

An Examination of the Alleged Contradictions in the Resurrection Narratives

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An Examination of the Alleged Contradictions in the Resurrection Narratives

ALLEGED CONTRADICTION NUMBER ONE: Who first came to the tomb and when did they arrive?

1. Is Matthew in error concerning the NUMBER of women who went to the tomb on Easter morning?

Matthew 28:1—*After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.*

The critics charge that here Matthew reports two women went to the tomb at dawn. The critics allege that this conflicts with the parallel accounts in the other Gospels.

2. Does Mark contradict Matthew when he reports a DIFFERENT number of women going to the tomb on Easter morning at a DIFFERENT time?

Mark 16:1, 2—*When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"*

The critics charge that Mark says *three women* went to the tomb *after sunrise*. The critics claim this is a contradiction because the persons involved and the time of the event differs. Matthew says there were two women at dawn. Mark says there were three women, not two, and he didn't say "at dawn" but "just after sunrise."

3. Because Luke does not identify the women, does he contradict both Matthew and Mark concerning the NUMBER of women who went to the tomb and WHEN this event occurred?

Luke 24:1—*On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.*

The critics charge that Luke's account differs from Matthew's and Mark's. The women are *not identified*, and the time given is not Matthew's "at dawn" or Mark's "just after sunrise" but "*very early in the morning*."

4. Does John contradict the other Gospel writers in reporting only ONE woman went to the tomb at a DIFFERENT time?

John 20:1—*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.*

The critics charge that John's account disagrees with that of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Matthew says *two* women went to the tomb. Mark says *three* women went to the tomb; Luke does *not identify* the number of women. John says only Mary Magdalene, one woman, went to the tomb. Further, John does not say that they went to the tomb “at dawn” (Matthew), or “just after sunrise” (Mark), or “very early in the morning” (Luke), but “while it was still dark.”

5. Do Mark and Luke contradict Matthew and John concerning the ACTIONS of the women?

Mark 16:1—When the Sabbath was over [the women] bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body.

Luke 24:1—... *the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.*

John 19:39b-40—*[Joseph and] Nicodemus brought [spices]... Taking Jesus’ body [from the cross] the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen.*

The critics charge that both Mark and Luke mention the women procured spices so they could anoint Jesus’ body on *Sunday* morning. But Matthew gives no indication of this. Further, John records it was Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who supplied the spices and anointed Jesus’ body on *Friday* evening (John 19:39).

6. Do all the Gospel writers contradict each other concerning the NUMBER of women, the TIME they went to the tomb and the ACTIONS of the women?

After examining the above verses, the critics conclude that the Gospel writers conflict in their accounts of 1) *who* first came to the tomb (the number and identity of the women) and 2) *what time* this occurred and 3) *who supplied the spices* to anoint Jesus’ body and *when* this anointing occurred.

Answering the Objections of the Critics Concerning the Number of Women.

The first objection of the critics is that there are contradictions concerning the *number* of women who went to the tomb. Matthew mentions Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, i.e., two women; Mark mentions Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, i.e., three women; Luke simply mentions “the women,” while John mentions only Mary Magdalene, i.e., one woman.

But writers have every right to select facts according to their purposes. Mark obviously feels it is important to report that Salome was also at the tomb while Matthew does not. Perhaps Salome was the woman, or one of the two women, who reported the events to Mark.

Or, because Matthew learned of this event from a different source which may not have included Salome, he does not mention her. We cannot know the reason why one author selects information another author does not. Such information is simply not given, nor does anyone have the right to expect that it should be. It would make any writer’s job virtually impossible for him to meticulously list all the specific reasons for including the details he did and why he did not include other details.

The critics charge that Luke disagrees with Matthew and Mark because Luke merely mentions “the women.” But this is absurd. Notice, none of the Gospel writers say it was *only* two women, or *only* one woman, or *only* these three women. Each writer describes those he wants to recognize—either because of a specific emphasis he has or because

that is all the information he knows. But none of the writers give wrong or contradictory information. If one of the four writers had said *only* so and so went to the tomb and another writer said *only* somebody else specifically went to the tomb, then we would have a contradiction.

Today, it is perfectly reasonable for two modern newspaper reporters to describe a women's gathering honoring three particular ladies, and to either name the specific individuals present or to refer to one woman representative of the entire group, or to just cite the "honored women" of the occasion. Similarly, in referring only to "the women," Luke does not contradict Matthew and Mark; he is simply less specific.

The critics charge that John contradicts Matthew, Mark and Luke because he mentions only one woman, Mary Magdalene, who went to the tomb.

There are two possibilities. First, as we discuss elsewhere (See Q. 19, 33), all the women set out for the tomb, and Mary arrived first. John simply records the fact of Mary arriving first. We explain why below. Or second, it may be as simple as stating John only chooses to write about Mary even though he could have written about all of them.

But again, John didn't say only Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and no other women. There is no reason why John should not concentrate upon Mary Magdalene if he has reason to do so.

Probably the reasons John concentrates upon Mary Magdalene are because 1) Jesus' first Resurrection appearance was to Mary Magdalene, not one of the apostles according to Mark's appendix (Mark 16:9). 2) Mary had looked into the tomb and seen the two angels (John 20:11-12). 3) Jesus may have appeared to Mary first because He knew of her complete dedication and earnestness in following Him. John has already recorded in 19:25 that Mary was at the cross while Jesus was dying. In John 20:1, she went to His tomb early on Sunday morning. In 20:10-14, Mary remained outside the tomb crying. All of these things reveal how much Mary loved Jesus. 4) In 20:17, Mary was personally commissioned by Jesus to go and tell the disciples the good news.

Anyone who reads John 20:1-18 will see that the entire section stresses the importance of Mary Magdalene: What she did, how she came running to Peter and John, how Mary subsequently met Jesus at the tomb, and how she was commissioned to give a message to the apostles. It is not surprising then that the Apostle John should choose to single out Mary Magdalene in his reporting of these events.

We must also keep in mind that each of the writers learned their information from different sources. Luke records, "It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this [knowledge of the fact of the empty tomb and the angels' message concerning Jesus' Resurrection] to the apostles" (Luke 24:10).

Picture the different women, immediately after their dramatic encounter with the angels, each explaining what she had seen and what she thought was important to any one of the eleven apostles who happened to be standing by her at the moment. This would explain why certain facts are mentioned and other facts are omitted. Luke might have heard a little bit from each of the women or most of it from just one.

Cambridge graduate John Wenham in his book, *The Easter Enigma*, lists the following reasons why Luke and Mark, for example, might have presented different pieces of the total story. Probably, "...Luke's is a straightforward account written from Joanna's point of view [Joanna was a wealthy supporter of Jesus whose husband was 'steward' to Herod

Antipas, ruler of Galilee.] (Luke 8:3; 24:10), whereas Mark is an account written from the point of view of the other three women”....¹ Similarly, John’s account could be written strictly from Mary’s viewpoint.

John might have correctly assumed that the majority of Christians already knew that this group of women went to the tomb. But he decided to share additional details of what had happened to Mary Magdalene which others may not have known.

Indeed, when Luke mentions “the others with them” (Luke 24:10), one could even assume that at that first Easter morning visit to the tomb, more than three women were present. If Luke is describing the women who were actually at the tomb, then there were at least five women (Joanna and “the others,” signifying at least one more person than Salome). It is also possible that the “other women” mentioned by Luke were present and part of those who collectively “told this [event] to the apostles.”

In conclusion, we know that at least three women were present, possibly more. We also can see none of the accounts contradict. None of the writers state “only” a specific number of women were present at the tomb. No modern critic can give a good reason why each writer was not free to select the details he, in fact, chose to record.

Answering the Objections of the Critics Concerning Who First Came to the Tomb.

As noted earlier, John may have concentrated on Mary Magdalene to the exclusion of the other women. But it is more probable that Mary was actually the first person to the tomb. Thus, we believe this second option is preferable. Let’s say all the women had planned to meet at the tomb and left their homes at approximately the same time. Mary arrived first, observed the empty tomb and before her companions arrived, ran to tell Peter and John that the tomb was empty (See Q. 19, 33). Matthew, Mark and Luke could talk generally about all of the women going to the tomb. They would be correct. John could report the fact that Mary reached the tomb first. He would be correct.

If our assumption is valid, this explains John’s account as it stands. Nor does it conflict with anything the other Gospel writers assert. But here we must observe there are unannounced breaks in two of the Gospels. These occur in Mark 16 between verses 1 and 2 and in Matthew 28 between verses 1 and 2 and again between verses 4 and 5. For proof that the Gospel writers employ this abbreviated writing style see Question 16. Acknowledging these breaks permits us to see that Mary was first to the tomb and that the other women came shortly after she left. Further, in Luke 24:9-11, Luke’s inclusion of Mary with the other women who report what happened at the tomb is not in conflict with our reconstruction. (For a probable chronological sequence of events here, see that offered by Geldenhuys in Q. 35).

But there are other views. For example, noted Roman Catholic scholar John Lilly believes that Mary was first to arrive (while it was still dark), but that she was still present when the other women arrived at the tomb. Lilly adopts the view that all the women mentioned by the Gospel writers were, as a group, first to arrive at the tomb. Answering the general question, “Who discovered the empty tomb?”, he states:

We say without a moment’s hesitation: All of them! And perhaps others besides. Each evangelist tells the story in his own particular way with his own particular plan and purpose in view.

St. John evidently wants to lead up to the discovery of the empty tomb by [Peter]

and himself, and as these got the first inkling of what had happened from Magdalene, he introduces her alone, passing over her companions in silence, for there would be no particular point in mentioning them....

St. Matthew does not introduce details which are not strictly necessary, and since according to the Mosaic Law two witnesses were enough to establish a fact, he mentions no others, although he does not deny that others shared in the startling discovery of the empty tomb.

Mark adds the name of Salome to the group of women who went early Sunday morning to the tomb of Jesus. The reason for Mark's mentioning these three women is probably that he has already told us that they assisted at a distance at the crucifixion of Jesus, and his mention of them at the tomb on Sunday morning is designed to show that their love and devotion were not extinguished by the horrible death of their Master on the cross.²

Answering the Objections of the Critics Concerning When the Tomb Was Visited.

The critics allege that contradictions exist concerning the specific *time* the women went to the tomb. After all, didn't Matthew say "at dawn," while Mark says "just after sunrise"?

But consider modern reporting of Easter "Sunrise" Services. Who would charge a reporter with error because he stated the events began "at dawn" while another reporter said that they began "just after sunrise"? "At dawn" includes "just after sunrise." Even 20th century reporters do not use scientifically precise chronology in their reporting; why should we expect it of the Gospel authors? Further, what if the two reporters are discussing different "beginnings"—preliminary events vs. the official start of the service? Both phrases, "at dawn" and "just after sunrise," can involve a significant time span. If we say we went to the beach "at dawn," the hearer understands that we could mean anything from several minutes before sunrise till several minutes after sunrise. Thus, there is no contradiction between Matthew and Mark.

The critics next charge that Luke disagrees with Matthew and Mark because Luke says, "very early in the morning," not "at dawn" per Matthew or "just after sunrise" per Mark. But again, "very early in the morning" includes the descriptions given by both Matthew and Mark. In fact, the phrase could refer to any time after 1 a.m.! When one gets up "very early in the morning," this can include a significant span of time, certainly at least half an hour before dawn until just after sunrise. Therefore, Luke does not contradict anything Matthew or Mark says.

But the critics charge that with John we certainly have a contradiction. John says, "While it was still dark." This phrase the critics allege is certainly not compatible with "at dawn" or "just after sunrise" when obviously it would not be "still dark." But consider again the normal use of language. "While it was still dark" *can* describe conditions that exist "at dawn." Everyone who has been up "at dawn" certainly knows it is not yet the full light of day. In fact, depending on weather conditions, it can be quite dark even "at dawn" or "just after sunrise."

If we only consider the manner in which language is typically used, we can see that there is no necessary contradiction between Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Even the most "discrepant" of the accounts—"just after sunrise" and "while it was still dark"—can easily refer to the same period of time.

There are other facts that must be considered which further indicate there is no contra-

diction between these accounts. What if each writer is describing a certain period of time at which the women either left their houses, or traveled, or the point in time when they actually arrived at the tomb? Dr. Gleason Archer carefully examined the original language used by the writers and concluded:

They [the women] apparently started their journey from the house in Jerusalem while it was still dark (*skotias eti ouses*), even though it was already early morning (*proi*) (John 20:1). But by the time they arrived [at the tomb], dawn was glimmering in the East (*te epiphoskouse*) that Sunday morning (*eis mian sabbaton*) (Matthew 28:1). (Mark 16:2, Luke 24:1, John 20:1 all use the dative: *te mia ton sabbaton*.) Mark 16:2 adds that the tip of the sun had actually appeared above the horizon (*anateilantos tou heliou*—aorist participle; the Bezae codex uses the present participle, *anatellontos*, implying “while the sun was rising”).³

So, if one reads the accounts carefully and takes note of the fact that the women were on a journey to the tomb, not only is there no basis to assume a contradiction, one actually wonders why anyone would accuse these writers of such a thing. Obviously, there could be many unstated reasons why each writer would include different details of the same event. Because he does, this does not show contradiction; rather, it shows truthfulness in his reporting.

Lilly not only observes the harmony existing among the four accounts but also supplies an additional reason explaining why they differ: the delay of certain of the women to purchase spices. This would require additional time and explain the difference between John’s Gospel and the others. In this event, Mary herself would have arrived at the tomb alone, before the other women.

It should be noted that all four evangelists agree on the day: it was Sunday; that they all agree on the time: it was very early in the morning. The only discrepancy is that Mark tells us that the sun had already risen, while John says that Mary Magdalene went to the sepulcher while it was still dark. Pere Lagrange has an obvious solution: “It is clear that in Mark’s account the women are delayed by the purchase of spices. We may suppose then that Magdalene, leaving this matter to the other women, went alone and much in advance of the other women to the tomb,” even while it was yet dark, and that the other women who had stopped to purchase ointments did not reach the sepulcher until the sun had risen.⁴

John Wenham provides an overall succinct summary, proving that there is no contradiction concerning the time element in the four narratives:

There is perhaps no need to insist upon any distinction between Matthew’s “toward the dawn”, Mark’s “very early”, Luke’s “early dawn” and John’s “while it was still dark.” Darkness and light are relative terms and it would be perfectly possible, and not inaccurate, for one person to describe the time as “early dawn” which another described as “still dark.”

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.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the words “went” in Matthew, Mark and Luke translate the same verb as the “came” in John and that either translation would be possible in any of the cases, it depending on what standpoint the writer is thought to

be adopting. If John is thinking of Mary Magdalene setting off from Bethany, the translation “went to the tomb early, while it was still dark” would be precisely accurate.

Similarly, Matthew’s “toward the dawn... went” suggests the same Bethany standpoint—the two Marys started their journey just before dawn. Mark’s “very early” could well represent Peter’s recollection of the Marys and Salome leaving John’s house and Luke’s “at early dawn” would fit well enough the departure of Joanna and “Susanna” from the Hasmonean palace.

These distinctions may be too fine, but we undoubtedly get a consistent and coherent picture if we see the first departures as being in the dark and the last arrivals as being before [full] sunrise.⁵

Whether we are considering the number of women at the tomb or the time element, it is clear that there is no contradiction between the Gospel accounts.

Answering the Objections of the Critics Concerning Who Supplied the Spices to Anoint Jesus’ Body and When This Occurred.

When Mark and Luke report that the women bought spices for anointing Jesus’ body on Sunday morning, and John records that Nicodemus supplied the spices and applied them to Jesus’ body on Friday evening, the critics claim this is another contradiction.

John records that on Friday evening (before the Sabbath began), “Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, and strips of linen. This was in accordance with the Jewish burial custom” (John 19:39-40).

But according to Luke certain unnamed women had followed Jesus from Galilee. They saw Him crucified, saw the tomb and how the body was laid and “went home and prepared spices and perfumes” (Luke 23:56). They rested on the Sabbath, but on Sunday morning they brought the spices to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body (Luke 24:1).

According to Mark 16:1-2, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome purchased additional spices and went to the tomb on Sunday morning to anoint Jesus’ body.

This is not a contradiction because although the women were intending to anoint Jesus’ body with the spices, they never had the opportunity to do so. When they arrived at the grave, the body was already absent and Christ was resurrected.

Why the women wanted to anoint Jesus’ body *after* Joseph had already done so is probably easily answered. Lilly observes, “Decent burial according to the standards of the day was the most highly cherished and ardently desired lot of every Jew; its privation was deemed a frightful misfortune. Relatives and friends of the deceased considered it a grave obligation to discharge this office on behalf of their departed.”⁶ Most likely, the women felt that in the rush after the crucifixion to move Jesus’ body, it was not properly prepared before the Sabbath had started. They feared some important element might have been overlooked.

Further, the critic charges that only Mark and Luke mention that the women brought spices, whereas Matthew and John do not mention this at all. But why should anyone consider this a contradiction?

All four Gospel writers would have known that the body of Jesus required anointing according to Jewish burial custom. It is perfectly reasonable for two to mention this fact and the other two to assume it.

There is no contradiction concerning the anointing of Jesus' body. Both Wenham⁷ and Lilly⁸ further discuss these passages and prove that there is no error or contradiction in them.

We must also remember that the Gospel writers are independent reporters of these events. The hallmark of independent reporting is differences in content.

For example, in a court of law, it is always true that four witnesses describing a traffic accident (or a crime) will each supply different information. Characteristically, witnesses notice and report matters which are unique, relevant or important to them. But no judge would ever instruct a jury to ignore what a dependable witness says merely because different details were reported.

The same is true for the Gospel writers. Each one devotes differing amounts of space and detail to the women coming to the tomb. Matthew and Mark supply 8 verses each (Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8), yet both mention things the other does not. Luke gives 10 verses (Luke 24:1-10) while John gives only 2 verses (John 20:1-2).

It is unreasonable to assume that every Gospel writer would record the event in precisely the same way, giving precisely the same details. This would be evidence of collusion, not independent testimony.

Consider the illustration of a group of employees at an important business luncheon. Ask each employee to file a report of the event later that day. One may recount how taken he was with the day's speaker. Another may recall how impressed she was with the good service and quality of the food. One other individual may remember the important things discussed over lunch; another only how pretty the waitresses were. If we were to take all the reports of the employees and compare them, would we charge that they contradicted one another merely because they listed different details according to what impressed them most?

There is no reason to demand that the Gospel writers must report the same detail. When the critic charges contradictions exist merely because the accounts differ, he is being unfair. He is holding the Gospel writers to a standard to which he would not subject anyone else, least of all himself.

7. Do the critics today still use these alleged contradictions to deny the Resurrection accounts?

Modern liberal theologians and rationalistic, atheistic skeptics agree when it comes to the alleged contradictions in the Resurrection narratives. Virtually every liberal theologian and/or skeptic on The John Ankerberg Show commenting upon the issue has either denied the Resurrection of Christ or cast doubts upon the narratives because of these alleged contradictions.

For example, we shall now examine the beliefs and accusations of some contemporary critics who have appeared on our show.

8. Does Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong teach the Gospel narratives are greatly confused?

The controversial Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong stated in his debate with the late Evangelical scholar Dr. Walter Martin, “There is great confusion in the Gospel narratives themselves about a lot of the details of [the] Resurrection—great confusion! You cannot harmonize Luke with John, for example.”⁹

In his book, *The Easter Moment*, Bishop Spong expands on his beliefs that the differences and alleged contradictions in the Resurrection accounts cast doubt upon the Resurrection itself:

Something so very basic to the Christian proclamation as the Resurrection is thus the subject of great confusion and contradiction even in the writings of the gospels, the primary written Christian witnesses. Let me summarize the points of conflict.

Who went to the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week? Paul says nothing about anyone’s going. Mark says that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went. Luke says that Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, Joanna, and some other women went. Matthew says that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary *only* went. John says that Mary Magdalene *alone* went.¹⁰

9. Why is Bishop Spong wrong in claiming great confusion exists in the Resurrection narratives?

Bishop Spong charges there is great confusion in the Resurrection narratives. But the evidence shows that the confusion may lie with the critic. We have just demonstrated above that, not only is there no confusion concerning who first visited the tomb, there is no contradiction concerning the time the women went to the tomb.

As to Bishop Spong’s specific charges, we should note, first of all, that there is no necessity for Paul to mention the visitors to the tomb on Easter morning. Paul was converted to the Christian faith several years after the Resurrection. It was, therefore, natural for him to leave the discussion of the particular happenings of Easter morning to those who were close to or participants in the actual events.

Further, notice that Bishop Spong is putting words in the writers’ mouths that they never stated. Bishop Spong claims Matthew and John use such words as “only” or “alone” in referring to specific people who went to the tomb. But anyone who reads the texts can plainly see that Matthew never said that it was *only* Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who went to the tomb. He merely mentions these two women without excluding others. Also, John does not say that *only* Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. As we have seen above, he selects her from among the other women for reasons central to his purpose.

10. Do critics often misconstrue exactly what the Resurrection narratives claim?

Unfortunately, critics often do misrepresent what the Bible really teaches. For example, Central American diplomat and agnostic John K. Naland, in his debate on The John Ankerberg Show with theologian and lawyer Dr. John Warwick Montgomery, also claimed the following concerning the first visit to the tomb: “The first question: Who went to the tomb? Was it Mary Magdalene *alone*? Was it Mary Magdalene with another woman? Was it Mary Magdalene with three women? Was it Mary Magdalene with five women?”¹¹

Here we see Mr. Naland does not have his facts straight. Notice again that no Gospel

account mentions only Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. No account mentions only Mary Magdalene and another woman came to the empty tomb, or that only three other women came to the tomb.

In considering all of the above material, what may we conclude? We must conclude that no contradiction exists between the number of women who went to the tomb on Easter morning and when this event occurred.

If three or more women went as a group to the tomb, then each writer could focus on the particular women he wanted to emphasize. Each writer could focus on a particular woman, women, or the group as a whole according to his purposes.

Further, if the women lived different distances from the tomb, then when they each started their journey, the time factor would have been slightly different. Notice, each writer was free to report the time the women left their homes and started their journey, the time during any part of the journey itself, or the time when they arrived at the tomb.

Finally, each Gospel writer could have received the information from which he wrote his account from one or more of the women. Each woman would naturally tell the event from her perspective, mentioning the details that seemed relevant to her and omitting the others.

ALLEGED CONTRADICTION NUMBER TWO: The angels at the tomb: How many angels were at the tomb—one or two—where and in what position were they located—and were they angels or men?

11. Is Matthew wrong in saying there was only ONE angel OUTSIDE the tomb?

*Matthew 28:2-4—There was a violent earthquake, for **an angel** of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and **sat** on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.*

The critics claim that Matthew refers to only *one* angel who was *outside* the tomb and that this contradicts the other Gospel narratives.

12. Does Mark contradict Matthew in recording there was not ONE ANGEL OUTSIDE the tomb but a young MAN INSIDE the tomb?

*Mark 16:4-5—But when they [the women] looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a **young man** dressed in a white robe **sitting on the right side**, and they were alarmed.*

The critics claim the account of Mark contradicts that of Matthew. Matthew mentions *one angel outside the tomb*, but Mark mentions not one angel but *a young man* who, further, was not *outside* but *inside* the tomb.

13. Does Luke contradict both Matthew and Mark by saying there were TWO men, not OUTSIDE, but INSIDE the tomb?

*Luke 24:2-5—They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly **two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning** stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground,...*

The critics claim that Luke contradicts both Matthew and Mark. Matthew says that there is *one* angel *outside* the tomb, while Mark mentions not an *angel* but a young *man* *inside* the tomb. But Luke mentions not *one* angel or *one* man but *two men*. Further, Luke has the men *inside* the tomb, not *outside* it.

14. Does John contradict Matthew, Mark and Luke in saying there were TWO angels INSIDE the tomb who appear ONLY to Mary?

John 20:11-12—... *but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.*

The critics claim that John's account only confuses matters further because John refers to two angels who appear *only* to Mary Magdalene. Further, in John there are *two angels* *inside* the tomb. Thus, the critics declare unequivocally that the number of beings (one or two), their exact nature (men or angels), and their location are hopelessly confused and simply cannot be reconciled.

15. Do all four of the Gospel writers contradict each other in describing the LOCATION and POSITION of the angels?

The critics assert that not only the location but also the position of the beings is contradictory. Matthew has a single angel *sitting outside* the tomb; Mark has a young man *sitting* at the *right side* of the tomb; Luke has two men inside the tomb *standing* beside the women; John has two angels in the tomb, *both seated*, one where Jesus' head had been and the other where Jesus' feet had been.

Answering the Objections of the Critics Concerning the Number of Angels.

In harmonizing the Gospel accounts, we should keep in mind, if two or more angels are present at various times, they can be in a variety of locations and positions both inside and outside the tomb.

If two angels are present, there is nothing contradictory or false about mentioning the existence of one angel. If two angels are present, obviously one angel is present. It is a contradiction if one writer specifically states that only one angel was present, and another writer flatly contradicts this statement by asserting that two angels were present at the same moment. But if anyone examines the accounts, he will see that this is not the case. In fact, in honor of Christ's Resurrection, many different angels could have been present at the tomb.

Answering the Objections of the Critics Concerning Whether the Persons Were Men or Angels.

Were the persons men or angels?

The Gospel writers seem to report different "beings" at the tomb. Matthew reports "an angel." Mark reports "a young man." Luke reports "two men." John reports "two angels." Do these accounts conflict concerning the nature of the beings reported—i.e., were they earthly men or heavenly angels? How do we respond to the critics who claim these accounts conflict?

When the Gospel writers refer to angels as men, they are describing how the angels

appeared to them. Whenever angels appear to men in the Scriptures, they are almost always said to take the form of men. Nor is this surprising; it seems to be a deliberate attempt to reduce the anxiety level of those they contact. But they may reveal that they are angels in some unique way as they did in Matthew 28:2-3 or they may keep their angelic nature entirely hidden, as is plain from Hebrews 13:2. Therefore, it is not contradictory for the four Gospel writers to refer to the angels as men or as angels. Both are correct.

Regardless, Matthew specifically states it was an angel of the Lord. When angels are described as men, there is really little doubt as to the angelic nature of the men.

Luke, although describing their appearance as “men,” also clearly identifies them as angels for he notes they were “in clothes that gleamed like lightning.” Throughout the Bible angels are many times described as “men.” In fact, sometimes in the very same passage angels are first described as “men” and later as “angels.”

The Scriptures, both Old and New Testament, refer to angels in this way. It is not unique to these passages. Any critic who says this is a contradiction has not read the rest of the Bible (Genesis 18:1-3,22; 19:1,5,11-13,15; Judges 13:3,8,9-11,13; Luke 2:9-10; Hebrews 13:2).

Answering the Objections of the Critics Concerning the Location of the Angels.

Are we or are we not going to accept the existence of “beings” called angels? If we do accept their existence, then isn’t it also logical to assume that they may come and go as they please and appear and disappear as they please?

If the critics are going to argue the number of angels reported and the positions they were seen to be in, then why should they be surprised if the eyewitnesses report that they are in different positions at different times? If one assumes that “beings” called angels do exist, then isn’t it also reasonable to assume that even angels move at some time during the day? And if angels exist and can seemingly appear and disappear at will, the Gospel writers may all be honestly reporting these phenomena. We will speak more about this as we answer other questions. Now let’s examine the location of the angels.

16. Does Matthew conflict with Mark’s description concerning the LOCATION of the angels?

In Matthew’s account, by the time the women arrived, the guards had already been frightened away by the angel. Then the angel proceeded inside the tomb so as not to frighten the women away:

Matthew intends us to understand that the angel rolled back the stone, not to let the body out, but to let the witnesses in, in proof of the resurrection. He sat in awesome splendor on the great gravestone, making it clear that no one could replace it. He sat there to frighten the guard away, and then presumably went inside not to frighten the women unnecessarily. He told them that *they* were not to be afraid.¹²

Why did the angels go inside the tomb? Again, probably so as to not frighten the women and also because this is where the women would naturally go, observing that the rock had been rolled back. It seems the angels wanted the women to enter the tomb to observe the absence of Jesus’ body. Now, does Matthew conflict with Mark’s description concerning the locations of the angels?

Mark is clear that the women “*entered the tomb*” and there saw an angel “on the right

side" (Mark 16:5). Luke is also very clear that the women *entered* the tomb: "They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when *they entered*, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus" (Luke 24:2, 3). Further, Mark states the women went inside the tomb ("as they entered the tomb"), and tells us the angel helped the women by giving them the same message recorded by Matthew, "see the place where they laid him."

From this it can be seen that the angel's "request" in Matthew to "come and see the place where he lay" is not a request for the women outside the tomb to come inside the tomb, but to take more specific notice of the exact location of Jesus' body and to note that it was no longer there. Tombs in those days were not small body-sized graves, but were often large sepulchers the size of a small modern room. The angels' request is appropriate if it is made from inside the tomb.

There is no reason to assume that the angel's message in Matthew was given outside the tomb since: 1) Mark and Luke both record the message as being given inside the tomb and 2) Matthew has compressed his narrative, leaving out some of the details Mark and Luke include.

The only difference between Matthew and Mark is that Matthew does not include the details of the women *entering* the tomb. But this omission is the kind of omission that all of us make every day.

How many of us have said to a friend, "Hey, let's go to lunch. We'll get some burgers at McDonald's." The fact that the incident of *driving to* McDonald's is omitted does not suggest that lunch was not eaten at McDonald's.

That Matthew does not specify the location at which the angel delivered his message to the women hardly proves it did not occur inside the tomb, particularly when all the other writers say it did. That's why no contradiction exists between Matthew and Mark.

Here, the critics wrongly assume that Matthew has stated the angel *always* remained outside the tomb. Clearly, the angel was outside the tomb at one point. But Matthew never states anywhere that the angel was confined to existing outside the tomb and could not change locations in order to speak to the women.

It is very important to understand how Matthew has recorded specific events in his book. His account of what took place at the tomb concerning the angels appearing, the guards being frightened away, the women coming to the tomb, and what happened next are all compressed. How do we know? By comparing what the other Gospel writers say.

Thus, sometimes, even though Matthew relates his story of events with no visible break in time, from other sources we can determine that one event must be separated from another by a period of time. Modern writers do this every day.

When the President of the United States delivers a message to the nation, followed by a press conference the next day in an adjoining room, reporters who failed to mention that between the President's two appearances he had dinner, met with advisors, and slept, would hardly be considered negligent in doing their jobs. They simply compressed the events to report what they believed important. Sure, they left out some details. But everyone who writes does the same.¹³

Matthew's narrative of the events which took place at the tomb is one such example. When the guards were frightened away by the appearance of the angel (Matthew 28:2-4), this is actually separate from the next event Matthew records of the angel appearing and speaking to the women who came to the tomb (Matthew 28:5-8). As we shall see, there is

good reason to believe “gaps” exist between the events recorded in this passage.

In brief, there are “unidentified breaks” or “unspoken breaks” in Matthew’s narrative. What proof is there that Matthew compressed events here and is not describing every occurrence that took place at and around the empty tomb? The answer is that if it can be shown that Matthew compresses events in other portions of his Gospel, then we must hold open the possibility that he did the same in this portion of the Gospel, especially when the other Gospel writers supply the missing information.

To cite one illustration of Matthew compressing his story elsewhere, let’s compare Matthew’s account of the events identified as Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple with Mark’s account of the same events.

Here is the order of events as given by Matthew and Mark:

MATTHEW:

Day One

- 1) Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:8-10).
- 2) Jesus enters the temple and cleanses it (Mathew 21:12-16).
- 3) End of day one, at night Jesus leaves Jerusalem and goes back and rests in Bethany (Matthew 21:17).

Day Two

- 1) Matthew says, “early the next morning” (Matthew 21:18) Jesus leaves Bethany to go back to Jerusalem. On the way to Jerusalem He sees a fig tree, curses it, and “Immediately the fig tree withered” (Matthew 21:19).
- 2) The same day, Jesus enters the temple in Jerusalem and argues with the chief priests (Matthew 21:23).

Day Three

MARK:

Day One

- 1) Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:8-11).
- 2) Jesus looks around Jerusalem, leaves the temple and the city, goes and rests in Bethany.

Day Two

- 1) Jesus leaves Bethany, on the way sees the fig tree and curses it (Mark 11:12-14).
- 2) That same day enters Jerusalem and cleanses the temple (Mark 11:19).
- 3) After cleansing the temple, He argues with the chief priests (Mark 11:17-18).

Day Three

- 1) The third day, during the morning on His walk toward Jerusalem, the disciples discover the withered fig tree (Mark 11:20-25).
- 2) Jesus again returns to Jerusalem and argues with the chief priests (Mark 11:27-33).

In summary, even though these occurred over three days, Matthew's narrative reads as if they took place on only two days.

Matthew's narrative, at first glance, leads us to think that on day one Jesus enters triumphantly into Jerusalem and on the same day, cleanses the temple. It is only when we read Mark's account, that we see Matthew has compressed the details.

What did he leave out? On day one Matthew skips the night's rest Jesus had in Bethany after His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Matthew does not report, "The next day Jesus again went into Jerusalem from Bethany and at that time cleansed the temple." He simply goes on in his account and describes Jesus cleansing the temple immediately after His Triumphal Entry. There is no pause or break in his narrative, but the unidentified breaks must be recognized.

Otherwise, someone reading Matthew's account might conclude there is a contradiction between Matthew and Mark. But Matthew did not say, "All of these events happened on two specific chronological days"; rather, he is reporting events he chooses to without mentioning what specific time, or what specific day, they occurred. Only when we compare Matthew's account with Mark do we see that these events are spread out over a three-day period of time.

Matthew's compressing of the events helps us understand that there may be periods of time in between the events described of which Matthew is giving us no details. If we understand how Matthew compresses events in his narrative throughout his Gospel, it will help us answer the questions, "How many angels were at the tomb?" and "Were the angels inside or outside the tomb?" The only way we will know what happened in the periods of time Matthew does not record is to read the account of the other Gospel writers.

Obviously, Matthew did not record the angel going into the tomb. But it is clear from the other Gospel accounts that after the angel appeared and frightened the guards away, he proceeded into the tomb. It is also clear that another angel appeared in the tomb with him.

We are now prepared to examine what the other Gospel writers said happened at the tomb.

17. Does Luke contradict Matthew and Mark concerning the LOCATION of the angels?

What does Luke tell us about the location of the angels? Luke records that there are two angels who are *inside the tomb*. He further records that the two men suddenly appeared *beside the women*. Critics say this conflicts with the account in Mark which says that when the women entered the tomb they saw an angel "sitting on the right side."

We need to recognize:

We know too little about the manner of Angel appearances to be sure that Luke and John mention the same two Angels, or that Matthew and Mark mention the same one.... Where, out of two or more, only one is spokesman, he is necessarily remembered. The other or others may be easily ignored or forgotten. It is an exaggeration to call such differences discrepancies.

This suggests the very plausible idea that instead of one or two angels there was probably a whole legion of them present to honor their Lord in his greatest moment of triumph on earth. First one, then another appears in visible form.

Neither do they have to appear always in the same place and in the same position. At one moment they may be seated outside the sepulcher and the next be inside the sepulcher in a standing position. If they remained in statuesque immobility, the holy women might well have doubted that they were real, living beings.¹⁴

We should also keep in mind since we are dealing with angels, unlike men, angels can make themselves visible or invisible at will.

Mark says that as the women *entered the tomb* they saw an angel *sitting* on the *right side*. However, Luke says the women were inside the tomb when “suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning *stood beside* them” (Luke 24:4).

18. Did the women see ONE angel to the right in a SITTING position or did the TWO angels suddenly appear to them STANDING?

The Greek word for “standing” may clear up the problem of the two descriptions given about the angels’ positions. According to Arndt and Gingrich, in their authoritative *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, the standard lexicon concerning the Greek words in the New Testament, the word Luke uses in Luke 24:4 that is translated “stood by” (*epestesan*), can also be translated “came upon” or “appeared.” In Luke 2:9 we read, “An angel of the Lord *appeared* [This is the same word used in Luke 24:4 about the angels] to them, and the glory of the Lord shown round about them.” Therefore, Luke is probably stressing the suddenness of the angels’ appearing, and Mark only tells us that when they appeared they were seated, a position that would be calculated to put the women at ease.

Cambridge graduate John Wenham agrees with this:

The translation “stood by”, which would bring Luke into contradiction with Mark’s “sitting”, cannot be insisted on. The word [stood] is frequently used, meaning “to appear to”, often implying suddenness.

When the angels appeared in the little cave room, they may well have appeared in a sitting position, very much as Mary Magdalene saw them on her later visit—a position calculated to minimize the alarm that their sudden presence was bound to cause.

Matthew and Mark do not make it clear that the angels appeared after the women had entered, but both stress the awesomeness of the figures they encountered. One might have inferred even from their accounts that had the women seen such dazzling figures from the doorway they would have been too frightened to have ventured in.

But only Luke says explicitly that the women had gone into the tomb before the appearance of the angels [Mark refers to “as they entered”]. The mention of two men is one of the many differences between Mark and Luke which makes them look like two independent narratives....

We have argued that he [the angel] had withdrawn into the cave before the women arrived, so that his “Come, see the place where he lay” is not an invitation to enter the tomb, but to put away their fears and take a close look at the grave space (now empty save for burial linen).¹⁵

Piecing together the data to obtain the whole story, it would seem that there were two angels, one more prominent than the other.

They (or he) first lifted the great stone and rolled it from the entrance and then sat upon it until the guards had left. They then retired inside and were invisible when the first women arrived. They made themselves visible to them and delivered their message. When Peter and John arrived they were again invisible [or gone], but they had reappeared when Mary Magdalene looked into the tomb [at her second visit].¹⁶

19. Does John's account of the angels' LOCATION in the tomb conflict with Matthew, Mark, and Luke?

The critics claim that John's account of the angels conflicts with Matthew, Mark and Luke in that the two angels are seated, one at the head and the other at the foot of where Jesus had lain (John 20:12).

The critics are right. Two angels speak to Mary from inside the tomb at the locations stated. However, the critics are wrong in claiming this is the same event described by Matthew, Mark or Luke. Why? Because a careful reading of the text clearly proves this.

John and Mark apparently both agree that Mary Magdalene was the first person Jesus appeared to (Mark 16:9; John 20:14). Yet, according to Mark's account, Jesus must have appeared to Mary sometime other than when her companions, Mary the mother of James and Salome, came to the tomb early Easter Sunday morning (Mark 16:2). Reading Mark 16:2, it sounds as if Mary was with her companions, but it brings up the question, "How could Mark say Mary Magdalene was the first to see Jesus if her companions were with her?" The answer is that Jesus appeared to Mary at her *second* visit to the tomb, not her first.

Mark states they all came to the tomb early Sunday morning. If we assume Mary arrived earlier than her companions, there is no contradiction in what Mark and John are saying. Mary probably arrived early and intended to wait for her friends. But after she arrived, she noticed the stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty; she immediately set off to tell Peter and John (John 20:1, 2).

Meanwhile, her companions, the other Mary and Salome, arrived at the tomb and the angels appeared to them (Mark 16:1). The lead angel tells them to report the good news to the disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead. The women leave. A short time later Peter and John arrive after hearing the news from Mary that the tomb was empty.

Mary follows Peter and John back to the tomb, although she trails behind them. (Notice, because she had run from the tomb to tell the apostles, she was already tired; also, the apostles themselves ran to the tomb after she told them it was empty. John even outran Peter (John 20:2,4).

By the time Mary returns to the tomb, Peter and John have already left (John 20:10). All alone Mary stands in front of the tomb, begins to cry, and then looks into the tomb, whereupon she sees two angels, one seated where Jesus' head had been, the other seated where Jesus' feet had been. Then Jesus appears to her.

In conclusion, this appearance of the two angels to Mary is a different account entirely than the event described by Matthew, Mark and Luke. Again, Mary's encounter with the angels is after Peter and John left to go and tell the others what had happened (John 20:10). Looking at these events this way, John's account is clearly complementary and not contradictory to Matthew, Mark or Luke.

20. Does Luke's recording of TWO angels contradict Matthew's and Mark's recording of ONE angel?

We must remember that both Matthew and Mark are dealing with the same event. But neither writer is obligated to include every detail.

Mark simply refers to the fact that there is an angel the women encounter sitting on the right side who proceeds to give them a message. Mark compresses the story here as Matthew has done in places in his account. Luke, on the other hand, supplies more details about this event. He states in addition to the angel that speaks, there is a second angel present. Apparently the second angel does not say anything.

Concerning the number of angels recorded by Luke (two) and Matthew and Mark (one) Wenham states:

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. Contradiction would only be created if the writer who mentioned the one should go on to say explicitly that there was only one.

In a scene where one person is the chief speaker or actor it would often be perfectly natural to omit reference to the irrelevant fact that he had a companion.... It needs to be remembered that we are dealing with two *descriptions* of an event, and not with two witnesses replying to cross examination.

If witnesses, who had been in the tomb at the same time, had been asked independently, "Precisely how many men did you see?" and had given different answers, that would have shown one or the other to be unreliable. But these witnesses are not answering the question "How many?", they are giving (as all descriptions must be) incomplete descriptions of a complex event.¹⁷

In conclusion, even though Matthew, Mark and Luke have recorded differing details concerning the number of angels and their activities, the accounts do not contradict. Rather, they are complementary. Again, this does not show collusion but rather truthfulness in reporting. The writers have merely reported the events selectively, as all writers do.

Yet contemporary critics continue to discount what the Scriptures report concerning the story of the angels who were present at the Resurrection. Let's examine one theory of a well-known critic.

21. Is Hugh J. Schonfield correct in his theory called *THE PASSOVER PLOT*?

(See Q. 23)

22. Why does Schonfield believe the angels were simply invented by Christians and falsely put into the story of the empty tomb?

(See Q. 23)

23. Why does Schonfield think the empty tomb is not good evidence for Jesus' Resurrection?

In his infamous book, *The Passover Plot*, Hugh J. Schonfield claims the Resurrection accounts evolved and were later doctored by editors. According to Schonfield, Jesus never rose. Mary Magdalene and others falsely concluded Christ had resurrected on purely circumstantial grounds, not evidential ones.

Schonfield states that Mary Magdalene was an “unbalanced” person. When she visited the tomb, she was really in a “half-crazed condition.”¹⁸ She did not really see angels there, but only an unknown person whom she thought was an angel. Later, the church came to accept her totally false story.

Schonfield speculates that the story of the angels may have evolved as a way of giving divine credence to the story of the empty tomb:

The Gospel accounts... had acquired in telling and retelling many legendary features....

According to Mark's Gospel the man who was seen had been a young man in a white robe who had told the women [including Mary] that Jesus had risen....

All that registered at the time was that the body of Jesus was gone and that a strange man was there. Trembling and unnerved they fled, and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid....

The story progressed in the light of belief in the resurrection of Jesus. The young man became an angel, and then two angels.¹⁹

Further, Schonfield argues that in his view this man was the one who gave the potion to Jesus at the cross. The same man allegedly helped take Jesus' body to the tomb and later moved the body.

Schonfield believes Mary did tell Peter and John about the empty tomb. When the three of them returned to the tomb, Mary stayed there where she encountered the gardener. Because of her “unbalanced” mental condition, she incorrectly concluded the man was the risen Jesus, and ran to tell the disciples that now she had actually seen Him alive.²⁰ Because the tomb was empty, everyone else falsely concluded that Jesus was risen from the dead.

Schonfield states:

Mary rushed back to the disciples with her tale of having seen the Master. So another ingredient was added to the story.

There had been the empty tomb, the man seen by the woman who was converted into an angel, the conviction of the Beloved Disciple, and now the man who had spoken to Mary of Magdala had become an appearance of Jesus himself.²¹

24. What six false assumptions did Schonfield make in *THE PASSOVER PLOT*?

First, no evidence whatever exists that Mary was in a “half-crazed condition,” and that she was “unbalanced”.²² This is Schonfield's false assumption based upon the fact that Mary had seven demons driven from her (Luke 8:2). If this first assumption is wrong, the rest of his theory crumbles as well. All of the evidence tells us Mary was quite normal after her exorcism and certainly so on Easter morning. Her recovery is consistent with that which occurs through modern exorcisms.²³

Second, Mary never expected to see Jesus. She would never have identified the gardener, an unknown stranger, as her beloved Lord and Master when she did not *expect* to see Jesus. Thus, the record shows that even when Mary saw Jesus, she had a hard time believing it was He (John 20:14-15). She knew Jesus was dead. And absolutely *no* one mistakes a complete stranger for a well-known friend, especially when they have just attended the funeral of that same friend.

Third, Schonfield's assumptions that an unknown man or men could somehow remove Jesus' body from a guarded tomb without being noticed would have been impossible (Matthew 27:65-66).

Fourth, we have already seen that the strange "young man" inside the tomb was really an angel. Luke himself tells us the men were, in fact, angels by describing them as having clothes "that gleamed like lightning." Also, the women's response of fear and bowing their heads would have been inappropriate if they thought that only some strange man was inside the tomb.

Fifth, it is impossible that the story could have evolved in the manner Schonfield suggests. Why? Schonfield contends that Jesus never really resurrected from the dead. At *best*, He survived the crucifixion and later died.²⁴ Thus, there would have been no Resurrection appearances. But this cannot explain subsequent events.

Would merely an empty tomb *without* the Resurrection appearances have been sufficient evidence to convert the skeptical and downtrodden disciples to a belief that Jesus had risen from the dead? The simple fact is that it not only took the empty tomb, but more importantly, the numerous Resurrection appearances to convince them. The church could never have started with only an unexplained empty tomb.

Sixth, why would an unknown man or men move or steal the body of Jesus in the first place? Schonfield admits, "It was a capital crime to tamper with tombs and interfere with the bodies of the dead. An imperial decree found at Nazareth in 1870, which may date from the reign of the Emperor Claudius (AD. 41-54), witnesses to this."²⁵

Finally, even Schonfield himself expresses doubts about the events he outlines: "We are nowhere claiming for our reconstruction that it represents what actually happened, but that on the evidence we have it may be fairly close to the truth."²⁶ But the problem is that Schonfield dismisses all the evidence first and then speculates as to what happened.

His theory demands that we believe all of the disciples were so anxious to accept the idea of the Resurrection (which the evidence itself denies; for example, the disciples were skeptics) that they never even bothered to carefully check out the facts.

The Passover Plot is simply not believable. This is one reason that scholars have almost universally rejected the book as little more than implausible speculation.

ALLEGED CONTRADICTION NUMBER THREE: Do the message of the angels to the women at the tomb and the women's response conflict in the Gospel accounts?

To resolve this problem, first, we will cite Matthew, Mark and Luke's accounts, noting the critics' charges for each. After this, we will show why Matthew, Mark and Luke do not contradict one another. The Apostle John does not record this event.

25. Do Matthew, Mark and Luke CONTRADICT each other in reporting the angelic message?

Matthew 28:5-8—*The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and **tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’** Now I have told you.” So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, **and ran to tell his disciples.***

The critics claim this account conflicts with the accounts given by the other two Gospel writers who mention this event. Matthew has one angel delivering a message to the women, who are then supposed to give that message to the disciples only. The critics claim this is different from the account in Mark where “Peter” is also mentioned and in Luke where *two* angels deliver a message without any mention that it is to be delivered to the disciples. Further, the response of the women in Matthew differs from that in Mark and Luke.

26. Does Mark CONFLICT with Matthew concerning the message of the angels?

Mark 16:5-8—*As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples **and Peter**, “He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. **They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.***

The critics claim that Mark’s description of one angel instructing the women to inform the disciples *and Peter* conflicts with Matthew who does not mention Peter. Further, in Mark’s account the angel says, “There you will see him, just as he told you,” which is different from what the angel says in Matthew. What then was the exact message given by the angel? Finally, Luke proceeds to contradict both Matthew and Mark by stating that not one angel but two angels delivered the message:

27. Does Luke ADD words to the original message given by the angels?

Luke 24:3-9—*...but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly **two men** in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “**Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’**” Then they remembered his words. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others.*

The critics claim that Luke’s message is altogether different from that supplied by Matthew and Mark. For example, in Luke the angels say, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” But Matthew and Mark do not even record this. Further, the angels in Luke also quote a statement by Jesus concerning His Resurrection: “Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of

sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again” (Luke 24:6b-7). This too was never mentioned by Matthew or Mark.

Answering the Objections of the Critics Concerning the Message of the Angels and the Women’s Response.

We must keep in mind that the angels did give one complete message. We shall give the angels’ message in its entirety at the end of this section. Thus, the full speech and all the details which were given by the angels for the disciples should first be pictured as a whole. The authors chose to record parts of that message which they thought important. In other words, the three writers are giving bits and pieces of that speech as they heard it from the eyewitnesses or people who knew the eyewitnesses.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that their accounts will differ slightly in length of material and emphasis, but in writing their accounts the way they do, they are not in conflict with each other in what they report. No one can demand that Luke must give a word-for-word report of the angels’ message any more than the Vice President must give a literal word-for-word report from a Cabinet member to the President. There are enough of the exact words given that agree with Matthew and Mark’s account for us to know it is the same message. Luke’s emphasis differs from the other two writers on Galilee but the thrust is the same. Jesus will go before the disciples into Galilee since He has risen.

Even so, the message of the angels as recorded both by Matthew and Mark is strikingly similar. The only difference between them is that Mark includes a specific reference to the Apostle Peter. Why is Mark the only author who records the message of the angels was to be told specifically to Peter? Because Mark was Peter’s friend and traveling companion, most of his Gospel was derived from Peter’s eyewitness testimony of the events. Therefore, it is natural to find this additional information concerning Peter in his friend Mark’s record. Peter apparently conveyed to Mark how wonderful it was that Jesus would have the angel specifically mention that he, Peter, should be told that Christ was risen and wanted to see him.

This mention of Peter in Mark’s account and a slight variation in wording are the only differences between Matthew and Mark. In both accounts the angels mention that Jesus was crucified, that He is not in the tomb, that He has risen; both point out the place where He was laid and is now absent; both urge the women to go tell His disciples; both mention that the risen Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee; and both mention that Jesus had predicted His own Resurrection in advance.

But the critics proceed to charge that Luke has an entirely different message altogether. Some have claimed that Luke actually added words to the angels’ message that they never said. Luke records the words, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (Luke 24:5), something not mentioned by Matthew and Mark (Matthew 28:5-7; Mark 16:6-7). Luke also states, “He is not here, but he has risen” (Luke 24:6). Both Matthew and Mark agree with Luke and include this statement.

Luke continues, “Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and the third day be raised again’” (Luke 24:6b,7).

Matthew and Mark do not record these words. However, this does not mean the angel did not say this. Even though Matthew and Mark do not record the angel saying these

words, they agree with Luke that Jesus said them. These same words are found to be stated by Jesus in the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke: “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him and on the third day He will be raised to life” (Matthew 17:22-23, cf. Luke 9:22; Mark 8:31).

In another prediction of Jesus he records, “From that time Jesus Christ began to show his disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day” (Matthew 16:21).

Mark also agrees with Matthew that Jesus said the words quoted by the angels. In Mark 8:31 we read, “And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Luke says the same (Luke 9:22).

In conclusion the additional information given by the angels in Luke is based on a real saying of Jesus that all three writers recorded. Since this part of the angels’ message is based on a real statement Jesus made, why should we doubt Luke even though Matthew and Mark chose not to include it in their accounts?

28. Does Luke’s mention of Galilee contradict the mention of Galilee in Matthew and Mark?

The critics claim that Matthew and Mark contradict Luke’s message concerning Galilee. In the first two Gospels the disciples are told to go *to Galilee* in order to see Jesus there. But in Luke the angels do not mention that Jesus will appear to the disciples in Galilee, but only that it was *in Galilee* that He *predicted* His Resurrection.

Did the angels say that Jesus would meet the disciples in Galilee—or that He just wanted them to remember that was where He predicted He would resurrect from the dead?

Matthew and Mark both record the angels quoting Jesus’ exact words He gave to His disciples in Galilee before His trial, crucifixion and death. Both Matthew and Mark state that *when He was in Galilee*, Jesus said to His disciples, “But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee” (Matthew 26:32; Mark 14:28).

Now, after the crucifixion Matthew records the angels’ message of instruction to the disciples this way, “Go quickly and tell His disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him. Now I have told you’” (Matthew 28:7).

Mark records the angels’ message as, “But go, tell His disciples and Peter He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you” (Mark 16:7).

Luke apparently knows the angels are quoting Jesus’ exact words He gave His disciples in Galilee. Instead of quoting those words, Luke simply refers to them and their meaning by reporting the angels saying, “Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee.” If they did remember, they would have known exactly what Matthew and Mark said, namely, “He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee.”

Mark probably heard the reference to Galilee straight from Peter’s preaching of what the angels had said. Because their words are almost the same, Matthew might have (1) also heard the message from Peter and (2) as an apostle, he might have heard the message himself. In other words, the different rendition concerning Galilee found in Luke’s account is due merely to Luke’s own emphasis.

Remember, there is no necessity for Luke giving a word-for-word rendition of what the angel said. He might have heard the exact words and realized their importance and signified it by referring his readers back to what Jesus said in Galilee. When one looks at what Jesus said in Galilee, it was exactly the message that Matthew and Mark record concerning what the angel declared, “He is going before you into Galilee.”

Did Luke give enough correct information so his readers would understand what was meant? Yes. Luke records the angels’ message in such a way that his readers would remember back to Jesus’ prediction of His death and Resurrection and His promise to meet His disciples in Galilee.

Is Luke wrong in taking such liberty with the angels’ words? Does anyone else ever report an event and place their own emphasis upon that event? All of us do this every day.

Most of us watch the evening news at night. When the Columbia space shuttle disintegrated and the seven astronauts died, we flipped from channel to channel and caught a different account of the same terrible event. Different words were used and even different facts were added or omitted. But did such differences cause us to conclude the disaster never happened, and the astronauts didn’t die?

If one network news team added new information, or gave a slightly different emphasis to their report, did we assume that the different accounts given by the different network teams couldn’t be harmonized? No! And the same is true for these Gospel accounts. When one writer gives additional information or places his own emphasis on one part of the story and reasonable attempts at harmonization successfully blend together, no contradiction can be assumed.

Selective reporting is just that; it is selective according to the author’s purpose. John doesn’t even mention these words of the angels’ message. Are we then to assume the event never happened? Certainly we must grant the same courtesy to the biblical authors that we do to modern secular writers who select appropriate material and edit it as they see fit. The key issue is not what was omitted but rather, is what was said truthful?

In conclusion, it is clear that the Gospel writers do not contradict one another in their recording of the angels’ message. If we combine the messages given in the different Gospel accounts, it is easy to reconstruct the original message given by the lead angel:

Don’t you be afraid. I know whom you are seeking—Jesus the Nazarene, the crucified one. Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here—for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where they laid him. Remember how he talked to you when he was in Galilee, saying that the Son of man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise. Go quickly, tell his disciples (and Peter) that he is raised from the dead and is going before you into Galilee. You will see him there, as he said.²⁷

Again, each writer has merely selected the part of the angels’ message which best suited his purpose.

29. Do Matthew, Mark and Luke contradict one another in describing the women’s reaction to the angels’ message?

The critics also claim that the responses of the women in these accounts are contradictory. Matthew says the women “ran to tell his *disciples*” about the empty tomb (Matthew 28:8); but Mark records, “And they said *nothing to anyone*, for they were afraid” (Mark

16:8). Critics claim that Luke contradicts Matthew and Mark when he says, "...they told all this *to the Eleven* and *to all the rest*" (Luke 24:9).

Mark records that after hearing the angels' message the women "said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Does Luke contradict Mark by recording that, "returning from the tomb they [the women] told all this to the Eleven and to all the rest" (Mark 16:8; Luke 24:9)? Did the women tell or not tell?

Once again, when the accounts are combined and time is factored in, the "problem" disappears. It is true that at first, before they reached the apostles, the women said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. Each of us would have been as well.

Since we are dealing with a specific period of time (the time it took the women to go from the tomb to find the apostles) there is no reason why the women could not have first responded with fear, and then after their fear "subsided," told the disciples what had happened. This is why they were silent and told no one *until* they reached the safety and security of the apostles. Then they delivered their message.

By implication, this was also the instruction of the angels' message. "Go tell the apostles" implies that the apostles should be the first to hear the message. If an angel gives one party specific instruction to give a vital message to another party, the first party does not stop and gossip along the way.

But it would be incredible to think that, having received the instruction of the angels specifically to go tell the disciples about the Resurrection, the women would *never* tell anyone throughout the rest of their entire lives. Mark is simply emphasizing that they were scared, and it took them a while to "collect themselves" before they would obey the specific instruction of the angels to tell the apostles. That they did tell the apostles is obvious, for the Gospels record the apostles' reaction to the women's message. Mark is simply emphasizing the women were scared and they said nothing until they reached the disciples.

In conclusion, there is no contradiction in the basic content as given by all the Gospel writers. Each writer has recorded the "basics" of the angels' message. Neither is there a contradiction in the women's response to the message.

Now we will consider the claims made by a contemporary critic concerning the angels' message.

30. In what way do critics imply collusion on the part of the apostles?

John K. Naland criticizes the accounts and supplies us his own interpretation of the events:

We must now turn to the conflicting reports of what happened next. All four sources claim that an amazing message was given to the women when they arrived.... The agreement however, stops there [i.e., the message itself conflicts].... Scholars conclude that we are dealing here with a literary device, not remembered history.

Since the simple fact that the tomb was empty could be interpreted in many ways (such as Magdalene's "they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him"), the ancient authors apparently move to dispel confusion and doubt by using the traditional literary device of introducing divine beings to authoritatively proclaim this otherwise confusing event's "true" meaning: Jesus' body had not been stolen but had in fact risen from the dead.²⁸

Naland concludes, “The fact that, despite their other disagreements, three of the authors closely agree on the man/men/angels message in no way supports its historicity; most scholars agree that the authors of Matthew and Luke wrote their books with a copy of Mark in front of them.”²⁹

The idea that Matthew and Luke wrote the Gospels with a copy of Mark in front of them, implying collusion, is the bankrupt assumption made by liberal critics today. What evidence exists to substantiate their assumption?

Notice, the critics claim the accounts are so different that contradictions can clearly be seen. But then all of a sudden they tell us the accounts are so similar that collusion can be seen. The critics can’t have it both ways. If the accounts are too similar, the critics cry “collusion!” If the accounts are too divergent, they cry “contradiction!”

If the writers copied from one source, then we must give them credit for not being so foolish as to deliberately contradict each other. The critics who say they all copied from one source, Mark, must explain why differences exist.

Anyone who reads the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke finds that they are sufficiently divergent to indicate independent research, reporting and writing. There is no evidence of either collusion or contradiction.

Further, Naland and other critics claim the account of the angels is merely a “literary device,” an attempt to “dispel confusion” concerning conflicting accounts by having the angels introduce an authoritative message. But this is pure conjecture on the critic’s part.

There is absolutely no difference between Naland’s suggested “literary device” and blatant deception. If Jesus really didn’t rise physically from the dead, why would the disciples have invented a story about angels proclaiming an event (the Resurrection) no one believed had happened in the first place? Were the writers so deluded that in their weakened state they pathetically made up stories of nonexistent events to “confirm” their own pathological hallucinations of a non-risen Jesus? Such assumptions are absurd, especially when what the Gospel writers wrote harmonizes beautifully.

ALLEGED CONTRADICTION NUMBER FOUR: Do Jesus’ Resurrection appearances conflict with one another?

31. Was Mary Magdalene the first person to visit the tomb as John implies or did the other women accompany her as Matthew and Mark state?

The seeming contradiction between John and Matthew and Mark can be resolved by assuming all the women were to meet together at the tomb and were on their way when the events happened. Therefore, Matthew and Mark are correct in referring to them as a group on their way to the tomb. If Mary arrived a bit earlier than the rest, then John’s account is correct. If the stone was rolled away and Mary looked in and found the tomb empty, it would be reasonable to conclude that she would leave immediately to tell Peter and John. This is what the Apostle John says happened.

After Mary left, her other companions arrived at the tomb. The angels appeared to them, delivered their message, whereupon they left and ran to tell the disciples. So Mary was the first person to reach the tomb.

32. If Jesus appeared to Mary first (Mark 16:9), why is it that after informing Peter and John, she stays at the tomb and begins to weep?

(See Q. 33)

33. If Mary were the first to see Jesus, why does she tell the angel, “They have taken my Lord and I don’t know where they have laid Him”?

These questions are answered if we follow Mary’s journey after she meets Peter and John. When Mary finds John and Peter, they start off for the tomb (John 20:3). Mary lags behind. Peter and John reach the tomb, look in, see the grave clothes lying where Jesus’ body was laid. John believes. They both leave the tomb (John 20:10). Finally, Mary reaches the tomb.

By the time she arrives, the disciples have already left, and she has not been told what Peter and John have concluded. Up to this point she has not seen any angels or the Lord. So she stands by the tomb all alone and in frustration begins to weep.

She looks into the tomb. At that point, the angels appear to Mary and ask her why she is weeping. She replies, “They’ve taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don’t know where they’ve put him.”

Jesus then appears to Mary and in her confusion, she thinks He is the gardener. Jesus makes Himself known to Mary in the conversation and she recognizes Him as her Lord. So Mary is probably the first one that Jesus appeared to. She then leaves to go and tell the good news to the disciples.

34. Do Mark and Luke conflict in their reports about the disciples on the road to Emmaus?

Luke records the appearance of Jesus on the road to Emmaus seven miles away from Jerusalem (Luke 24:13-36). The two men in his account return to Jerusalem only to discover the people present already believe in the Resurrection. The people are saying, “It is true! The Lord is risen and has appeared to Simon” (Luke 24:34). At that point the two men who had just returned tell of their own experience with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

The critics, however, claim Luke contradicts Mark who says, “And they [the men on the road to Emmaus] went away and reported it to the others, *but they did not believe them either*” (Mark 16:12-13).³⁰

Which account is correct? Did the disciples believe in the Resurrection or not believe it? First, we need to understand that the persons exclaiming, “The Lord has risen and has appeared to Peter” were *not* the apostles themselves. They were the “others who were with them” who came to inform the apostles that Christ was resurrected (Luke 24:33). *These other* individuals had believed in the Resurrection because they had just witnessed Christ personally. But the ones they were telling this to in the room had *not* yet seen Jesus and therefore did not believe them.

Mark’s appendix agrees with the Apostle John that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9; John 20:14). Mark then records Mary went and reported to the disciples that she had been with Jesus while she was mourning and weeping at the tomb.

What was the reaction of those who heard Mary? Mark tells us in Mark 16:11, “And when they heard that he [Jesus] was alive, and had been seen by her, they [the disciples]

refused to believe it.”

Next, Mark records Jesus’ appearance to the two men walking in the country along the road to Emmaus. These men return to Jerusalem and report to the others. What happened to Mary happened to these two men. Mark records, “They [the disciples] did not believe them either” (Mark 16:13).

If we carefully examine what Luke says about these events, we will see he agrees with Mark. Luke records that after the two men recognized Jesus on the road to Emmaus, “They returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the Eleven *and those who were with them*, saying, ‘The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon.’”

The key issue is: Who is Luke speaking about when he says, “And those who were with them”? This reference must be to Mary (Mark 16:10-11) whom they had earlier refused to believe and probably the other women who had seen the angels and the resurrected Lord (Matthew 28:5-10).

Luke only tells us the Eleven were “listening” to those people who had come to them, who were with them and testifying, “The Lord has *really risen*.” Nowhere in Luke’s account does he say the Eleven actually believed what the others were telling them. How do we know this?

There is clear evidence that indicates the eleven disciples did not yet believe in the Resurrection. While this entire group is gathered together, Jesus Himself appears to them and rebukes them for doubting His Resurrection. Luke records, “they [the Eleven] were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost” (Luke 24:37). Jesus encourages all of them to “Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.” And even then, Luke records, “They still did not believe it because of joy and amazement” (v. 41).

Mark records these words, “Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after He had risen” (Mark 16:14).

In conclusion, when Mark reports that the disciples in Jerusalem did not believe Mary, nor did they believe the two men from the road to Emmaus, he must be telling the truth. Luke does not contradict Mark’s report concerning the two men on the road to Emmaus.

35. How can most of the alleged conflicts be easily resolved?

By now it should be obvious that most of these questions are answered simply by constructing a plausible sequence of events that shows the accounts do not contradict each other. We would like you to consider this account given by Noval Geldenhuys which is just one of many reconstructions that answers many of these questions:

Very early on the Sunday morning the resurrection took place, the earthquake followed, the angel descended and rolled away the stone (Matthew 28:2-4), and the guards of soldiers fled (Matthew 28:11).

A little later Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome hastened to the sepulcher while another group of women followed with the spices. Mary Magdalene reaches the sepulcher first, sees that it is empty and immediately goes to inform Peter and John (John 20:1ff).

The other Mary and Salome approach and see the angel (Matthew 28:5).

Thereafter the other women with Joanna among them come along; they see the two angels and receive the message that Jesus has risen (Luke 24:1ff).

In the meantime Mary Magdalene reaches Peter and John, and they hasten to the sepulcher (John 20). Mary also follows them again and arrives at the sepulcher after the others have already departed.

She weeps at the sepulcher (John 20:2ff) and sees the two angels, who ask her why she is weeping. After this she sees Jesus himself (John 20:14).

In the meantime the other women had gone to the other disciples and told them their experiences. But their words were regarded as idle tales (24:11) until Peter and John confirm them.

When the women were afterwards probably again on their way to the sepulcher, Jesus meets them (according to the true text of Matthew 28:9, which simply reads: "And behold, Jesus met them and said...").

Later in the day the Savior appeared to Peter alone (Luke 24:34 and 1 Corinthians 15:5), toward evening to the men of Emmaus, and a little later to the whole group of disciples, with the exception of Thomas (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-24).

A week later he again appeared to the disciples, including Thomas, who was convinced of the certainty of the resurrection (John 21:1-23).

And during the 40 days before his ascension the Lord also appeared in Galilee to the seven disciples at the Sea (John 21:1-23) (obviously the Galilean disciples, especially after Jesus' command that they should go thither, left Jerusalem after a few weeks for Galilee).

He also appeared to the five hundred of his followers in Galilee (as a result of the command of Mark 16:7 they would probably, after the reports concerning Jesus' resurrection had been brought to them, have assembled spontaneously in expectation of his appearance). When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 15:6, most of the five hundred were still alive as living witnesses of the fact of the resurrection.

From Acts 1:3,4, and from the whole history from the commencement of Christianity, it appears that during the 40 days before his ascension Jesus often appeared to his followers and spoke to them about many things in order to prepare them as builders of his church.

Toward the end of the 40 days he no doubt commanded them to go to Jerusalem and to remain there until the promise of the Holy Ghost should be fulfilled.

After their return to Judaea the Savior also appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7) and to the apostles (Luke 24:33-53; Acts 1:3-12); and after his ascension he appeared to Paul near Damascus (Acts 9:3-6, 1 Corinthians 15:8) and again in the temple (Acts 22:17-21, 23:11).

Also Stephen, the first martyr, saw Jesus after his resurrection (Acts 7:55). Last of all, the Savior also appeared to John, the gray-haired exile on Patmos (Revelation 1:10-19).

Thus we have a mighty cloud of witnesses that Jesus has indeed arisen as the Conqueror over the grave, death and hell, and lives forever!³¹

But even though most of the apparent problems can be resolved by supplying a chronological sequence of events, we must remember there are times when this is impossible

simply because we do not have sufficient information.

As Geldenhuys observes, the Gospels are primarily accounts of the apostles' preaching about Jesus. They are not complete biographies. Because of this fact, we are not entitled to demand that they supply us with an exact, detailed, and chronologically connected narrative of all the various events they discuss. Geldenhuys writes:

When we are faced with assertions (sometimes of a very arbitrary character) that the Gospels contradict one another as regards the particulars of the resurrection-appearances, we should bear in mind that the Gospels give such a condensed and selective account of the resurrection that no one knows whether the episodes described in one Gospel are the same as those mentioned in one or more of the others.... And because we know so little of the less important particulars of those events, we are unable to see how the various narratives fit into one another. In any case, all the Gospels proclaim the main facts and leave no doubt as to the certainty that Jesus did arise.³²

36. Did Jesus appear in Jerusalem or only on a mountain in Galilee?

We must remember that there were at least twelve separate appearances of Jesus after His Resurrection from the dead. Michael Green succinctly outlines the major Resurrection appearances for us:

The Gospels profess to give us only a selection of events in the Jesus story (John 21:25) but even so there is an impressive list.

Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9; John 20:1-18),

to the two Marys (Matthew 28:1-10),

to Simon Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5),

to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-31),

to the Eleven and other disciples (Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-23; 21:1-14; Acts 1:3-9; 1 Corinthians 15:5-6),

to Thomas (John 20:24-29),

to James (1 Corinthians 15:7),

to Joseph and Mathias (Acts 1:22ff),

to five hundred people at once (1 Corinthians 15:6),

to Peter and John together (John 21:15-24),

to Nathanael and some other disciples on the lake (John 21:1-14),

and to Paul (Acts 9:4ff; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8).

Taken together, these appearances to individuals and to groups, to men and to women, in country and in town, in the upper room and by the open lake, on the road and on the hillside, constitute testimony to the resurrection that needs to be taken very seriously indeed.³³

Now in answering the critics' questions concerning these Resurrection appearances, let us remember that the mere fact that Jesus appears in different places to different people is hardly a contradiction in itself. On any given day, each one of us appears in different places to different people. Given these twelve Resurrection appearances which took place in various locations to numerous individuals and groups, it should not be surprising that four

independent writers would select some details and not others.

The first thing apparent is that all four accounts do agree that the Resurrection did, in fact, happen. Second, these accounts give every evidence of frank and honest reporting. There is no cover-up, and even the doubts and skepticism of the apostles themselves are laid bare as part of the record. If the disciples had wanted to make up stories, they would have left out these unflattering remarks about themselves.

If four contemporary TV reporters covered similar events, what problems would they face that were also faced by those writing the Resurrection accounts?

If four reporters covered a key battle during the war in Vietnam, or filed reports on the election results and key political speeches made by leaders in East and West Germany, or covered a serious airplane accident involving three airplanes which landed in two different locations (including weather reports), or wrote reports on a Presidential visit to twelve European cities, each of these four reporters would select different material, emphasize what he thought was really important, and leave out what he did not have time to report or judged was not as important as other material. If this is true for contemporary reporters, why is it that the accounts of the four Gospel writers concerning twelve Resurrection appearances would be any different?

If there merely *appeared* to be a contradiction between the accounts of our contemporary newsmen, would we not assume that no contradictions existed because of the many different details involved? And finally, wouldn't we assume our own lack of knowledge of the events covered and in light of that, not accuse them of lying for seeming contradictions merely because we cannot resolve them immediately?

Concerning the different locations in which the accounts say Jesus appeared, how can these be resolved to remove any charge of contradiction or error? Lilly discusses the problem and supplies plausible answers for why Jesus made the appearances He did:

The chief difficulty relative to the recorded appearances is the place or places where they occurred. According to Saint Matthew our Lord appeared to the holy women at Jerusalem, and to the disciples in Galilee at the mountain which he had appointed them....

Mark mentions no appearances at all, but in the appendix there is mention of several appearances which, however, are not localized.

Saint Luke's recorded appearances all took place in or near Jerusalem, while Saint John tells us of appearances which occurred both at Jerusalem and in Galilee.

Another difficulty is the command of Christ, delivered to the apostles through the holy women, to go to Galilee; that there he would see them. This seems to be inconsistent with the appearances which he granted them the very evening of his resurrection at Jerusalem and at Emmaus.³⁴

It is certainly true that Jesus appointed Galilee as a rendezvous for the disciples. His first intention may probably have been to have the Apostles leave the hostile atmosphere of Jerusalem for the much more tranquil territory of Galilee, where he would show himself to them and give them his final commission.

But the holy women delayed to report the direction to the Apostles, and when finally the message did reach them, they remained incredulous, labeled the report contemptuously "idle tales."

The only way, at least the most effective way, to overcome this incredulity was for Jesus to appear to the Apostles directly, establish faith in their minds as to the reality of his resurrection and prepare them for the final and more important appearances in Galilee. I say more important because it was during these that Jesus imparted the great commission....³⁵

Lilly proceeds to discuss the manner in which each apostle's method and purpose accounts for the material included or deleted:

We must bear in mind the particular method used by each Evangelist. Father Buzy in this connection says: Matthew's method "is to pass over facts not pertinent to his plan, and to group in a synthetic picture the facts he considers indispensable to his purpose. Since the Evangelist's purpose is not to recount the doings of the Apostles during Easter week at Jerusalem, he is content with presenting us the disciples back in Galilee." Thus he omits the Jerusalem appearances entirely but by no means denies that they occurred.

Saint Luke's plan both in the Gospel and in the Acts, as is well known, is geographical. Accordingly he conducts Jesus and the Apostles through Galilee to Jerusalem. There it concludes the story of Jesus, and there he leaves the Apostles, to present them to us again in his second volume, the Acts.... We understand perfectly well why, according to the geographical plan, he does not concern himself with the Galilean appearances, but sums up and localizes at Jerusalem all the post resurrection utterances of Jesus which the Gospel's plan and purpose require.

There is therefore no well-founded objection against the historical accuracy and trustworthiness of the Gospel accounts of the events connected with the resurrection. There is a natural and satisfying explanation of each of the pretended inconsistencies in the four-fold record,—satisfying for anyone who is willing to be satisfied and is not obstinately determined to reject the historic reality of the resurrection of Jesus out of blind devotion to a philosophic postulate.³⁶

Now we shall examine some of these same criticisms as presented by contemporary critics.

37. Do the Resurrection accounts involve clearly contradictory historical traditions as critics such as John K. Naland maintain?

Why does John K. Naland say that the Gospel writers totally disagree on where they saw Jesus?³⁷

In his article on the Resurrection accounts in *Free Inquiry* Naland refers to the "clearly contradictory historical traditions—one placing *all* post-crucifixion appearances in the Jerusalem area, the other placing them in the region of Galilee."³⁸

In this article, Naland admits that all four Gospel writers agree that someone experienced a risen Jesus. However, "...the...thing the sources disagree on is who, when, where, and how—which is quite a bit. They agree on what? That *someone* experienced a risen Jesus. But they totally disagree on what it was, when it was, where it was...."³⁹ Naland implies that when Luke says Jesus appeared on Easter in *Jerusalem* and Matthew says Jesus appeared on Easter in *Galilee*, then this is a contradiction. Notice he says that Luke places all Resurrection appearances in Jerusalem, whereas Matthew places them all in Galilee.⁴⁰

38. Why does Hugh J. Schonfield believe the Gospel writers contradicted each other in citing where Jesus appeared to them?

Hugh J. Schonfield in his book, *The Passover Plot*, is another critic who claims the accounts conflict. He writes:

According to Luke...the “appearance” to the apostles is in the Judean tradition.... This is at variance with the Galilean tradition followed by Matthew.... In the Judean tradition Jesus positively identifies himself to the apostles in Jerusalem.... We may regard the information as in the highest degree questionable in view of the rival record in Matthew, which suggests that the apostles did not see Jesus in Jerusalem....⁴¹

Answering the Charges Made by Naland and Schonfield.

Should Jesus be limited to appearing in only one location?

The Apostle John records about one of the appearances of Jesus, “This was now the *third* time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead” (John 21:14). Luke records in his second book, Acts, that “He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). From these two authors we can see that there were many separate appearances of Jesus to the disciples. Isn’t it a little absurd to demand Jesus appear in the same location over a 40-day period?

Matthew not only gives a Galilean appearance (Matthew 28:16), but he gives a Jerusalem one as well (Matthew 28:9). John has both Jerusalem and Galilee appearances (John 20 and 21). Luke certainly gives Jerusalem appearances but in his second book, Acts, he shows he is not unaware of Jesus’ other appearances in different places over a 40-day period. Mark records the message of the angels, “Go tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you into Galilee. There you will see him....’” (Mark 16:7). In brief, the evidence goes against Naland and Schonfield’s assertion that there are rival traditions.

If the critics force Matthew and Luke to say Jesus could *only* appear in Jerusalem or Galilee, then of course, they would contradict each other. But neither of them sets limits on Jesus’ appearances, nor demands by what they say that Jesus cannot appear in some other geographical location.

Michael Green shows that each of the authors did *not* place Jesus’ Resurrection appearances in only one geographical location:

But are there such major diversions in the accounts? The one most commonly adduced seems to me the weakest of all. It is the claim that in Matthew (and by prediction in Mark 16:7) you get appearances of Jesus in Galilee; whereas in Luke and John you get appearances in Jerusalem. But this objection is totally jejune.

Matthew does indeed give a Galilee appearance, but he gives a Jerusalem one as well, by the tomb itself (28:9f).

Luke certainly gives Jerusalem appearances, but then in his gospel he offers us a continuous narrative from the resurrection to the ascension in highly compressed style, and he has a clear theological emphasis on Jerusalem as the centre from which world mission spreads out until it takes over Rome itself.

Though he selects Jerusalem resurrection material, that does not mean he is

unaware or skeptical of Galilean appearances. He tells us that Jesus “presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days” (Acts 1:3), so he affords plenty of opportunity for appearances to have taken place in both locations.

John has both Jerusalem and Galilee appearances (ch. 20, 21), and both are implied by Paul’s list which includes appearances to Peter and to James (manifestly in Jerusalem), to five hundred (manifestly in Galilee) and to himself (in Syria). Why on earth not?⁴²

39. Are the Gospel writers uncertain in detailing where and when Jesus appeared after His Resurrection?

The following citation in the Gospels illustrates that the writers were anything but uncertain saying where and when Jesus appeared. Mark says in 16:9, “Now after He had risen early on the first day of the week, He first appeared to Mary Magdalene.” The Apostle John agrees. John 20:14 says, “She turned around and beheld Jesus standing there....” Verse 18 says, “Mary Magdalene came announcing to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’ and that He had said these things to her.” In brief, both Mark and John agree.

Also, as we have already shown, there is no contradiction between Luke’s account of Jesus’ appearance to the two men on the road to Emmaus and the same event recorded in Mark 16:12-13.

No one contradicts John’s clear depiction of Jesus’ appearance to the Apostle Thomas in John 20:26-31.

Luke in Acts 1:3 asserts Jesus presented Himself over a period of 40 days to His apostles. From reading all of the accounts, Jesus’ appearances fit in well with these words.

In 1 Corinthians 15:5 Paul says, “He appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the Twelve.” This fits in nicely with Mark 16:2-8 where we find the angels instructing the women to tell Peter and the disciples Jesus “is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He said to you.” Both of these accounts agree with what Luke says in 24:34, “The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon.” Another appearance is recorded in John 21:15, where “Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’”

Peter himself is adamant in declaring in his own epistle, “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were *eyewitnesses* of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16).

These are just a few of the specific, clear, non-contradictory accounts given of the Resurrection appearances of Jesus. They do not conflict concerning time or place or any other criteria.

40. If Jesus really appeared to the disciples, why did they go fishing?

(See Q. 41)

41. If Jesus really appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem, why would He have to appear to them again in Galilee?

John K. Naland represents many critics when he asks, “If Jesus really appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem, why would they go back to Galilee and start fishing again?” And why

would Jesus appear to the disciples again in Galilee?⁴³

Initially, some of the disciples did not believe in the resurrected Jesus, even after He first appeared to them (Matthew 28:17). If some were skeptical and doubted what their own eyes had seen, it is very reasonable to assume that they would have retired to such an activity as fishing to try and sort things out. Even those disciples who saw and believed would be shaken by the implications.

Why would Jesus appear to the disciples in Jerusalem and at other times in Galilee?

There are many possible reasons why. First, perhaps Jesus might simply have had a lot to tell the disciples as the Scriptures imply (John 16:12; Luke 24:27, 45). Second, the disciples might have needed the time between appearances to digest and think through what Jesus was telling them. Third, Jesus may have wanted to appear in other locations to other disciples not present at the time He appeared in geographical areas closer to Jerusalem.

In the four Gospels we are told of eleven apostles and a large number of other disciples of Jesus who lived in other towns and places. It is obvious that not every disciple was in Jerusalem when Jesus first appeared. It seems Jesus appeared to some disciples first in order to instruct them to inform others of the next time and place He would appear. How else would they have known? That's why some of the disciples who were in Jerusalem may have gone on to Galilee, not only to meet Him there, but to tell others that He would be there.

That's why the objection over the different appearances in different geographical locations is in fact the weakest objection of all.

42. Do the Gospel writers agree they saw the same Jesus or did they see a different Jesus?

Bishop Spong claims the Gospel writers conflict because they do not describe Jesus the same way in every appearance. He asserts:

Was it the resurrected but not yet ascended and glorified Lord who appeared, or was it the resurrected, ascended Lord of heaven that they experienced alive? Paul clearly implies the latter. Mark says nothing but hints that it will be the ascended, glorified Lord they will meet in Galilee. Luke argues that all resurrection appearances ceased with the ascension....

For Luke, it was the risen Lord who, after appearing to his disciples, ascended into heaven; and it was the ascended Lord now united with the Father who poured the Holy Spirit out on the gathered church at the day of Pentecost.

Matthew implies that it was the resurrected but not yet ascended Lord who confronted the women in the garden, but that it was the ascended, glorified Lord who possessed all authority and power who met them and commissioned them on the Galilean mountain top. John says that the resurrected Lord appeared only to Mary Magdalene ("Touch me not for I have not yet ascended."), but it was the resurrected, ascended, glorified Lord who appeared to the disciples and breathed on them, imparting the Holy Spirit, and inviting Thomas to examine his body....⁴⁴

One sometimes wonders at the extent to which intelligent men will go to find contradictions in the Scriptures. The "issue" Bishop Spong has raised here is not even an issue. There is no reason why Christ could not have gone to heaven several times throughout the

40-day period of His appearances before finally ascending into heaven.

According to John, Jesus told Mary not to keep touching or holding onto Him *because* He had not yet ascended. Then He adds for her to tell His disciples, “*I am returning to my Father and your Father*” (John 20:17). The fact that Jesus later invited the disciples to touch Him (Luke 24:39) would indicate He had ascended to heaven and returned. How many times Jesus did this is not known, but why should anyone imply He couldn’t have done it if He wanted to?⁴⁵

Further, the accounts are in absolute agreement that every appearance of Jesus to every disciple or group of disciples concerned the *same* resurrected Christ. A few appearances apparently occurred before His first ascension and the remainder apparently occurred before His final ascension 40 days later.

But Spong makes five entirely arbitrary distinctions concerning Jesus: “the resurrected, ascended Lord of heaven” vs. “the resurrected but not yet ascended and glorified Lord” vs. “the ascended Lord now united with the Father” vs. “the resurrected but not yet ascended Lord who confronted the women in the garden” vs. “the ascended, glorified Lord who possesses all authority,” etc.⁴⁶ Certainly these words describe the activities of Jesus, but why should we think Jesus became a different person as a result of doing these activities? These are all arbitrary and useless descriptions for the purpose of creating false contradiction in the Gospel accounts.

ALLEGED CONTRADICTION NUMBER FIVE: Are the details surrounding the crucifixion contradictory?

43. Who carried Jesus’ cross: Simon the Cyrene (Matthew, Mark and Luke) or Jesus Himself (John)?

Because of what Jesus had already experienced, He was undoubtedly extremely weak. The solution to this apparent contradiction is that Jesus carried the cross part of the way (John 19:17) and Simon the Cyrene the remainder (Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26). It is also possible that Jesus carried part of the cross (the “I” beam or the “T” beam) all the way while Simon carried the remainder.⁴⁷

44. Did Jesus drink from the wine mixture given to Him while on the cross (John) or refuse it (Matthew and Mark)?

Another alleged contradiction is whether or not Jesus actually drank from the wine mixture given to Him. Matthew says He tasted the mixture but “refused to drink” (Matthew 27:34); Mark says He was offered the wine but did not take it (Mark 15:23); Luke mentions only that He was offered wine vinegar (Luke 23:36); John says that Jesus “received the drink” and by implication drank (John 19:29,30).

Further, Matthew says the wine was mixed with gall; Mark says it was mixed with myrrh; Luke and John both say it was mixed with vinegar.

What resolves this alleged contradiction is a careful reading of the text, remembering Jesus was on the cross for some six hours. There were three known offerings of a wine mixture; the first offer was made by the soldiers, before Jesus was crucified and is recorded by Matthew and Mark. This mixture was the wine and “gall” or “myrrh” that was usually offered to condemned prisoners as a mild analgesic. But when this drink was offered to Jesus before He was crucified, *He refused it*. Luke records a second offer by the

soldiers (Luke 23:36), this time of wine vinegar or sour wine, a common drink.

The third offer was made during the time Jesus was crucified and occurred after He had uttered the phrase, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This third offer of wine *vinegar* was made to Jesus by a particular individual in the crowd and is recorded by Matthew, Mark and John. All three writers agree that Jesus *did taste this offer*. There is no contradiction in the accounts.

45. What did the inscription placed above Jesus read?

The third alleged contradiction concerns the inscription on the sign placed above Jesus. What did it say? The sign itself read: “THIS IS JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.” All four writers mention that the sign stated that this was “THE KING OF THE JEWS,” but Matthew adds “THIS IS JESUS” while John adds, “JESUS OF NAZARETH.” There is no contradiction; each author uses that information which suits his purpose.

In 1964, a large banner was placed across the stage where the Beatles were performing. It read, “THE BEATLES, THE FABULOUS FOUR FROM LONDON. JOHN, PAUL, GEORGE, RINGO.” Later, writing about the concert, four different reporters could easily refer to this sign and correctly give four different accounts of what the sign said without being contradictory.

46. Did both thieves insult Jesus on the cross (Matthew, Mark) or did only one insult Him (Luke)?

The fourth alleged contradiction in the Crucifixion accounts is whether or not both thieves insulted Jesus on the cross. Matthew and Mark say that both thieves insulted Jesus (Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32); Luke says only one insulted Him (Luke 23:39-40), and John does not mention the incident.

The solution is to remember we are dealing with a period of six hours. It is perfectly logical to think that both criminals initially insulted Jesus, but that one of them, as he observed Him on the cross and heard His comments, changed his mind, and later even rebuked the other criminal. (Matthew 27:44; Luke 23:39-40)

ALLEGED CONTRADICTION NUMBER SIX: Are the details concerning the events that occurred around the time of Jesus’ death contradictory?

47. What were Jesus’ last words on the cross?

The critics ask, “What were Jesus’ last words?” If one does not read carefully, it would appear that Matthew and Mark assert that Jesus’ last cry was, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). But shortly after recording this statement, both authors also agree that Jesus “cried out again in a loud voice” (Matthew 27:50; Mark 15:37) and breathed His last (“gave up His spirit”) (Matthew 27:50; Mark 15:37).

In other words, both Matthew and Mark refer to another statement of Jesus, a loud cry, although they do not identify the words spoken. Luke identifies this loud cry as, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Immediately prior to that statement, John informs us that Jesus uttered, “It is finished” (John 19:30). John does not say Jesus spoke the words, “It is finished” in a loud voice.

What this means is that after Jesus had cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” a brief period of time elapsed. Then, during the last minutes of His life, He

uttered, “It is finished” and immediately after that, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” At that point, He died. Again, we see that all four Gospel accounts harmonize perfectly and do not contradict. One author adds a thing another leaves out, but this is only to be expected from independent reporters.

48. What did the centurion say when he saw Jesus die?

Another alleged contradiction surrounding Jesus’ death concerns what the Centurion said when he saw Jesus die. Matthew says that the Centurion and those with him guarding Jesus stated after seeing the earthquake and all that happened, “Surely he was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:54). Mark says that when the Centurion heard His last cry and “saw how He died,” he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39). Luke 23:47 records the Centurion said, “Surely this was a righteous man.” John does not mention the event.

We see no contradiction. It is reasonable to assume, given the miraculous events recorded by Matthew (Matthew 27:51-54), that the Centurion and others guarding Jesus, as well as the many observers, would know something unusual was happening. In fact, Matthew records they “were terrified” (Matthew 27:54). It is perfectly reasonable that both the Centurion and those guarding Jesus agreed among themselves that “surely he was the Son of God” while the Centurion also added the comment, “Surely this was a righteous man.”

49. Did “some” women (Mark) or “many” women (Matthew) watch Jesus die?

Another alleged contradiction for this category concerns whether there were “many” women watching Jesus being crucified or only “some” women. Matthew mentions “many” (Matthew 27:55); Mark mentions “some” (Mark 15:40); Luke mentions “the women” (Luke 23:27) and John does not record the incident.

A careful reading of the accounts dispels any contradiction. Each of the Synoptic writers records two facts: a) many people were there, including many women and b) some women in this crowd were important to single out because “these women had followed him [Jesus] and cared for his needs” (Mark 15:41). But besides mentioning these special “some women,” Mark also later mentions that “many other women... were also there” (Mark 15:41).

ALLEGED CONTRADICTION NUMBER SEVEN: Are the events surrounding Jesus’ burial contradictory?

50. Who took Jesus’ body from the cross and buried it—Joseph (Matthew, Mark, Luke) or Joseph and Nicodemus (John)?

In the accounts of Jesus’ burial another contradiction asserted by the critics concerns who buried Jesus’ body. The Synoptics mention that Joseph took and wrapped the body and placed it in the tomb (Matthew 27:59; Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53). John, however, says that it was both Joseph and Nicodemus (John 19:39).

But this is no contradiction. John simply mentions an additional fact the Synoptic writers leave out. The truth is that Joseph could not have taken the body off the cross and placed it in his tomb all by himself; he would have required the assistance of another individual whom John identifies as Nicodemus (John 19:39-40).

51. The guard at the tomb: Why did only Matthew mention it?

Many critics have a problem with the guards placed at the tomb, probably because their existence is such a powerful testimony to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even though there is absolutely no reason to do so, the critics summarily dismiss the account as false.

In *The Passover Plot*, Hugh Schonfield claims, "We may dismiss the story in Matthew alone that the chief priests requested Pilate that a guard be set over the tomb, and that they posted a watch, presumably on Saturday evening at the end of the Sabbath."⁴⁸

John K. Naland states that, "Of the 26 books of the New Testament,... Mark, Luke, and John... do not mention these guards. And not only do they not mention them, they present the events in such a way [that] the guards are precluded."⁴⁹ Further, Naland asks, "Why doesn't Mark, Luke, and John mention these guards if they were there?"⁵⁰

In his article on the Resurrection accounts he claims that, "The general scholarly conclusion [is] that the author of Matthew *invented the details* about the watchful guards, perhaps in hope of influencing contemporaries who would charge, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away'."⁵¹

But on what basis can anyone entirely dismiss an entire account of an event merely because there is only one trustworthy person who mentions it? When your pastor recalls a personal incident on Sunday morning, do we immediately think he is lying because he is the only one reporting it? Only two Gospels mention the Sermon on the Mount. Does anyone doubt that Jesus actually preached the Sermon on the Mount because Mark and John do not mention it?

No critic has ever supplied one iota of evidence to throw out Matthew's testimony concerning the guard. Writing for a Jewish audience, it would be perfectly consistent with Matthew's purpose to include an account of Jewish actions. Further, Matthew's account of the guards (Matthew 27:62-66; 28:11-15) involves ten verses, or some fifteen lines of material, almost one half of his account of the Resurrection event. If we throw out the report concerning the guards, why not throw out everything Matthew says? But all that is required is one accurate eyewitness to tell us the guards were there. Matthew was that eyewitness.

There *is* additional historical evidence concerning the guards at the tomb. Matthew is not their sole reporter. It is reported by Justin and Tertullian in the second century as well as in two Apocryphal Gospels. As Michael Green observes:

It is fashionable to disregard the story of the guard, because it is only recorded in Saint Matthew's gospel, and looks like a bit of Christian propaganda.

However it is attested by two of the apocryphal gospels of the second century, *The Gospel of the Hebrews* and *The Gospel of Peter*. The former, probably the oldest of the apocryphal gospels, says of Pilate "he delivered unto them armed men, that they might sit over against the cave and keep it day and night." *The Gospel of Peter*... records that Pilate set Petronius, a centurion, with soldiers to watch over the tomb of Jesus.... The account is manifestly legendary [in places]...but the story of the guard has a firm place in the tradition; it is found also in Justin and Tertullian in the second century.

Furthermore it is just the sort of thing one might expect, given the mixture of law and intrigue which went to make up the administration of Judaea at that time. The

body of a condemned criminal remained Roman property. That is why Joseph had to go and ask no less a personage than Pilate himself for it if he wanted to give a burial.⁵²

Christians would never have invented the story of the guards at the tomb.

Doubtless it served apologetic purposes in arguing with Jews, but it could not have arisen in that way. Two words make that certain. No Christian could have made up those two words *hemon koimomenon* (“while we slept”) and put them in the mouth of the guards (Matt. 28:13). This story could only have been... use[ful] for Christian propaganda if the guards *had stayed awake!* The only possible reason, therefore, the story of the guard circulated is that it was true. There had been a guard.⁵³

In addition, Wenham supplies other reasons why “Pilate would be inclined to listen seriously to suggestions by the chief priests on matters of security.”⁵⁴ For example, Pilate didn’t want another uprising inspired by Jesus’ followers that possibly could lead to his losing his position as governor of Judaea.

There can be no doubt that guards were posted to protect the tomb from thieves. Certainly guards would never have been posted to protect an empty tomb. Once they were in position, they would have made certain the object they were to guard would remain there.

In conclusion, consider this: given the many details reported concerning Jesus’ crucifixion, death, burial, and Resurrection by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, there are dozens and scores of different opportunities for the writers to have contradicted one another. For every single event, however small, mentioned by one writer, another writer could have clearly contradicted it.

But in all this detailed reporting, we could not find a single genuine contradiction and only a few alleged contradictions—all of which had perfectly reasonable solutions. How then can the fact of the Resurrection be denied on the grounds the accounts conflict?

Notes:

¹ John Wenham, *Easter Enigma* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books/Zondervan, 1984), pp. 69,39.

² John Lilly, “Alleged Discrepancies in the Gospel Accounts of the Resurrection,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 2 (1940), pp. 105-106.

³ Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), pp. 347-348.

⁴ Lilly, pp. 106-107.

⁵ Wenham, pp. 81-82.

⁶ Lilly, p. 103.

⁷ Wenham, pp. 68-71.

⁸ Lilly, pp. 101-104.

⁹ The John Ankerberg Show, “Martin/Spong Debate on Sexual Ethics,” 1989, (Program transcript), p. 4.

¹⁰ John Shelby Spong, *The Easter Moment* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 127, cf. pp. 120-129, emphasis added.

¹¹ The John Ankerberg Show, unpublished transcript of a debate between Dr. John Warwick Montgomery and John K. Naland, televised April 1990, p. 42.

¹² Wenham, p. 77.

¹³ Let us stress that it is almost impossible and not necessary for any writer to keep to a strict chronological order of events when discussing the activities of several persons: “Earlier chroniclers...sometimes...incorporated in a single story a number of actions and speeches which

had a common theme, not indicating at all the time of the occurrence. Sometimes they jumped back and forward between two or more parallel sequences of events, leaving it to the reader to understand that each item is as it were a flash on a cinema screen.” (Wenham, p. 78)

¹⁴ Lilly, pp. 107-108.

¹⁵ Wenham, pp. 85-86.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 87-88.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁸ Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 169.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 167, cf. pp. 166-174.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 168-169.

²¹ Ibid., p. 169.

²² Ibid.

²³ John W. Montgomery, ed., *Demon Possession* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1976)); Malachi Martin, *Hostage to the Devil: The Possession and Exorcism of Five Living Americans* (New York: Bantam, 1977); William Alexander, *Demonic Possession in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980, rpt.).

²⁴ Schonfield, pp. 164-166.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 167.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 165.

²⁷ Wenham, p. 88.

²⁸ John K. Naland, “The First Easter: The Evidence for the Resurrection Evaluated,” *Free Inquiry*, Spring 1988, pp. 12-13.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁰ It should be noted that Mark’s appendix, 16:9-20, is not found in the earliest manuscripts.

³¹ Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 627-628.

³² Ibid., pp. 626-627.

³³ Michael Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 114, formatting added.

³⁴ Lilly, pp. 109-110.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 110-111.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

³⁷ Naland, pp. 16-17.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 16, emphasis added.

³⁹ Naland/Montgomery debate, p. 43.

⁴⁰ Naland, p. 16.

⁴¹ Schonfield, p. 171.

⁴² Green, p. 120.

⁴³ Naland, p. 44.

⁴⁴ Spong, pp. 129-130.

⁴⁵ Archer, p. 350.

⁴⁶ Spong, p. 129.

⁴⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 804.

⁴⁸ Schonfield, p. 163.

⁴⁹ Naland/Montgomery debate transcript, p. 16.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵¹ Naland, p. 12, emphasis added.

⁵² Green, pp. 99-100.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 101.

⁵⁴ Wenham, p. 74.