

Making Sense of Easter

It is impossible to blend the Bible narratives into a single complete, coherent, consistent account of Jesus' resurrection. There are numerous inconsistencies and contradictions in the various accounts. Here are some of the discrepancies that fundagelicals need to resolve.

Although there is disagreement on exactly who went to the tomb or exactly when they arrived, we can generally conclude that Mary Magdalene was the first to arrive at the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week. It may have been just before dawn, but I don't consider that detail important. The authors could very plausibly have remembered it slightly differently. Also, dawn doesn't happen instantly; it is a gradual process over several minutes, so what one may consider dawn, another might consider slightly pre-dawn. I also don't worry too much about the women who may have been with Mary Magdalene. She was apparently considered by all the authors to be the key figure, and failure to mention others doesn't necessarily mean they weren't there. The authors may plausibly have considered that detail insignificant, or they may have simply remembered it differently. It doesn't significantly impact the gist of the narrative.

We begin to see a serious departure in the narrative when Matthew tells us about the earthquake, the angel who rolled the stone away, and the guards who were present. The other writers simply say that the stone had already been rolled away when Mary Magdalene arrived. If Matthew is correct, it seems the other writers should have reported those events also, as they are certainly impressive, even if they don't really add anything significant to the resurrection paradigm. On the other hand, if the other writers are correct, we are left to ponder where Matthew came up with such a fairy tale, and why. He was (purportedly) one of the original disciples, eyewitness to most events in Jesus' brief career, certainly in the loop and well aware of all the latest news. But so was

John, who doesn't mention these events. This is a troubling discrepancy.

What happened next is impossible to say with any certainty, because all the versions are different. And the denouement is as confusing as it is chimerical. According to Matthew and John, either there was no ascension or these authors didn't think it was important enough to mention it. Paul doesn't mention the ascension either. Mark tells us that Jesus ascended while sitting at a table with his disciples in Jerusalem, apparently on Easter day or evening. Luke, however, places Jesus in Bethany when the ascension occurs, apparently sometime on the first day of the week. But in the book of Acts, the scenario is radically different. There we have Jesus hanging out with his disciples for 40 days after his resurrection, finally ascending from Mt Olivet, a day's journey from Jerusalem.

Luke is widely considered the most likely author of Acts. But Acts and Luke present such different versions of the ascension that it seems unlikely those books were penned by the same author. (There are a number of other disagreements between Luke and Paul, as well.)

So, what really happened on that original Easter? It's impossible to know from the Bible. And it's our only source for the Easter story. The authors couldn't possibly all be right. That is enough to blow the infallible-Word-of-God myth out of the water. How, then, can we be sure any of the authors is right? If they didn't get Easter right, why should we believe anything they say about anything?

When you factor in that the gospels were not written by disciples or apostles, the discrepancies begin to make more sense. These accounts were not written by eyewitnesses to the events. The New Testament was written years after Jesus' death by men who were well educated, spoke Greek, and did not live in Israel. That rules out Jesus' followers, who were Jewish peasants, illiterate, and spoke Aramaic.

The modern Easter narrative is not a historical account of an actual event, but a collection of oral traditions that evolved in the decades after Jesus' death by people who were struggling to explain why their messiah had not lived up to expectations, and had failed to keep his own promises. He

told his followers that many of them would still be alive when the Kingdom of God arrived. He was wrong. The resurrection myth was their futile attempt to make sense of something that otherwise made no sense. If the Bible is not a reliable historical or biographical source, what is its worth? Literature. Parable, allegory, poetry, myth, tradition, fable.

Fundagelicals have a lot of explaining to do. While you're at it, maybe you could tell us why the disciples and Mary Magdalene didn't recognize Jesus? Were there two angels at or in the tomb, or just one? Or were they men, not angels at all? The authors were all over the map on that. Or, you could simply accept the obvious fact that Jesus was wrong in his apocalyptic preaching, and the resurrection did not happen at all outside the imaginations of early Christians.