

Ehrman's Alleged Discrepancies: Confirmations or Contradictions?



L. L. (DON) VEINOT JR.*

President of Midwest Christian Outreach

President of Evangelical

Ministries to New Religions (EMNR)

donveinot@midwestoutreach.org

“For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” 2 Peter 2:16

Is the New Testament a historical account of the life, ministry, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth or a collection of stories and myths that grew and developed after He and his original disciples passed from the scene? There are several affirmations within Scripture which claim their writings are factual, reliable accounts of the events of the time they reference. Peter proclaims that they were “eyewitnesses” and didn’t follow “cunningly devised fables.” Dr. Luke opens his first account, the Gospel according to Luke, claiming the accuracy of his history to Theophilus:

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses

*Don Veinot is co-author of, *A Matter of Basic Principles: Bill Gothard and the Christian Life*, contributing author of *Preserving Evangelical Unity: Welcoming Diversity in Non-Essentials*, as well as articles in the *CRI Journal*, *PFO Quarterly Journal*, *Campus Life Magazine* and other periodicals.

and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.” (Luke 1:1-4, NASB)

Luke uses language which assumes a continuation of the accuracy of his reporting as he addressed the recipient of his writings, Theophilus, in his second work, the book of Acts.

From time to time the validity of these claims and indeed the reliability of the New Testament as a whole is called into question by those who are not favorable to, or even hostile toward, Christianity. One of the most effective salvos is to simply claim the Bible has contradictions and point out a few that seem to demonstrate the contention. Many are not prepared to respond or show that the claims of seeming contradictions are only that, *seeming* contradictions. This is an issue that has been with us for a long time, causing many of the supposed biblical contradictions to be addressed and readdressed over time. Some suggested works which have been produced to help in formulating responses:

Difficulties in the Bible, R. A. Torrey

Alleged Discrepancies in the Bible, John W. Halley

When Critics Ask, Norman Geisler & Thomas Howe

The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties, Gleason L. Archer

One of the newest antagonists on the scene is Bart D. Ehrman, author of a number of books such as *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* and *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don't Know About Them)*.

I had the privilege of being in the audience during a debate between Dr. Bart D. Ehrman and Dr. Craig A. Evans at the Dead Sea Scrolls/EMNR¹ Conference at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in April of 2010. Dr. Ehrman proved to be an amiable and capable debater.

¹ EMNR is Evangelical Ministries to New Religions; www.emnr.org.

His claims were simple. The gospel accounts were written 35 to 70 years after the original events, the stories had been carried over several continents and several languages during that period and were not, he contended, written by the original disciples. The stories grew, evolved, and have little similarity with the actual events surrounding the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To buttress his position he put forth examples of what he claimed were contradictions, “some major, some minor” but in his view, contradictions nonetheless and sufficient to invalidate the gospels as reliable texts.

I. WHAT OF THE SEEMING CONTRADICTIONS?

Although I think we can credibly establish that the gospel accounts were written early by followers of Jesus or others who were close to them, that would not necessarily mean the accounts are trustworthy. The claims of contradictions must be addressed. Simply because Dr. Ehrman asserts there are contradictions does not mean there are nor does my asserting there are not contradictions mean there are not.

Ehrman set this one up in an interesting way. His claim was that Evangelicals tend to read the gospels individually from beginning to end. They read them with a start, middle and conclude with the resurrection. He suggested we need to read them across by comparing each section with the same sections of the other gospels. It is there, he contends, that the contradictions surface most clearly. He went on to claim that if we try to put the stories together to answer his charges we are then creating yet another gospel or somehow changing what he calls the “Big Picture.” This is a case of special pleading or stacking the deck.²

Simply because all of the accounts do not contain the exact same details in exactly the same way does not mean nor prove there are actual

² *Fallacy of special pleading.* (a) Accepting an idea or criticism when applied to an opponent’s argument but rejecting it when applied to one’s own argument, or (b) rejecting an idea or criticism when applied to an opponent’s argument but accepting it when applied to one’s own.” Peter A. Angeles, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Barnes & Noble/Harper & Row, 1981), 99; italics and bold part of original text. Cf. Don Lindsay, “List of Fallacious Arguments,” where “special pleading” is also referred to as “stacking the deck” (<http://www.don-lindsayarchive.org/skeptic/arguments.html#special>).

contradictions.³ By assembling or comparing the accounts, as Ehrman started off challenging the audience to do, we are not by definition creating yet another gospel. This is used as a way to discourage an actual response. It might be helpful to provide a demonstration of seeming contradictions by reliable sources which in the end are only different aspects of the same story but not at all contradictory.

The late Kenneth Kantzer from time to time told a story of a personal experience where seeming contradictions turned out not to be contradictions once all of the facts were assembled and compared.⁴

One day he received a phone call from a reliable friend. He was told that a young lady they both knew had been standing on a corner waiting for the light to change and was struck by a car but was not seriously injured. A little while later he received another call from another trusted friend who communicated that the same young lady had been riding in a car which was broadsided by a truck and she was instantly killed. Both witnesses were reliable but there clearly seemed to be contradictions in their stories. Kantzer later learned that indeed the young lady had been standing on a corner waiting for the light to change when a vehicle struck her. She was injured but not seriously. The driver got her in the car and was taking her to the hospital to get her checked out. On the way to the hospital they were driving through an intersection and a truck ran the red light and broadsided the car killing the girl instantly.

Combining all of the facts of both stories did not create an entirely new story; they simply cleared up seeming inconsistencies and told the entire story. Most of Ehrman's claimed contradictions fall into this category. It seems that if we take Ehrman at his challenge, read the accounts in the same sections together, either we will see the contradictions or eliminate the seeming contradictions. I believe it will

³ Perhaps one of the most common grounds for accusing the gospels of contradicting each other has been the differing sequences in which the writers sometimes portray the events they narrate. But as a former pupil of Rudolph Bultmann, Eta Linneman, has pointed out, this objection has been answered at least as far back as the second century, when Papias (as attested by Eusebius) asserted that Mark did not intend to provide a chronologically-ordered account. (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15 and Linneman, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* [trans. Robert B. Yarbrough; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992], 168).

⁴ Kenneth S. Kantzer (1917–2002), was an influential theologian and educator in the evangelical Christian tradition.

be the latter. For the remainder of this article I will list each of the discrepancies highlighted in the debate and then respond to them:

Who went to the tomb: was it Mary Magdalene and another Mary; was it the two Marys and Salome? Was it Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and another Mary? Was it Mary Magdalene by herself?⁵

Matthew 28:1 tells us it was Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. Mark 16:1 names Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James (the other Mary) and Salome. Luke informs us in Luke 23:55 that just prior to the beginning of the Sabbath the “women who had come with Him out of Galilee” had gone to the tomb to see where it was and then returned to prepare the burial spices. This would be a larger group than the three so far named but would have included them. In Luke 24:1 he references this group when he continued this account, “But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb...”. The “they” here is the same “they” in the previous two verses, Luke 23:55, 56. Lastly, John 20:1 names Mary Magdalene. The problem here is not with any of the texts but with Ehrman’s theological slip. We can tell by his statement, “*Was it Mary Magdalene by herself*” that he is taking each account as though the writers are giving an exhaustive list of who came to the tomb. But that is simply not the case. Not only does John not say *only* Mary Magdalene came to the tomb, something that would have to be included in order for Ehrman’s assumption to hold any validity, but none of the writers make the claim that only those they named came to the tomb. The writers keyed in on individuals which were important to them for particular reasons. Three of the accounts name Mary Magdalene, Matthew, Mark and John. Two accounts name “the other Mary,” Matthew and Mark. One account, Mark, names Salome. Luke does not name any of the women. Using Ehrman’s methodology that would mean that Mary Magdalene, the other Mary and Salome were not there in Luke’s account, which is an absurd claim. So, the answer to the question is a simple one. It was Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, Salome and the rest of the women that followed Him out of Galilee. Ehrman provided no evidence which demonstrates this is not the case, and listing all of the

⁵ Ehrman’s questions (in bold) come from the rough outline he prepared to use during the debate.

evidence from the accounts clears up and answers the supposed contradictions.

Was the stone already rolled away by the time they got there or did it roll away when they arrived?

The account in Matthew 28:2 reports that a “severe earthquake *had* occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.” The word “had” indicates something which happened earlier in time, prior to the arrival of the women. Mark describes the discussion the women were having on the way to the tomb about how to get the stone moved. The stone had been rolled away prior to their arrival (Mark 16:3-4). We find the same description on Luke 24:2. The stone had been rolled away prior to their arrival. John agrees with the other narratives in John 20:1 that, “the stone already taken away from the tomb.” Again, without changing any material facts but simply listing them together we find no contradiction. In all accounts the stone had been rolled away prior to the arrival of the women.

Whom did they meet there to tell them that Jesus was raised? An angel? A man? Two men? Or Jesus himself? (John 20:1: she saw the stone was rolled away and so ran back to tell Simon Peter; later Jesus appears to her.)

Matthew writes that the angel who had rolled away the stone told them that Jesus had risen and invited them to look inside the tomb (Matt 28:5-6). They then met Jesus (Matt. 28:9). Mark describes a “young man...wearing a white robe” sitting in the tomb who told them Jesus had risen (Mark 16:5-6). Luke's account describes two men in dazzling appearance who told them He had risen (Luke 24:4-6). In John 20:12-13 Mary Magdalene saw two angels and in 20:16 she saw Jesus. John supplied additional but not contradictory material. According to the account, this was her second trip to the tomb on that morning. She had gone there “while it was still dark” (John 20:1), saw the stone rolled away, ran to tell Peter (John 20:2) and then returned (20:11 and following).

A few things here: It is not uncommon in Scripture for angels to be referred to as “men” or “young men” in both Old and New Testaments. We find this as early as Genesis 18 where angels are referred to as “men” in verses 2, 16, 22. One of the “men” was “The Lord” or YHWH and the other two “men” are referred to as angels in 19:1. When angels or the Lord took on physical appearances in Scripture they most often looked like men. The additional information of wearing a white robe (Mark) and having a dazzling appearance (Luke) helps to clarify that the “men” were angels. When we study any document, including Scripture, it is necessary, honest and even scholarly to use the historical grammatical understanding of the text and how the culture in which the text was written and read used language. Following that injunction what we have as an answer to this question is, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb while it was dark, before morning light. She found the stone rolled away, the tomb empty and ran back to tell Peter. She then returned as morning was dawning, and the other women (all of the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee) were also going to the tomb. Two angels greeted them, one sitting on the stone that had been rolled away who told them Jesus had risen. Another angel inside the tomb confirmed Jesus had risen and was then joined by the angel who had been outside the tomb. As they turned to leave, Mary Magdalene was weeping when she ran into Jesus who was indeed resurrected. Again, a careful review of the accounts in this fashion does not support the claim of contradiction but instead gives a more comprehensive BIG picture, as Ehrman refers to it.

Do the women assume Jesus has been raised (Synoptics) because that’s what they’re told, or do they assume he’s been buried in some other place (John) since his body is not in the tomb?

This one is a time question or *when* question rather than a demonstration of contradictions, for both of the above are true at different times. As previously shown, Mary Magdalene came while it was dark, saw the tomb was empty and “assumed” His body had been moved (John 20:1-2). Later, she and the all the other women were told He was raised and saw Him after they were told. These two are not contradictions but are both true at different times of the morning in question.

Who first comes to realize that Jesus has been raised? The women (the Synoptics) or Simon Peter and the beloved disciple (John)?

Again, the text, in context, answers this one without any contradiction. As Ehrman agrees, Matthew, Mark and Luke all concur that the women "realized" or knew first. John not only does not contradict this but agrees. In John 20:3-8, Peter and John ran to the tomb, saw and believed that the tomb was empty but, "...as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise from the dead" (John 20:9). So, although Peter and John saw and believed (John 20:8) the tomb was empty, they did not know what it meant at that point, whereas the women has been told by the angels and saw the risen Lord.

Are the women told anything upon first finding the tomb empty (Synoptics yes; John no)?

The answer to both is yes and no but does not result in a contradiction. Why you ask? Again, the first time Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, while it was dark, she was not told anything. When Mary Magdalene returned, and the other women arrived, they were all told that Jesus was raised.

What are they told? To tell the disciples to go to Galilee to meet Jesus there, or that Jesus told them while he was still in Galilee that he would rise?

Is there a contradiction here or are both true? Jesus' stating that He would be resurrected is not the same thing as the disciples understanding what that meant or that it registered in their thinking at the time. As early as John 2:22 we find He clearly taught the resurrection of His body (John 2:19-21) but it was not until *after* the event that the disciples understood. Then they, "...remembered that He had said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken." So, yes, He told them while He was still in Galilee that He would be raised and sent the women to tell the disciples to go and meet Him in Galilee. No contradiction. Both are true, one is predictive or prophetic (while He was still in Galilee) and the other confirmation of prophetic fulfillment.

Did they tell the disciples? Mark 16:8. The end. Contrast Matthew 28:8 and Luke 24:9.

The answer is... no and yes. Mary Magdalene ran and told Peter and John the tomb was empty (John 20:1-2). She returned and the other women arrived. Most of the women fled after seeing and hearing the angels and, being gripped with fear, said nothing (Mark 16:8). Mary Magdalene and some of the women met up with Jesus (Matthew 28:8-10; John 20:15-17) and then she and other women went and told the disciples (Luke 24:9-10; John 20:18). Both are true at different times of the resurrection morning and are therefore not contradictory.

Ehrman stated, "You will find dozens of discrepancies in the details. Let me stress: it's not good enough to say that these are all just minor details. The BIG picture is made up of lots and lots of details; if you change all the details, you change the BIG picture." So far he has not provided any examples of actual contradictions. None of these are minor details. He is correct: the BIG picture is made up of lots and lots of details. Cross-checking the details, the *when* and *where* of details in historical narrative is important and builds the BIG picture. Each of Ehrman's above claims demonstrates problems or perhaps biases in his research, reading and teaching on this issue. This raises a question. Is this intentional dishonesty, poor scholarship or something else? That is a question I cannot answer but is worth considering.