark, much less is it possible to reconcile the picture presented by the fourth evangelist with the accounts of any of the synoptic writers. Mutually contradictory narratives cannot all be true....Nothing can be made of a jumble of contradicting statements.

Emil Brunner, a German theologian from the early 1900s who rejected the theology of divine inspiration of the Scriptures and the miraculous elements of the Christian faith, said:

The sources contradict one another, and only a “harmonizing” process which is not too much concerned about truth could patch up a fairly connected account of the events, in which it is only to manifest that the latter and less credible witnesses appear more important than the earlier, and more reliable ones. Such a dishonest way of dealing with the subject really has nothing to do with “faith in the Word of God;” it only serves to support the disastrous prejudice that Christian faith is only possible in connection with historical dishonesty.

In other words, the honest Christian will admit that the contradictions in the New Testament surrounding the resurrection accounts are irreconcilable, for you cannot hold it together and harmonize it without being dishonest with the details.

Arthur Michael Ramsey, an Anglican bishop who served as the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1961 to 1974, said:

It is a fascinating study to attempt to harmonize what the evangelists tell...Up to a point the attempt may be successful, but a limit to the success is always reached. That we should expect to be able to weave the stories into a chronological and geographical plan seems inconceivable.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some scholars who are orthodox and generally considered more “conservative” in their handling of Scripture suggest that, although there **must** be a way of harmonizing the accounts, the solution will be forever unknown to us. In other words, they're willing to admit that what we have before us is accurate, but how it all fits together is a grand mystery.

There is a lot at stake in this issue. This is more

than a mere intellectual curiosity. If the gospels have contradictions, then they are not inspired. If there are errors in the records and irreconcilable contradictions, then God did not write them. They are untrustworthy at best.

I believe, and I intend to show, that the claims that the gospels are hopelessly contradictory and irreconcilable are vastly overstated. That is not to say that harmonizing the details is easy. It is not. But it is to say that harmonizing the details is not impossible. There are, in fact, more than one way of harmonizing the resurrection accounts and accounting for all the various details provided by the gospels.

Examples of "Contradictions"

The differences in the accounts are real and not imaginary. Here are some examples of the types of differences that we find when we examine the accounts.

Who Came to the Tomb?

When it comes to the question of who came to the tomb early that first resurrection Sunday morning, each of the gospels provide different details. Matthew names “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary” (Matthew 28:1). Mark names three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 16:1). Luke identifies five different women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and “the other women” (Luke 24:10).^{iv} John only names one woman, Mary Magdalene, and John tells the entire narrative from her perspective (John 20:1). The only woman named by all four gospel writers is Mary Magdalene.

When Did the Women Come to the Tomb?

Matthew records that the women came “as it began to dawn” (Matthew 28:1). Mark says that it was “very early” and “the sun had risen” (Mark 16:2). Luke says it was “at early dawn” (Luke 24:1). Yet John says that “Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark” (John 20:1). How is it possible that “it was still dark” (John) when “the sun had risen” (Mark)?

When Was the Stone Moved?

There is also an apparent discrepancy pertaining to when the stone was moved. Mark, Luke, and John all place the moving of the stone *prior* to the arrival of the women (Mark 16:2; Luke 24:2 John 20:1). Matthew *seems* to describe the stone being moved when the women arrived (Matthew 28:1-2).

How Many Angels Were There?

Matthew and Mark only mention one angel appearing to the women (Matthew 28:2-7; Mark 16:5-7) whereas Luke unmistakably says there were two

(Luke 24:4-7).

When and Where Did Jesus Appear to the Women?

Matthew seems to place the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene and the other women as they were leaving the tomb to go tell the disciples (Matthew 28:8-10). John records the appearance to Mary Magdalene *at* the tomb, *after* she reported it to the disciples, and *after* Peter and John visited the tomb (John 20:1-18). Not only that, the appearance to Mary Magdalene recorded by John and supposedly that same appearance recorded by Matthew bear almost no similarity to one another.

To even the most casual reader, those differences appear to be numerous and significant. Further, these differences pertain to the most elementary details of the narrative: *who* came, *when* they came, and *what* they saw. In connection with an event of such monumental importance - the resurrection of Jesus Christ - we might expect far more agreement in the details.

Is there a way of understanding the events of those early Sunday morning hours that does not force us to conclude the gospel writers are contradicting one another? Is there a way that these events could have occurred that would account for all the various details provided by the four gospels?

Yes. Yes there is. In fact, there is more than one way of harmonizing these differences. But before we get to that, we need to cover some basic principles we have to keep in mind when reading the gospel narratives.

Principles for Harmonizing

As we seek to piece together the various details provided in the Gospels around the resurrection of Christ, we have to keep in mind the following basic principles.

1. The gospels are independent and not identical accounts. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each wrote independent of one another. They *did not* intend to give us four identical accounts of the life of Jesus. They *did* intend to give us four independent accounts.

Each of the four Gospels offers details that the other three do not. Each author selected his material consciously, choosing which details to omit and which to include. Each wrote with a different purpose in mind and a different audience in view. The authors did not sit down in a room and collude together while writing their gospels. There is no evidence they consulted

with one another as to what details to include or how to describe the events they recorded.

If the gospels were identical accounts, then three of them would be unnecessary. John, whose account is widely believed to have been written later, appears familiar with the content and emphasis of the other three. He seems to intentionally include details and material that is not found in the others. Ironically, if there were no differences in the gospels, if they did not appear as independent accounts, skeptics of the New Testament would charge the authors with collusion. They would say the authors were carefully crafting a lie colluding together to deceive the masses.

2. The gospels are not intended to be read as comprehensive accounts. We do a disservice to the text when we read the gospels as if expecting them to give every detail of every event, miracle, or discourse they record. The gospel writers did not intend their accounts to be taken as comprehensive. They were mindful of the fact that they were including and excluding certain details for certain purposes. The inclusion and/or exclusion of details was intended to draw attention to certain aspects of the events that they wanted to highlight. John openly admits his selectivity and bias when he says, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30-31).

By leaving out certain details, they were not lying. It would have been impossible to give a comprehensive account of *any one thing* in the life of Jesus, let alone *everything* in the life of Jesus. So the authors of the Gospels, just like authors today, had to pick and choose what they wanted to include and what was unnecessary to their purpose. Their intention was to state the facts, often giving only the barest of essential details.

Unlike authors today, New Testament authors had limited space for their writings. They could not publish a seemingly endless online blog, or print up books containing hundreds of pages. The length of ancient books was limited to what could be contained on a scroll of parchment.

3. We should expect there to be differences. Given the fact that the gospel records are not intended to be comprehensive, and given the fact that the writers were very selective in the material they chose to record, and given the fact that they are four independent accounts, *we should expect there to be differences*. Differences in eyewitness testimony is, in

fact, an evidence that the testimony is reliable. It shows that the witnesses have not been tampered with or coached.

4. Not every difference is a discrepancy. Yes, there are differences in the accounts, but those differences are not necessarily contradictions. Not every difference in the details recorded by two different authors is a necessary contradiction. For instance, Luke mentions two angels at the tomb when the women arrived. Matthew only mentions one. Mark only mentions one. That is a difference, but it is not a contradiction.

The fact that Matthew and Mark only mention one angel is not proof that there were not two angels. All it proves is that Matthew and Mark only focused on the angel who spoke. If, in fact, there were two angels, as Luke records, then there was most certainly one angel, as Matthew and Mark record. If Luke had said that there were two angels at the tomb and Mark and Matthew both said there was **only** one angel, then we would have a contradiction. But the fact that Matthew and Mark do not mention a second angel is not proof that there was not a second angel, nor does it constitute a contradiction to Luke's record that there were two angels present.

In fact, it is possible for two accounts of the same incident to be *radically different* without being contradictory. For instance, let's say that I told you that yesterday a man from Publishers Clearinghouse knocked on my door and he gave me a check for \$1 million. Then, a couple hours later, you talk with my wife about this claim. My wife has an eye and a mind for details far more refined than my own. So when she describes the same event, she says, "Yesterday a man from Publishers Clearinghouse showed up at our home. He was driving a white van with the words 'Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes' printed in large black letters on the side. He had with him a camera crew, a man to hold the microphone, and a news reporter there from the local newspaper, *The Daily Bee*, so they could be sure to inaccurately report the story. His assistant was holding a big cardboard sign that that looked like a check, and it said 'Pay To The Order Of Jim and Diedre Osman.' It was made out in the amount of \$999,950.62."

Obviously there are numerous differences

i The only exception is the feeding of the 5,000 recorded in John 6. That is also recorded in Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:32-44, and Luke 9:10-17.

ii These articles are adapted from messages preached in John 20. Those messages are available at <http://www.kootenaichurch.org>.

between those two eyewitness accounts of the exact same event. One account only mentions one person while the other mentions at *least* five. One account mentions the van and another says nothing of the van. One account says it was a check, the other a large cardboard sign that looked like a check. I reported that it was made out to me, whereas my wife claimed it was to both of us. I say it was for \$1 million, my wife's says it was for \$999,950.62.

If you heard those two eyewitness accounts of the same event, you would never claim that the accounts are contradictory or hopelessly irreconcilable. Instead, you would immediately be able to put all the pieces together and harmonize them quite nicely in your mind. You would probably suspect that there are a number of details about that event not reported by either one of us. None of those differences would necessarily constitute a contradiction.

Conclusion

So it is with the gospels. We have four independent, eyewitness accounts of the same event. These accounts provide complementary, but not contradictory, information.

There are no contradictions between the gospel accounts of the resurrection. There are differences, even very intriguing differences, but there are no necessary contradictions. There are statements that may appear contradictory, but when we examine them, accounting for the perspective of the author, we find that there are ways of understanding the events that do not require us to conclude that one or any of the gospel writers had it wrong.

When we put these accounts together we get a complete picture not a contradictory picture.

In part two, I will reconstruct the events of that first Easter morning in a way that accounts for all the details. We will see that a harmonization of these accounts is anything but impossible.

Without Wax -



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iii This and the previous quotations in this section are taken from a very helpful book, *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?* By John Wenham (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992) pgs. 9-10.

iv Though Luke leaves at least two women unnamed, we may suppose that one of those women is Salome, mentioned by Mark.