

The Resurrection

Real Event or Historical Hoax?



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“If Christ has not been raised,” wrote the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, “then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (I Corinthians 15:14). Yet, many liberal theologians reject the biblical accounts of Jesus’ resurrection. They claim that the resurrection narratives of the New Testament are contradictory and therefore cannot be trusted as reliable accounts of an actual event. But is this true? Do the resurrection narratives contain discrepancies? Are they irreconcilable, as the critics claim?

by Vance A. Stinson

According to an article appearing in the April 8, 1996 issue of *Newsweek*, “various Biblical scholars argue that the Gospel stories of the empty tomb and Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances are fictions devised long after his death to justify claims of his divinity.” These scholars, through scores of books and articles written within the past five years, “hope to show that belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a burden to the Christian faith and deflects attention from his role as social reformer.”

The liberal scholars involved in this movement to redefine Jesus (supposedly through stripping the Gospel accounts of their “myths” and discovering the underlying historical “facts”) do not agree on precisely what did happen to Jesus’ body. Some argue that the body was placed in an unmarked grave where it “rotted away,” while others say that the body was taken from the tomb and later thrown to wild dogs. In spite of their “scholarly” differences of opinion, however, all agree that the historical Jesus did not actually awaken from the state of death and exit the tomb.

According to these critics, the limited philosophical world view that gave rise to the resurrection “myth” must now give way to a more “enlightened” world view. With our greater scientific knowledge, and with our view of man as a being evolving to higher and higher levels of consciousness, we must look underneath the “myths” and “legends” that developed in the early years of the Christian movement and discover a “Jesus” that is “real” to us.

As Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong writes, “We [modernists] would not turn the proclamation ‘death cannot contain him’ into empty-tomb stories of Easter, complete with angels, earthquakes, soldiers falling over like dead men, and temple veils that kept human beings separated from the holy of holies being ripped open. We would not transform the ecstatic Easter cry of ‘He is risen,’ ‘we have seen the Lord’ into a series of ghostlike appearance

stories that fight with each other as to whether or not this risen Christ is physical or spiritual” (*Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, Harper San Francisco, p. 235).

Apparently, some scholars believe that proclamations such as “He lives,” “He is risen,” and “Death cannot contain Him” originally meant that the spirit of Jesus as social reformer lives on in the movement He started—perhaps in much the same way a civil rights worker today might say that the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr. lives on in the struggle to rid the world of prejudice and social inequality. This, they seem to suggest, is the great universal ‘truth’ that underlies the “mythical” stories of the resurrection and post-resurrection appearances.

As Spong argues, we would express this universal truth much differently, but the early disciples, with a very different world view, conveyed their experiences through literary methods that were meaningful to them. Notice his explanation of how a simple but life-changing experience was transformed into a series of mythical stories:

“When the experience of Easter [i.e., the disciples experience of the risen Christ] was first put into words, it was simply a proclamation without narrative. Jesus lives! Death cannot contain him! Proclamations, however, never remain simply proclamations; they inevitably create a narrative to explain them. Jesus lives! became ‘we have seen the Lord’ and gave rise in time to all of the appearance stories. ‘Death cannot contain him’ was expanded first into such shouts as ‘O death, where is your sting?’ ‘O grave, where is your victory?’ (1 Cor. 15:55). Then later the concept was encapsulated into narratives about a tomb that was empty and a grave that had been escaped. The essence of the gospel is never found in the narrations, but all of the irreconcilable contradictions are. In the telling and retelling of the story, the facts were bent, twisted, and even changed” (ibid., p. 225).

Notice Spong’s claim that the narrations (the accounts found in the New Testament) contain “irreconcilable contradictions.” This claim that the resurrection narratives are hopelessly contradictory is the foundation upon which the so-called “higher critics” and liberal theologians form their arguments.

Alleged Contradictions

In many of their books and articles, and even in the seminary classes they teach, liberal scholars compare the various biblical accounts of the resurrection and post-resurrection appearances to show what they perceive to be “irreconcilable contradictions.” The following, taken from *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (pp. 218-220), is a concise summary of several alleged contradictions:

Who went to the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week? Paul said nothing about anyone going. Mark said that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went (chap. 16). Luke said that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and some other women went (24:10). Matthew said Mary Magdalene and the other Mary only went (1:28). John said that Mary Magdalene alone went (20:11). This is not an important detail unless you claim inerrancy for every word of Scripture. If that claim is made, even minor disagreements become catastrophic.

What did the women find at the tomb? Since Paul made no reference to a tomb visit, he has nothing further to contribute to this section of the narrative. Mark, however, said that the women found a young man dressed in white garments who gave the resurrection message. Luke said it was two men clothed in dazzling apparel. Matthew said it was nothing less than “an angel of the Lord” who descended in an earth-quake, put the armed guard to sleep, rolled back the stone, and gave the resurrection message. John began with no messenger at all, but on Mary Magdalene’s second visit she confronted two angels, although they were speechless. Finally she confronted Jesus himself, whom she mistook for the gardner. From Jesus she received the resurrection message.

Did the women see the risen Lord in the garden at dawn on the first day of the week? Mark and Luke said no. Matthew said yes. John said yes also, but he insisted that it was a little bit later. Where did the risen Christ appear to the disciples? Paul gave no hint of location in his list of appearances. Mark recorded no appearance stories, but he hinted that there would be a meeting between the risen Lord and the disciples in Galilee. Matthew was quite specific, writing that the only time Jesus appeared to the disciples was in Galilee on a mountaintop, at which time he gave what we call the Divine Commission. Luke was equally specific but diametrically opposed to the Mark and Matthew tradition.

In Luke the risen Christ quite pointedly ordered the disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they were empowered by the Holy Spirit; that is, they were not to go to Galilee, as the angelic messenger in Mark had ordered and as Matthew had narrated. Luke then asserted that the only resurrection appearances that occurred took place in the Jerusalem area. For him the setting was in an upper room and in the village of Emmaus, some six miles away from Jerusalem. Luke implied that there was no Galilean appearance because for him appearances of the risen Lord ceased with the ascension that occurred just outside of Jerusalem. John said, in agreement with Luke, that the initial resurrection experiences took place in Jerusalem, but then, in disagreement with Luke, he went on to record a Galilean resurrection tradition in chapter 21.

There are many scholars who believe that the final chapter of John is not from the pen of the same man who wrote chapters 1 through 20, so the Galilean tradition in the Fourth Gospel does not rest on quite as firm biblical base as it does in Mark and Matthew. However, it must be noted that John’s Galilean tradition is not set on a mountaintop as it is in Matthew, but by a lake. It does seem strange that the experience of the risen Christ, which had to have been a moment of tremendous consciousness expanding and revelation, could not be located in one consistent place. Most of us remember where we were when a life-changing event occurred. The biblical narratives do not give evidence of a consistent tradition.

The reader is urged to carefully read and compare the narratives for himself. They are found in Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24 (with Acts 1:1-11), John 20-21, and I Corinthians 15:3-8. At first, the differences may *seem* irreconcilable. However, if the reader gives careful attention to what the various texts do and do *not* say, and realizes that none of the writers intended to present *all* the details, then he will soon see that many of the so-called

“irreconcilable contradictions” are neither irreconcilable nor contradictory.

What the Narratives Do *Not* Say

Upon reading one of the resurrection narratives, the reader will naturally form mental images of the events described in the accounts. However, he should be aware that the description provided in an account may allow for more than one possible scenario. For instance, Matthew’s account says that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb. From this description, the reader might assume that those were the only two women who visited the tomb that morning. *But the account does not say so.* It is quite possible that others were on their way to the tomb at the time Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrived. Perhaps Salome, Joanna, and other women were only a short distance away, either traveling together or separately.

Further, it is possible that other women were with the two Marys, but Matthew mentions only the two Marys because they were his primary sources of information. Remember, Matthew was not there. He relied on the testimony of witnesses who *were* there. For whatever reason, he did not sense a need to list all the women who visited the tomb that morning. To him, the two witnesses—perhaps the two who arrived first, and perhaps the two he knew best—were sufficient.

The *King James Version* of Matthew’s narrative leaves the impression that the two Marys were at the tomb when the earthquake occurred, and witnessed the angel rolling back the stone. But the language used in the account does not demand this conclusion. The term was could be translated ‘had been’ (see the New American Standard Bible). Thus, “there had been a great earthquake ...” (Matthew 28:2). The earthquake and opening of the tomb could have occurred several hours before the women arrived at the tomb.

Matthew’s account says that after the women received the resurrection message, they “did run to bring His disciples word,” and while they were on their way, “Jesus met them” (verses 8,9). Mark’s account, however, says that after the women received the resurrection message, they “were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8). Verse 9 says that Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, but this verse does not appear in the two oldest manuscripts, so Jesus may have appeared first to the women as they went to tell the disciples of their experience (Matthew 28:8,9).

While Matthew says that the women ran to tell the disciples, he does not say that they reported their experience right away. They departed the tomb “with fear and great joy” (Matthew 28:8). Perhaps their fear caused them to hold off going immediately to the disciples. They could have stopped someplace along the way before deciding to report their experience. Perhaps they thought it best to remain silent about the matter—until Jesus appeared to them and told them to go to the disciples.

In John’s Gospel, a single word shows how the details given in an account do not necessarily mean that the writer is aware of no further details. The reader might think that John’s account says that only one person, Mary Magdalene, went to the tomb. But the account does not say that at all, and a single word—the word *we*—indicates that John knew

other women were involved.

When Mary Magdalene left the tomb and reported her experience, John writes, she said, “They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid Him (John 20:2). The “we” indicates that at least one other person had been with Mary when she came to the tomb.

The fact that details any modern writer would include are left out of the various resurrection narratives does not mean that the narratives contradict; it simply means that the writers of the first century had a literary style quite different from our own, and it shows that each wrote from his own perspective and with his own emphasis. Rather than judge their credibility on the basis of our literary standards, as the “higher critics” and liberal theologians tend to do, we should rather allow them to speak their own language in their own style.

Once the reader understands that none of the writers intended to include all the details, that they often summarized a series of events, and that their summaries (in some cases) may have been arranged in categories other than chronological order, then it is an easy matter to arrange the events in a logical, non-contradictory sequence.

Putting It All Together

The resurrection narratives are *not* irreconcilable. The following is one possible way the different New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Christ can be harmonized:

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Salome the mother of Zebedee’s children, and other women agree to meet at the sepulcher. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary travel together and arrive first at the sepulcher (Matthew 28:1; cf. Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10; John 20:1,2 [note the “we”]). The other women arrive soon after.

Late on the previous day, at the time of the resurrection, an angel had descended from heaven, caused an earthquake to break the seal of the tomb, rolled away the stone blocking the entrance of the tomb, and caused the guards to faint (Matthew 28:2-4). The women, now on their way to the tomb (traveling in two or more parties) are unaware of the angel’s activity, so are wondering who would remove the stone (Mark 16:3).

When they arrive (Mary Magdalene and the other Mary first), they discover that the stone had been rolled away (Mark 16:4; Luke 24:2; John 20:1). Mary Magdalene assumes that someone had removed Jesus’ body (John 20:1). In great distress, she immediately runs away to tell Peter and John that someone had stolen the body (John 20:2).

Meanwhile, the other women join the other Mary at the tomb. At that time, two angels appear. At first the women see only one angel (the lead angel), but soon realize that there are two angels in the tomb. The angels, who appear as men, give them the resurrection message and tell them to go and tell the disciples that the Lord has risen from the dead (Matthew 28:6; Mark 16:4-7; Luke 24:3-8).

The women then leave the tomb and go to tell the disciples of what had happened, but, because of fear of being ridiculed, they decide to say nothing to anyone. A short while later, Jesus Himself appears to them. When He greets them, they fall before Him, hold His feet,

and worship Him. He tells them to go and tell His brethren to go to Galilee, where they will see Him. They then go and report these things to the disciples, but the disciples do not believe them (Matthew 28:9,10; cf. Mark 16:8; Luke 24:9-11).

By now, Peter and John have made their way to the tomb and discovered that the Lord's body was not there, and are on their way back to their place of lodging (Luke 24:12; John 20:3-10).

Mary Magdalene, who couldn't keep up with Peter and John, arrives at the tomb a second time, and is there alone. She looks in, sees two angels, and briefly converses with them. She then turns about and sees Jesus, but does not recognize Him. When He calls her by name, she realizes that the body she is looking for is standing before her (John 20:11-16).

She immediately reaches out to embrace Him, but He tells her, "Do not touch me, for I am not yet ascended. But go and tell my brethren that I ascend to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God" (John 20:37).

So Mary Magdalene returns to the disciples and tells them that she has seen the Lord (John 20:18). Mary arrives to tell her story shortly after the other women arrive to tell theirs. (The above assumes that Mark 16:9-20 does not belong in the text and is a second century attempt to complete Mark's Gospel.) Later that day, when Simon Peter is alone, Jesus appears to him (Luke 24:34; cf. I Corinthians 15:5).

On the same day, Jesus joins Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus. They do not recognize Him until later, when He dines with them. Once they go immediately to Jerusalem and report these things to the disciples (Luke 24:13-33; Mark 16:12).

When the disciples hear the report of the two, a believer among them (perhaps one of "them that were with" the eleven [Luke 24:33]) says, "The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon" (verse 34).

While the two tell of their meeting with Jesus, Jesus Himself appears. His appearance frightens them because they think they are seeing a ghost, or perhaps a demon (Luke 24:36,37).

Jesus proves that it is He (Luke 24:39-43), and upbraids them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had refused to believe the reports of Mary Magdalene, the other women, and the two travelers (Mark 16:14)

On this occasion, Thomas is not there. When he arrives, the disciples tell him what had happened, but he does not believe it (John 20:24,25).

Then, after eight days, when the disciples are again gathered behind closed doors (and Thomas with them this time), Jesus again appears and proves to Thomas that indeed it is He (John 24:11).

But what about the appearance in Galilee?

Matthew tells us that the eleven met with Jesus in a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16). John tells us that *some* of the eleven met with Him by the sea of Tiberias, which is in Galilee (John 21:1,2).

How do we reconcile these two accounts?

The disciples know that they are supposed to meet Jesus in Galilee. This was the order

given by the angles and by Jesus, and before His death Jesus Himself indicated that He would meet them in Galilee after the resurrection (Matthew 26:32).

So, with the second appearance in Jerusalem now past, the disciples agree to meet in Galilee. Some arrive before the others (John 21:2), and, as they await the arrival of the others, decide to go fishing. Jesus appears on the land while they are fishing, and they come ashore—with a lot of fish—and meet with Him (John 21:1-14).

Later, Jesus departs, the other disciples arrive, and they all meet in a designated location *in the mountain*. Of course, Mary Magdalene and the other women know of this meeting, and there must have been many others who by this time knew that the meeting was to take place. So not only do the other apostles arrive in time for Jesus' appearance, but so do the women and a whole host of others—totaling over five hundred. All of them, assembled in the mountain in Galilee, witness the appearance of Jesus (Matthew 28:16,17; I Corinthians 15:6).

The Synoptic writers are not concerned with the number, order, or location of Christ's various appearances. Their accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection teachings are summaries of what He taught them over the forty-day period (Acts 1:3) in which the appearances occurred. John does not tell of the final appearance, which occurred in Jerusalem (at some point after the Galilean appearance) and concluded at Bethany (on the eastern slope of Mount Olivet, two miles southeast of Jerusalem), the point from which Christ visibly ascended (Luke 24:50; Acts 1:1-12).

The above description of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene (John 20:10-17) and the other women (Matthew 28:8,9) assumes that Mark 16:9 ("Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene...") was not part of the original text. However, the accounts can be easily harmonized even if the disputed passage does belong there.

Possibly, as Mary Magdalene hurries to tell the apostles that someone had stolen Jesus' body, the other women join the other Mary (who had accompanied Mary Magdalene) at the tomb, where they receive the resurrection message from the angles. The women then leave the tomb and return to the city, but, because of fear, they decide to say nothing to anyone—at least, not yet. (This lapse between the women's departure from the tomb and decision to lay aside their fears and report to the disciples allows for Mary Magdalene's meeting Jesus before the other women.)

In the meantime, Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb, where she meets Jesus. She then returns to the disciples and tells them that she has seen the Lord.

At some point after Jesus' meeting with Mary Magdalene, He appears to the other women, who have now gathered the courage to go to the disciples and report what had happened earlier. Jesus appears to them while they are on their way to tell the disciples.

Conclusion

The fact that the writers tell the same story differently does not show that they cannot be trusted. On the contrary, it shows that they *can* be trusted. It shows that they are *honest*.

Had the writer reported the exact same details in the exact same chronological order, using identical terms and descriptions and naming the same persons involved, then perhaps we would have reason to question their credibility—just as a judge in a courtroom would question the credibility of witnesses who told the same story detail for detail, using the identical terms and phrases. Such testimony would raise the question of whether the witnesses collaborated in order to “get all the ‘facts’ straight,” thus indicating a possible plot to distort the truth.

No such charge can be laid to the writers of the resurrection narratives. Each wrote in his own style, providing details and emphasis from his own perspective. Yet, they tell the same story, without contradiction. This is compelling evidence indeed that their documents are trustworthy.

The conclusion is that the resurrection narratives are factual, not mythical. Jesus Christ died, and His body was placed in the tomb. But death could not contain Him. He rose from the dead. He came out of the tomb.

And He lives!

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