

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

An exercise for pupils on the resurrection of Jesus

(* especially relevant to Chapter 9)

The resurrection accounts in the Gospels are sometimes said to be unreliable because they offer significantly different accounts of the events on the Sunday morning. The word 'significantly' is crucial. A judgment has to be made as to what differences are reasonable and what differences are not. It may be that the presence of differences in the accounts should be taken as evidence of their reliability. After all, the differences would have been obvious to anyone compiling the canon and the opportunity was there to iron out the differences. But clearly no such interference has taken place.

What follows is an exercise for pupils to investigate how significant the differences are. It needs to be said that it is right to trust witnesses from the past. Our knowledge of history is largely bound up with the evidence that witnesses have bequeathed to us. We have to assume that they meant what they said. It is, however, useful when there happens to be more than one account of the same event, allowing the investigator to balance one witness against another. This is the case in the matter of the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection.

Question	Matthew 28:1-10	Mark 16:1-11	Luke 24:1-12
Who goes to the tomb?	Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary'.	Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Salome.	Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, mother of James and 'the other women with them'
Day and time of day	Sunday, as morning was dawning	Sunday, at sunrise	Sunday, very early in the morning
What is said about the tomb/stone?	The angel of the Lord had rolled away the stone and was sitting on it.	The stone was rolled back and they entered the tomb	The stone was rolled away and they entered the tomb.
Who do the women meet?	The angel of the Lord dressed in white. After leaving the tomb they meet Jesus.	A young man in white sitting on the right in the tomb.	Two men in bright, shining clothes.
What do the women do next?	They run to tell the disciples	They run from the tomb, terrified and say nothing to anyone.	They return from the tomb and told everything to the eleven disciples.

Pupils might be asked to list the similarities and differences in the accounts.

It is significant that all accounts agree on a basic outline of events: some women came to the tomb early on Sunday. Mark and Luke say they took spices to anoint the body. Matthew omits this. The women found that the stone was displaced and the body absent from the tomb. They met one or more men wearing bright clothing and they were frightened by this experience. Mary Magdalene and another Mary are mentioned in all accounts.

The differences concern the number of women, the number of people they met at the tomb and the identity of the man/men they met. And whereas Matthew and Luke have the women running to tell the disciples, Mark (assuming the gospel ends at verse 8) says that the women told no-one because they were afraid. The question is whether the differences amount to serious discrepancies, such that the accounts are rendered hopelessly confused, or whether a reasonable explanation can be found for them. On the women who went to the tomb Mark's and Matthew's accounts do not conflict. Luke adds Joanna and writes about 'other women'. It is quite possible that other women were present and that Luke's interest in people led him to find out that other women were there too. The word angel means messenger in Greek and it is quite possible that when Matthew writes of the 'angel of the Lord' Matthew is putting his own interpretation on the identity of the man who spoke to the women. The ending of Mark's gospel is strange and it is likely that it was lost early on. It is quite possible that the original ending, as in Matthew's account, had Jesus reassuring the women and repeating the instruction to go to the disciples.

There are reasonable explanations of the differences and this means that the accounts are not contradictory. No attempt has been made at ironing out the differences, an important piece of evidence in establishing the reliability of the accounts. It could also indicate that the original readers did not view the accounts as contradictory.

Pupils could go on to read the account of the resurrection in John's gospel, John 20:1-18. Pupils will see that there is quite a different account here, the basic difference being that it introduces Simon Peter and John. Mysteriously the 2 men disciples then drop out the story and we are back to Mary Magdalene. But does the account in John differ significantly, such that we cannot trust the basic outline of events?