

# Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels

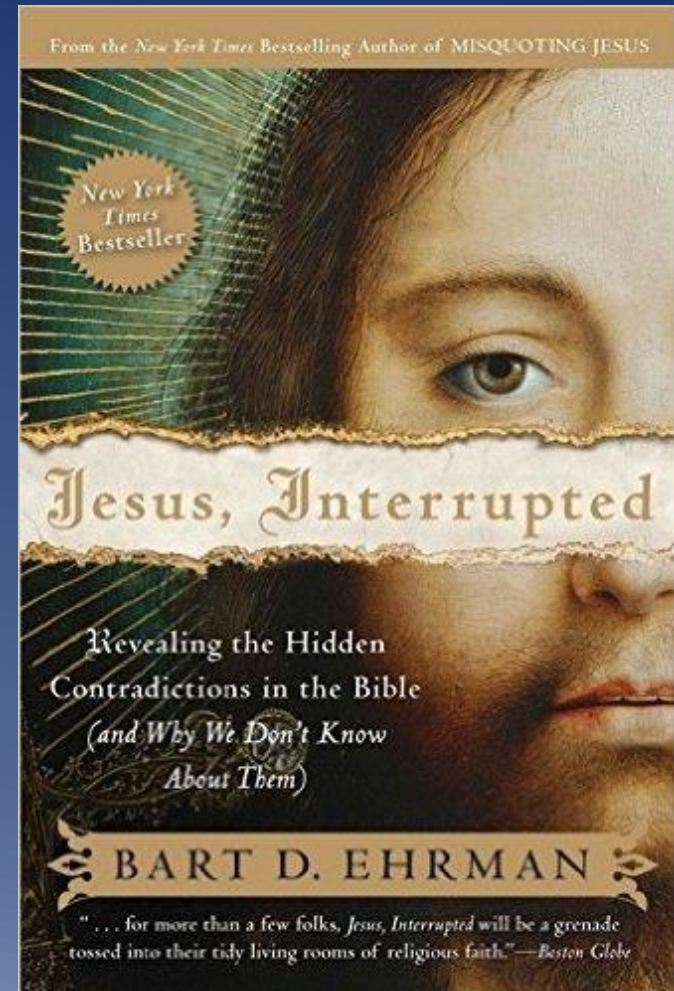
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## Proverbs 18:17

- The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.

# A true story

- New Christian, excited to learn about her faith
- Went to the library to find out more about Jesus ...
- ... and pulled a book called *Jesus, Interrupted* off of the shelf



# Bart Ehrman

- Former Baptist minister, now Prof. of Religious Studies at UNC Chapel Hill
- Apostate who has achieved popular fame by writing and lecturing against traditional Christianity
- “[T]he sources are *hopelessly contradictory*, as we can see by doing a detailed comparison of the accounts in the Gospels.”

—Bart Ehrman, *The Historical Jesus* (2000), p. 90 [emphasis added]



# Contradictions – what are they?

- A contradiction is a pair of claims that cannot both be true. If one is true, the other one *must* be false.
- If the Gospels contradict one another, then they cannot all be completely truthful.
- Bart's claim: there are *so many* contradictions throughout the Gospels, and they are *so important*, that we cannot rely on the Gospels as trustworthy records of what Jesus actually said and did.

# Strategy session: how does he do it?





## Bart's strategy: *treat difference as disagreement*

- Find two stories in the Gospels that are told *differently* – using different words, giving different details, naming different people, or emphasizing different things.
- Claim that these *differences* are *contradictions*.

## Example: The angels at the tomb

- “On the third day after Jesus’ death, the women go to the tomb to anoint his body for burial. And whom do they see there? Do they see a man, as Mark says, or two men (Luke), or an angel (Matthew)?”



## The normal explanation: the women saw two angels

- “That can explain everything else—why Matthew says they saw *an* angel (he mentions only one of the two angels, but doesn’t deny there was a second), why Mark says it was a man (the angels appeared to be men, even though they were angels, and Mark mentions only one of them without denying there was a second), and why Luke says it was two men (since the angels appeared to be men).”

# Bart's objection to this answer

- “The problem is that this kind of reconciling again requires one to assert that what really happened is unlike what *any* of the Gospels say—since none of the three accounts states that the women saw ‘two angels.’”

— *Jesus, Interrupted*, p. 8

- ... *unlike* ...?

# Rejoinder to Bart

- If he means that none of the Gospel accounts is, by itself, *identical* with this reconstruction, then *it does not matter*.
- If he means that the Gospels are in *conflict* with this harmonization, then *it is not true*.

## Blocking Bart's strategy: *do sensible harmonization*

- Read the texts realistically, understanding that there are almost always variations in the way any two honest writers describe the same event.

## An example from United States history ...

- Who read the Declaration of Independence from the balcony of the Old State House in Boston on the morning of July 18, 1776?
- Some early sources say it was William Greenleaf, high sheriff of Suffolk County
- Other early sources say it was Colonel Thomas Crafts

Someone must be wrong here ... right?

... resolved by further information

- Actually, *both* are true. Greenleaf had a weak voice, and the crowd could not hear him clearly, so Crafts repeated it after him, sentence by sentence, loudly enough for all to hear.
- The apparent contradiction was caused by the assumption—plausible sounding, but unwarranted—that *it could not be both*. But it was.

Bart's strategy: *assume what the Gospels never claim*

- Assume that the Gospel authors are each trying to give *every detail* about every event. Treat this assumption as though the authors had explicitly claimed it.
- You can now treat any *differences* in the accounts as *contradictions*.
- Be sure to leave out any inconvenient bits of the text that might ruin this impression.



# Example: the women at the tomb

- “Who actually went to the tomb? Was it Mary alone (John 20:1)? Mary and another Mary (Matthew 28:1)? Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 16:1)? Or women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem—possibly Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and ‘other women’ (Luke 24:1; see 23:55)?”

—*Jesus, Interrupted*, p. 48

# Breaking down this question

- “Was it Mary alone (John 20:1)?”
  - John 20:1—Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.
  - In John 20:2, Mary says to Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and *we do not know* [οὐκ οἶδαμεν] where they have laid him”
- How can it have been Mary *alone* if she speaks in the *plural* here?

## Example #2: Breaking down the question

- “Mary and another Mary (Matthew 28:1)? Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 16:1)?”
  - Neither Matthew nor Mark claims to have a complete list
- “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and ‘other women’ (Luke 24:1; see 23:55)?”
  - Luke *explicitly tells us* that his list is incomplete

## Blocking Bart's strategy: *difference* is not *disagreement*

- Two accounts do not need to be *identical* in order for both of them to be *true*.
- We apply this sort of methodology constantly in the study of secular history and in courts of law.

# A legal view of testimony

- “It so rarely happens that witnesses of the same transaction perfectly and entirely agree in all points connected with it, that an entire and complete coincidence in every particular, so far from strengthening their credit, not unfrequently engenders a suspicion of practice and concert.”

—Thomas Starkie, *A Practical Treatise of the Law of Evidence*, 10th American from the 4th London edition (Philadelphia: T. & J. W. Johnson & Co., 1876), 830-31

## Bart's strategy: *exploit your readers' ignorance*

- If there is a place where there is a scholarly dispute about the text, choose the position most unfavorable to traditional Christianity and present it as though it is what all scholars know.
- Make sure not to mention the fact that other scholars disagree.

# Bart on the end of Mark

- “One point in particular seems to be irreconcilable. In Mark’s account the women are instructed to tell the disciples to go meet Jesus in Galilee, but out of fear they don’t say a word to anyone about it.” — *Jesus, Interrupted*, p. 49
- Mark 16:8: **And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.**



# What is the problem?

- In each of the other three Gospels, the women tell the disciples what happened.
- Bart wants to create a contradiction by reading Mark as saying that they never said a word to anyone.
- Is that the right reading of Mark?

# About the ending of Mark

- Nearly all scholars now agree that the “long ending” of Mark – Mark 16:9-20 – was not part of the original text.
- There is *disagreement* among scholars regarding the question of whether Mark 16:8 was the original, intended ending of the Gospel (as Ehrman believes) or whether it represents a place where the narrative was broken off, either never completed or with the original conclusion now being lost (as Ehrman’s dissertation director Bruce Metzger held).

# Looking at Mark 16:8 again

- And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.
- How would we expect Mark to continue, if (as Metzger and many others thing) the text was broken off here?

# Mark's typical usage

- Mark 5:37—And he allowed no one to follow him *except* Peter and James and John the brother of James.
- Mark 9:8—And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them *but* Jesus only.
- Mark 9:9—... he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, *until* the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

# Mark's typical usage

- Mark 10:18—“Why do you call me good? No one is good *except* God alone.”
- Mark 13:32—“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, *but* only the Father.”

# What this suggests about Mark

- It is entirely plausible that the original ending of the Gospel ran something like this:  
... and told no one (for they were afraid), but running to the disciples, they told them all that they had seen and heard ...
- Indeed, something very much like this is what we find in Matthew 28:8. But Ehrman wants his readers to get the impression that Mark is *contradicting* Matthew.

## Blocking Bart's strategy: *do your homework*

- Knowing that our best manuscripts of Mark break off at Mark 16:8, we realize that the abrupt ending need not mean that the women never told anyone.
- Looking at Mark's own usage, we see how natural it would have been for him to continue by telling how the women went immediately to the disciples.



## Bart's strategy: *quote verses out of context*

- Find a set of passages that can be made to look like they contradict one another by leaving out key words.
- State the supposed contradiction carefully so that a casual reader will not realize that you have taken portions of verses out of context.

## Example: Bart finds (?) a contradiction in John

- “[I]n John’s Gospel, Jesus performs his first miracle in chapter 2, when he turns the water into wine (a favorite miracle story on college campuses), and we’re told that ‘this was the first sign that Jesus did’ (John 2:11). Later in that chapter we’re told that Jesus did ‘many signs’ in Jerusalem (John 2:23).”

## Example: Bart finds (?) a contradiction in John

- “And then, in chapter 4, he heals the son of a centurion, and the author says, ‘**This was the second sign that Jesus did**’ (John 4:54). Huh? One sign, many signs, and then the second sign?”

—*Jesus, Interrupted*, pp. 8-9

# John, Interrupted

- John 2:11— This, the first of his signs, Jesus did *at Cana in Galilee ...*
- John 4:54— This was now the second sign that Jesus did *when he had come from Judea to Galilee.*
- One sign *in Galilee*, many signs in Jerusalem (which is *not* in Galilee), and then a second sign *in Galilee*— what is supposed to be so mysterious about this?

Blocking Bart's strategy: *read the text for yourself*

- No further comment seems necessary

## Bart's strategy: *deliberately misinterpret the text*

- Find a passage where the text can be misread in a way that makes it seem awkward or absurd.
- Present this reading as though it is the only possible reading.
- Be careful not to draw your readers' attention to the more obvious and natural interpretation.

## Example: the triumphal entry

- “In Matthew, Jesus’ disciples procure two animals for him, a donkey and a colt; they spread their garments over the two of them, and Jesus rode into town straddling them both (Matthew 21:7). It’s an odd image, but Matthew made Jesus fulfill the prophecy of Scripture quite literally.”

—*Jesus, Interrupted*, p. 50



# Let's read that text for ourselves

- Matthew 21:7: **They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them.**
- Common sense check: Is the antecedent of “them” “the donkey and the colt” or “the cloaks”?
- A. T. Robertson: “The garments, of course. The words in Greek might refer to the two animals but such reference is by no means necessary. Matthew is not careful to distinguish, but common sense can do it.”  
—*Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew, in loc.*

## Blocking Bart's strategy: *use common sense*

- 'Nuff said.

# How *not* to read the Gospels

- “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”

—Sherlock Holmes, in “A Study in Scarlet”



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# Example: The day of the crucifixion

- “In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus lived through that day [before the Passover], had his disciples prepare the Passover meal, and ate it with them before being arrested, taken to jail for the night, tried the next morning, and executed at nine o’clock A.M. on the Passover day. But not in John. In John, Jesus dies a day earlier, on the Day of Preparation for the Passover, ...”  
—*Jesus, Interrupted*, p. 26

# Reading the texts for ourselves

- Mark 14:12—And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, “Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?” [The Last Supper follows]
- John 19:14—[Describing the scene where Jesus is condemned to be crucified] Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover [ἦν δὲ παρασκευὴ τοῦ πάσχα]. ...

# The apparent contradiction

- In Mark, the Last Supper takes place on the first day of Passover; Jesus is arrested that night and crucified on the next day, the first day (as the Jews reckon days) of Passover.
- According to Ehrman, John tells us that the crucifixion took place on “the Day of Preparation for the Passover,” the day, that is, *before* the Passover.



# What John really says

- John does *not* say that it was the day of preparation *for* the Passover; he says that it was the day of preparation *of* Passover.
- Mark uses the same term, but he also tells us what it means: Mark 15:42—**And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, ...**
- In other words, “preparation” means preparation *for the Sabbath, not preparation for the Passover.*

# Reading John more closely

- John 19:31—Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away.
- John agrees with Mark that it was the day before the Sabbath. This is what he means by “preparation.”

# Three more questions

1. What does John mean when he says, “for that Sabbath was a high day”?
  - He means that it was a *particularly special feast day*, not just any Sabbath day, but Sabbath *in Passover week*. (Compare *Easter Sunday*)

# Three more questions

2. What about John 18:28?—Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, *so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.*
- Doesn't this contradict the claim that Passover had already taken place?

# Some facts about Passover

- Passover is not just one day; it is a week long festival. Throughout the Gospel of John, the word “Passover” occurs eight other times and *always* refers to the festival as a whole, not to the opening meal.
- The *seder*, or supper, that begins the Passover celebration is not the only ritual meal eaten during Passover; in fact, there is another ritual meal, the *chagiga*, eaten at mid-day the following day.

# Some facts about Passover

- If the chief priests had entered Pilate's dwelling and been "defiled" by so doing, the defilement would expire at sundown; all they would need to do is wash, and they would be ceremonially clean for the evening meal.
- Therefore, they must be concerned about some meal *other* than the evening meal. So their worry here cannot have to do with the initial *seder* in Passover.

## Some facts about Passover

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

# Three more questions

3. But isn't the meal in John 13 a different meal from the Last Supper in the Synoptic Gospels?

- “They do eat a final supper together, but in John, Jesus says nothing about the bread being his body or the cup representing his blood. Instead he washes the disciples’ feet, a story found in none of the other Gospels.” —*Jesus, Interrupted*, p. 26



# Two undesigned coincidences

- Luke 22:27: For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.
- What does Jesus mean by that last phrase? To what could he be referring?

# Two undesigned coincidences

- John 13:4-5: [Jesus] rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, ...
- Only John records the event that makes sense of Jesus' statement in Luke.

# Two undesigned coincidences

- But *why* does Jesus wash their feet?
- Luke 22:24: A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.
- Only Luke mentions the dispute that explains why Jesus gave them this object lesson in servanthood.