

A World of Contradictions

When students are first introduced to the historical, as opposed to a devotional, study of the Bible, one of the first things they are forced to grapple with is that the biblical text, whether Old Testament or New Testament, is chock full of discrepancies, many of them irreconcilable. Some of these discrepancies are simple details where one book contradicts what another says about a minor point—the number of soldiers in an army, the year a certain king began his reign, the details of an apostle's itinerary. In some cases seemingly trivial points of difference can actually have an enormous significance for the interpretation of a book or the reconstruction of the history of ancient Israel or the life of the historical Jesus. And then there are instances that involve major issues, where one author has one point of view on an important topic (How was the world created? Why do the people of God suffer? What is the significance of Jesus' death?), and another author has another. Sometimes these views are simply different from one another, but at other times they are directly at odds.

In this chapter I will talk about some of the important and interesting discrepancies of the Bible that emerge when it is examined from a historical perspective. Since my specialty is the New Testament, I will be dealing with the kinds of problems that are found there. But you can rest assured that very much the same problems

can be found in the Old Testament as well—in fact, even more so. Whereas the New Testament, consisting of twenty-seven books, was written by maybe sixteen or seventeen authors over a period of seventy years, the Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures, consists of thirty-nine books written by dozens of authors over at least six hundred years. There is a lot of room for differing perspectives, and if you look for them, you will find them in droves.

My point is not simply that the Bible is full of contradictions, as I explain more fully at the end of the chapter. My students sometimes suspect that this is the ultimate point—that the Bible is riddled with problems and therefore “cannot be believed.” But this is not the ultimate point—even though the discrepancies in the Bible do create certain problems for people with a certain kind of Christian faith (not for all Christians, however). But there are other reasons for discovering that the Bible contains contradictions. It is best to provide these reasons at the end of the chapter, however, rather than the beginning; one should always know what the data *are* before deciding too quickly what the data *mean*.

My goal is not to point out every discrepancy that can be discovered in the New Testament, but only some of the most interesting or important ones. I will start with the Gospels and then move on to Paul. Throughout this discussion I will not be dealing with the very important question of who the authors of these books really were (disciples of Jesus? companions of the apostles? later Christians?). That is the subject of a later chapter. For now it is enough to note that whoever wrote these books, they sometimes stand at odds with one another.

Why is it that casual, and even avid, readers of the Bible never detect these discrepancies, some of which may seem obvious once they are pointed out? My view is that it has to do with the way people read these books. Most people simply read here and there in the Bible—open it up, choose a passage, read it, and try to figure out what it means. There is little or no effort to make a detailed comparison with other, similar passages, in other books. You read a snippet

here, a snippet there, and it all sounds like the Bible. To engage in a historical study of the text, however, requires that you read and compare the texts carefully, down to the minute details.

Yet even careful readers of the Bible often fail to detect differences among its books, again because of the way they read them. Most general readers, unlike those who read the Bible critically from a historical point of view, read the books in sequence. That makes sense—it is, after all, how we read *most* anthologies. And so, if you want to read the New Testament, you start with Matthew and you begin with chapter 1, verse 1, and you read the book from beginning to end, to get a sense of what he is trying to say about the life of Jesus. Then you read Mark, starting at the beginning and reading to the end—and it sounds a lot like Matthew. A lot of the same stories, often in the same words—a few things left out here and there, maybe, but basically the same kind of book. Then you read Luke, beginning to end. Here again: same or similar stories, similar words. When you read John you might notice some differences, but basically it all sounds the same: stories about the things Jesus said and did before he traveled to Jerusalem, was betrayed, arrested, crucified, and raised from the dead.

This is the most natural way of reading any book, from beginning to end. I call this approach “vertical” reading. You start at the top of the page and move to the bottom; start at the beginning of the book and move to the end. There is absolutely nothing wrong with reading the Gospels this way, as this is no doubt how they were written to be read. But there is another way to read them: horizontally. In a horizontal reading you read a story in one of the Gospels, and then read the same story as told by another Gospel, as if they were written in columns next to each other. And you compare the stories carefully, in detail.¹

Reading the Gospels horizontally reveals all sorts of differences and discrepancies. Sometimes the differences are simply variations on a story, possibly significant for knowing what one or the other Gospel writer wanted to emphasize, but not contradicting one

another. For example, in the accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke, a horizontal reading shows that Matthew tells the story of the wise men coming to worship Jesus, whereas Luke tells the story of the shepherds coming to worship him. There are no shepherds in Matthew and no wise men in Luke. This is not a contradiction: Matthew wants (for important reasons, as it turns out) to tell the story of the wise men, and Luke (for other reasons) wants to tell the story of the shepherds.

Then there are differences that may not represent flat-out contradictions but that do seem to stand somewhat at odds with each other. I have already mentioned the cleansing of the Temple in Mark 11 and John 2. In Mark it happens a week before Jesus dies; in John it is the first public event of his three-year ministry. Strictly speaking this difference is not a contradiction: if you are creative enough, you can figure out a plausible explanation for both accounts being right. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, maybe Jesus cleansed the Temple twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of his ministry. On the other hand, this does seem a bit far-fetched, as the question suggests itself: Why wasn't he arrested the first time? Moreover, it means that in order to make Mark and John fit together you have had to create your own version of the Gospel, one different from both of the ones you are reading, for in your version there are two cleansings of the Temple, not one.

There are other differences that, in the opinion of a large number of historical critics, simply cannot be reconciled without doing real violence to the text. I'll be dealing with some of these throughout this chapter, and don't want to spoil the fun by giving the most interesting examples here. For now my point is that most readers don't see these differences because they have been trained, or at least are inclined, to read the Bible in only one way, vertically, whereas the historical approach suggests that it is also useful to read it another way, horizontally.

If you are interested in finding discrepancies yourself, it is in fact very easy to do. Pick a story in the Gospels—for example, Jesus'

birth, the healing of Jairus's daughter, the crucifixion, the resurrection—most any story will do. Read the account in one Gospel, listing carefully everything that happens in sequence; then read the same story in another Gospel, again taking careful notes. Finally, compare your notes. Sometimes the differences are slight, but sometimes they matter a lot—even if at first glance they seem rather unimportant. That is the case with my first example. The issue at stake is a very simple and basic one, which can be expressed in a seemingly unambiguous question: When did Jesus die? That is, on what day, and at what time of day, was Jesus crucified? It turns out that the answer differs, depending on which Gospel you read.

AN OPENING ILLUSTRATION: THE DEATH OF JESUS, IN MARK AND JOHN

This is an illustration of discrepancies within the New Testament that I frequently use with my students.² It is a "textbook case" because both Mark and John give explicit indications of when Jesus dies. And he dies at different times, depending on which Gospel you read.

Mark was probably the first Gospel to be written. Scholars have long thought that it was produced about thirty-five or forty years after Jesus' death, possibly around 65 or 70 CE.³ The first ten chapters of Mark are about Jesus' public ministry in Galilee, the northern part of Israel, where he teaches, heals the sick, casts out demons, and confronts his Jewish opponents, the Pharisees. At the end of his life he makes a journey to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Jewish feast of Passover; while he is there he is arrested and crucified (chapters 11–16).

To make sense of Mark's dating of the crucifixion (and of John's, for that matter), I need to provide some important background information. In the days of Jesus, the Passover, held annually, was the most important Jewish festival. It was instituted to commemorate the events of the Exodus that had occurred centuries earlier, in the

time of Moses, as recounted in the Old Testament book of Exodus (Exodus 5–15). According to that account, the children of Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years, but God heard their cries and raised up for them a savior, Moses. Moses was sent to the Pharaoh and demanded, speaking for God, that he “let my people go.” But the Pharaoh had a hard heart and refused. In order to persuade him, God empowered Moses to send ten horrible plagues against the Egyptians, the last of which was the most awful: every firstborn Egyptian child and animal would be killed by the angel of death.

The Israelites were given instructions to avoid having their own children slain. Each family was to sacrifice a lamb, take some of its blood, and spread it on the doorposts and lintel of the house where they lived. Then, when the angel of death arrived that night, he would see the blood on the door and “pass over” that Israelite house, moving on to houses without the blood, to murder a firstborn child. And so it happened. Pharaoh was struck to the heart, and in anguish he let the Israelites (600,000 men, plus the women and children) leave his land. But after they set out, he had a change of heart, marshaled his army, and chased after them. He tracked them down at the Red Sea—called the “Sea of Reeds” in Hebrew—but God performed yet another miracle, allowing Moses to part the waters of the sea so the Israelites could cross on dry land. When the Egyptian armies followed in chase, God caused the waters to return and drowned the whole lot of them.

And so Israel was saved from its slavery in Egypt. God commanded Moses that from that time onward the Israelites were to commemorate this great event by a special meal, the annual Passover celebration (Exodus 12). In Jesus’ day, Jews from around the world would come to Jerusalem to celebrate the event. On the day before the celebratory meal was eaten, Jews would bring a lamb to the Jerusalem Temple, or more likely purchase one there, and have it slaughtered by the priests. They would then take it home to prepare the meal. This happened on the Day of Preparation for the Passover.

Now the only confusing aspect of this celebration involves the way ancient Jews told time—the same way modern Jews do. Even today the “Sabbath” is Saturday, but it begins on Friday night, when it gets dark. That is because in traditional Judaism the new day begins at nightfall, with the evening. (That’s why, in the book of Genesis, when God creates the heavens and the earth, we’re told that “there was evening and morning, the first day”; a day consisted of night and day, not day and night.) And so the Sabbath begins Friday night—and in fact every day begins with nightfall.

And so, on the Day of Preparation the lamb was slaughtered and the meal was prepared in the afternoon. The meal was eaten that night, which was actually the beginning of the next day: Passover day. The meal consisted of a number of symbolic foods: the lamb, to commemorate the original slaughter of the lambs in Exodus; bitter herbs, to remind the Jews of their bitter slavery in Egypt; unleavened bread (bread made without yeast) to remind them that the Israelites had to flee from Egypt without much warning, so that they could not wait for the bread to rise; and several cups of wine. The Passover day, then, began with the evening meal and lasted approximately twenty-four hours, through the morning and afternoon of the next day, after which would begin the day after Passover.

Now we can return to Mark’s account of Jesus’ death. Jesus and his disciples have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. In Mark 14:12, the disciples ask Jesus where they are to prepare the Passover meal for that evening. In other words, this is on the Day of Preparation for Passover. Jesus gives them instructions. They make the preparations, and when it is evening—the beginning of Passover day—they have the meal. It is a special meal indeed. Jesus takes the symbolic foods of the Passover and imbues them with yet more symbolic meaning. He takes the unleavened bread, breaks it, and says, “This is my body.” By implication, his body must be broken for salvation. Then after supper he takes the cup of wine and says, “This is my blood of the covenant, that is poured out for many” (Mark 14:22–25), meaning that his own blood must be shed.

After the disciples eat the Passover meal they go out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Judas Iscariot brings the troops and performs his act of betrayal. Jesus is taken to stand trial before the Jewish authorities. He spends the night in jail, and the next morning he is put on trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who finds him guilty and condemns him to death by crucifixion. We are told that he is crucified that same day, at nine o'clock in the morning (Mark 15:25). Jesus, then, dies on the day of Passover, the morning after the Passover meal was eaten.

All this is clear and straightforward in Mark's Gospel, but despite some basic similarities, it is at odds with the story told in the Gospel of John, which is also clear and straightforward. Here, too, Jesus goes to Jerusalem in the last week of his life to celebrate the Passover feast, and here, too, there is a last meal, a betrayal, a trial before Pilate, and the crucifixion. But it is striking that in John, at the beginning of the account, in contrast to Mark, the disciples do not ask Jesus where they are "to prepare the Passover." Consequently, he gives them no instructions for preparing the meal. 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 (John 13:1-20).

After the meal they go out. Jesus is betrayed by Judas, appears before the Jewish authorities, spends the night in jail, and is put on trial before Pontius Pilate, who finds him guilty and condemns him to be crucified. And we are told exactly when Pilate pronounces the sentence: "It was the Day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon" (John 19:14).

Noon? On the Day of Preparation for the Passover? The day the lambs were slaughtered? How can that be? In Mark's Gospel, Jesus lived through that day, 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, sometime after noon.

I do not think this is a difference that can be reconciled. People over the years have tried, of course. Some have pointed out that Mark also indicates that Jesus died on a day that is called "the Day of Preparation" (Mark 15:42). That is absolutely true—but what these readers fail to notice is that Mark tells us what he means by this phrase: it is the Day of Preparation "for the Sabbath" (*not* the Day of Preparation for the Passover). In other words, in Mark, this is not the day before the Passover meal was eaten but the day before Sabbath; it is called the day of "preparation" because one had to prepare the meals for Saturday on Friday afternoon.

And so the contradiction stands: in Mark, Jesus eats the Passover meal (Thursday night) and is crucified the following morning. In John, Jesus does not eat the Passover meal but is crucified on the day before the Passover meal was to be eaten.⁴ Moreover, in Mark, Jesus is nailed to the cross at nine in the morning; in John, he is not condemned until noon, and then he is taken out and crucified.

Some scholars have argued that we have this difference between the Gospels because different Jews celebrated Passover on different days of the week. This is one of those explanations that sounds plausible until you dig a bit and think a bit more. It is true that some sectarian groups not connected with the Temple in Jerusalem thought that the Temple authorities followed an incorrect calendar. But in both Mark and John, Jesus is not outside Jerusalem with some sectarian group of Jews: he is in Jerusalem, where the lambs are being slaughtered. And in Jerusalem, there was only one day of Passover a year. The Jerusalem priests did not accommodate the calendrical oddities of a few sectarian fringe groups.

What is one to make of this contradiction? Again, on one level it seems like a rather minor point. I mean, who really cares if it was one day or the next? The point is that Jesus got crucified, right?

Well, that is both right and wrong. Another question to ask is not "Was Jesus crucified?" but also "What does it mean that Jesus was crucified?" And for this, little details like the day and time actually matter. The way I explain the importance of such minutiae to

my students is this: When, today, a homicide is committed, and the police detectives come in to the crime scene, they begin searching for little scraps of evidence, looking for the trace of a fingerprint or a strand of hair on the floor. Someone might reasonably look at what they are doing and say, "What's wrong with you? Can't you see that there's a dead body on the floor? Why are you snooping around for a fingerprint?" Yet sometimes the smallest clue can lead to a solution of the case. Why, and by whom, was this person killed? So, too, with the Gospels. Sometimes the smallest piece of evidence can give important clues about what the author thought was really going on.

I can't give a full analysis here, but I will point out a significant feature of John's Gospel—the last of our Gospels to be written, probably some twenty-five years or so after Mark's. John is the only Gospel that indicates that Jesus is "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." This is declared by John the Baptist at the very beginning of the narrative (John 1:29) and again six verses later (John 1:35). Why, then, did John—our latest Gospel—change the day and time when Jesus died? It may be because in John's Gospel, Jesus is the Passover Lamb, whose sacrifice brings salvation from sins. Exactly like the Passover Lamb, Jesus has to die on the day (the Day of Preparation) and the time (sometime after noon), when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple.

In other words, John has changed a historical datum in order to make a theological point: Jesus is the sacrificial lamb. And to convey this theological point, John has had to create a discrepancy between his account and the others.⁵

This preliminary study of just one small discrepancy can lead us to several conclusions that I will be stating more forcefully at the end of the chapter.

- There are discrepancies in the books of the New Testament.
- Some of these discrepancies cannot be reconciled.

- It is impossible that both Mark's and John's accounts are historically accurate, since they contradict each other on the question of when Jesus died.
- To understand what each author is trying to say, we have to look at the details of *each* account—and by no means treat one account as if it were saying the same thing as another account. John is different from Mark on a key, if seemingly minor, point. If we want to understand what John is saying about Jesus, we cannot reconcile the discrepancy, or we miss his point.

DISCREPANCIES IN THE ACCOUNTS OF JESUS' BIRTH AND LIFE

We can now consider a number of discrepancies among the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, starting with the narratives of his birth. I have somewhat arbitrarily divided these into differences that strike me as particularly important and differences that may seem relatively minor or just curious. Again, I should stress that I am not presenting every possible instance of a discrepancy—that would take a book much longer than this one.

The Birth of Jesus

There are only two accounts of Jesus' birth in the New Testament, the opening chapters of Matthew and of Luke. Mark and John say nothing about his birth (the virgin birth, his being born in Bethlehem, and other elements of the Christmas story); in Mark and John, he appears on the scene as an adult. Nor are the details of his birth mentioned by Paul or any of the other New Testament writers. What people know—or think they know—about the Christmas story therefore comes exclusively from Matthew and Luke. And the story that is told every December is in fact a conflation of the accounts of

these two Gospels, a combination of the details of one with the details of the other, in order to create one large, harmonious account. In fact, the accounts themselves are not at all harmonious. Not only do they tell completely different stories about how Jesus was born, but some of the differences appear to be irreconcilable (some others do not pass the test of historical plausibility either, but that is a different matter).

The easiest way to point out the differences between the accounts is by summarizing both. Matthew 1:18–2:23 goes like this: Mary and Joseph are espoused to be married, when Mary is found to be pregnant. Joseph, naturally suspecting the worst, plans to divorce her, but is told in a dream that Mary has conceived by the Holy Spirit.⁶ They get married and Jesus is born. Wise men then come from the east, following a star that has led them to Jerusalem, where they ask about where the King of the Jews is to be born. King Herod makes inquiries and learns from the Jewish scholars that it is predicted that the king will come from Bethlehem. He informs the wise men, who proceed to Bethlehem—once again led by the star, which stops over the house where the family of Jesus resides. The wise men offer him gifts and then, warned in a dream, do not return to inform Herod, as he had requested, but make their way home by another route. Herod, since he himself is the king, is fearful of this one born to be king and sends his troops to slaughter every male child two years and younger in and around Bethlehem. But Joseph is warned of the danger in a dream. He, Mary, and Jesus flee from town in advance of the slaughter and travel to Egypt. Later, in Egypt, Joseph learns in a dream that Herod has died, and now they can return. But when they discover that Archelaus, Herod's son, is the ruler of Judea, they decide not to go back, but instead go to the northern district of Galilee, to the town of Nazareth. This then is where Jesus is raised.

One feature of Matthew that makes it distinctive from Luke is how the author continually emphasizes that the various events were "to fulfill what the prophet had said" (Matthew 1:22, 2:6, 2:18, 2:23).

That is, Jesus' birth is a fulfillment of the prophecies of Scripture. Luke probably would not have denied this, but he says nothing about it. There are two points on which he does agree with Matthew, however: Jesus' mother was a virgin, and he was born in Bethlehem. But it is striking just how different Luke's narrative is from Matthew's in the way he makes these two points.

Luke's much longer version (Luke 1:4–2:40) begins with a lengthy account of the angel's announcement to a barren woman, Elizabeth, that she will give birth to John (the Baptist), who, according to Luke, is actually Jesus' cousin (Elizabeth and Mary are related; Luke is the only New Testament writer to say this). Luke says that Mary is a virgin espoused to Joseph. Later an angel appears to her to inform her that she, too, will conceive, by the Holy Spirit, and she will give birth to the Son of God. She visits the six-month-pregnant Elizabeth, whose child leaps in the womb in joy at being visited by "the mother of [the] Lord." Mary then bursts into song. John the Baptist is born, and his father, Zechariah, bursts into prophecy. And then we get to the story of Jesus' own birth.

There is a decree from the Roman emperor Augustus that every one in the empire needs to register for a census; we are told that this is the first census, when Quirinius was the governor of Syria. Everyone is to return to their ancestral home to register. Since Joseph's ancestors were from Bethlehem (he is descended from King David, who was born there), he travels there with Mary, his espoused. While there she gives birth to Jesus and wraps him in bands of cloth and lays him in a manger, "for there was no room for them in the inn." Shepherds in the field are visited by an angelic host who tells them that the Messiah has been born in Bethlehem; they go and worship the child. Eight days later, Jesus is circumcised. Jesus is then presented to God in the Temple, and his parents offer the sacrifice prescribed for this occasion by the law of Moses. Jesus is recognized there as the Messiah by a righteous and devout man named Simeon and by an elderly and pious widow, Anna. When Joseph and Mary have finished "everything required

by the Law of the Lord" concerning the birth of their firstborn, they return to Nazareth, where Jesus is raised.

The "Law of the Lord" referred to repeatedly throughout this account is Leviticus 12, which specifies that the offerings in the Temple are to be made thirty-three days after the birth of the child.

Before examining the differences between these two accounts, I should point out that the historian finds real difficulties in both of them. In Matthew, for example, what does it mean that there is a star guiding the wise men, that this star stops over Jerusalem, and then starts up again, leads them to Bethlehem, and stops again over the very house where Jesus was born? What kind of star would this be, exactly? A star that moves slowly enough for the wise men to follow on foot or on camel, stops, starts again, and stops again? And how exactly does a star stop over a house? I tell my students to go outside on some starry night, pick one of the brightest stars in the sky, and figure out which house on their block it is standing over. Obviously what is being narrated here is a miraculous event, but it is very hard to understand what the author actually has in mind. It doesn't appear to be a real star, a nova, a comet, or any astronomical phenomenon ever known.

In terms of the historical record, I should also point out that there is no account in any ancient source whatsoever about King Herod slaughtering children in or around Bethlehem, or anyplace else. No other author, biblical or otherwise, mentions the event. Is it, like John's account of Jesus' death, a detail made up by Matthew in order to make some kind of theological point?

The historical problems with Luke are even more pronounced. For one thing, we have relatively good records for the reign of Caesar Augustus, and there is no mention anywhere in any of them of an empire-wide census for which everyone had to register by returning to their ancestral home. And how could such a thing even be imagined? Joseph returns to Bethlehem because his ancestor David was born there. But David lived a thousand years before Joseph. Are we to imagine that everyone in the Roman Empire was required to

return to the homes of their ancestors from a thousand years earlier? If we had a new worldwide census today and each of us had to return to the towns of our ancestors a thousand years back—where would you go? Can you imagine the total disruption of human life that this kind of universal exodus would require? And can you imagine that such a project would never be mentioned in any of the newspapers? There is not a single reference to any such census in any ancient source, apart from Luke. Why then does Luke say there was such a census? The answer may seem obvious to you. He wanted Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, even though he knew he came from Nazareth. Matthew did, too, but he got him born there in a different way.

The differences between the accounts are quite striking. Virtually everything said in Matthew is missing from Luke, and all the stories of Luke are missing from Matthew. Matthew mentions dreams that came to Joseph that are absent in Luke; Luke mentions angelic visitations to Elizabeth and Mary that are absent in Matthew. Matthew has the wise men, the slaughter of the children by Herod, the flight to Egypt, the Holy Family bypassing Judea to return to Nazareth—all missing from Luke. Luke has the birth of John the Baptist, the census of Caesar, the trip to Bethlehem, the manger and the inn, the shepherds, the circumcision, the presentation in the Temple, and the return home immediately afterward—all of them missing from Matthew.

Now it may be that Matthew is simply telling some of the story and Luke is telling the rest of it, so that we are justified every December in combining the two accounts into a Christmas pageant where you get both the shepherds *and* the wise men, both the trip from Nazareth *and* the flight to Egypt. The problem is that when you start looking at the accounts closely, there are not only differences but also discrepancies that appear difficult if not impossible to reconcile.

If the Gospels are right that Jesus' birth occurred during Herod's reign, then Luke cannot also be right that it happened when Quirinius was the governor of Syria. We know from a range of other historical sources, including the Roman historian Tacitus, the Jewish

historian Josephus, and several ancient inscriptions, that Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until 6 CE, ten years after the death of Herod.

A careful comparison of the two accounts also shows internal discrepancies. One way to get to the problem is to ask this: According to Matthew, what was Joseph and Mary's hometown? Your natural reaction is to say "Nazareth." But only Luke says this. Matthew says nothing of the sort. He first mentions Joseph and Mary not in connection with Nazareth but in connection with Bethlehem. The wise men, who are following a star (presumably it took some time), come to worship Jesus in his *house* in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary evidently live there. There is nothing about an inn and a manger in Matthew. Moreover, when Herod slaughters the children, he instructs his soldiers to kill every male two years and under. This must indicate that Jesus had been born some time before the wise men show up. Otherwise the instruction does not make much sense: surely even Roman soldiers could recognize that a toddler walking around the playground was not an infant born some time last week. So Joseph and Mary are still living in Bethlehem months or even a year or more after the birth of Jesus. So how can Luke be right when he says that they are from Nazareth and returned there just a month or so after Jesus' birth? Moreover, according to Matthew, after the family flees to Egypt and then returns upon the death of Herod, they initially plan to return to Judea, where Bethlehem is located. They cannot do so, however, because now Archelaus is the ruler, and so they relocate to Nazareth. In Matthew's account they are not originally from Nazareth but from Bethlehem.

Even more obvious, though, is the discrepancy involved with the events after Jesus' birth. If Matthew is right that the family escaped to Egypt, how can Luke be right that they returned directly to Nazareth?

In short, there are enormous problems with the birth narratives when viewed from a historical perspective. There are historical implausibilities and discrepancies that can scarcely be reconciled. Why

such differences? The answer might seem obvious to some readers. What historical critics have long said about these Gospel accounts is that they both are trying to emphasize the same two points: that Jesus' mother was a virgin and that he was born in Bethlehem. And why did he have to be born in Bethlehem? Matthew hits the nail on the head: there is a prophecy in the Old Testament book of Micah that a savior would come from Bethlehem. What were these Gospel writers to do with the fact that it was widely known that Jesus came from Nazareth? They had to come up with a narrative that explained how he came from Nazareth, in Galilee, a little one-horse town that no one had ever heard of, but was born in Bethlehem, the home of King David, royal ancestor of the Messiah. To get Jesus born in Bethlehem but raised in Nazareth, Matthew and Luke independently came up with solutions that no doubt struck each of them as plausible. But the historian can detect the problems with each narrative, and the careful reader can see that when the stories are placed side by side (read horizontally) they are at odds with each other at several key points.

The Genealogy of Jesus

Genealogies are not usually among the favorite passages of readers of the Bible. Sometimes my students complain when I have them read the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke. If they think this is bad, I tell them they should take a class on the Hebrew Bible and read the genealogy of 1 Chronicles. It covers nine full chapters, name after name. By comparison, the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke are short and sweet. The problem is that the genealogies are different.

Once again, Matthew and Luke are our only Gospels that give Jesus' family line. Both of them trace his lineage through Joseph to the Jewish ancestors. This in itself creates a puzzling situation. As we have seen, both Matthew and Luke want to insist that Jesus' mother was a virgin: she conceived not by having sex with Joseph but by the

Holy Spirit. Joseph is not Jesus' father. But that creates an obvious problem. If Jesus is not a blood-relation to Joseph, why is it that Matthew and Luke trace Jesus' bloodline precisely through Joseph? This is a question that neither author answers: both accounts give a genealogy that can't be the genealogy of Jesus, since his only bloodline goes through Mary, yet neither author provides her genealogy.

Apart from this general problem, there are several obvious differences between the genealogies of Matthew 1 and Luke 3. Some of them are not discrepancies per se; they are just differences. For example, Matthew gives the genealogy at the very outset of his Gospel, in the opening verses; Luke gives his after the baptism of Jesus in chapter 3 (an odd place for a genealogy, since genealogies have to do with your birth, not your baptism as a thirty-year-old. But Luke may have had his reasons for locating it where he does). Matthew's genealogy traces Joseph's lineage back through King David, the ancestor of the Messiah, all the way to Abraham, the father of the Jews. Luke's genealogy goes back well beyond that, tracing the line to Adam, father of the human race.

I have an aunt who is a genealogist, who is proud to have traced our family back to a passenger on the *Mayflower*. But here is a genealogy that goes back to Adam. As in Adam and Eve—the first humans. It's an amazing genealogy.

One might wonder why the two authors have different end points for their genealogies. Usually it is thought that Matthew, a Gospel concerned to show the Jewishness of Jesus, wants to emphasize Jesus' relation to the greatest king of the Jews, David, and to the father of the Jews, Abraham. Luke, on the other hand, is concerned to show that Jesus is the savior of all people, Jew and gentile, as seen in Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, where the gentiles are brought into the church. And so Luke shows that Jesus is related to all of us through Adam.

One other difference between the two genealogies is that Matthew starts at the beginning, with Abraham, and moves down generation

by generation to Joseph; Luke goes the other direction, starting with Joseph and moving generation by generation back to Adam.

These then are simply some of the differences between the two accounts. The real problem they pose, however, is that the two genealogies are actually different. The easiest way to see the difference is to ask the simple question, Who, in each genealogy, is Joseph's father, patrilineal grandfather, and great-grandfather? In Matthew the family line goes from Joseph to Jacob to Matthan to Eleazar to Eliud and on into the past. In Luke it goes from Joseph to Heli to Mathat to Levi to Melchi. The lines become similar once we get all the way back to King David (although there are other problems, as we'll see), but from David to Joseph, the lines are at odds.

How does one solve this problem? One typical suggestion is to say that Matthew's genealogy is of Joseph, since Matthew focuses on Joseph more in the birth narrative, and that Luke's is of Mary, since she is the focus of his birth narrative. It is an attractive solution, but it has a fatal flaw. Luke explicitly indicates that the family line is that of Joseph, not Mary (Luke 1:23; also Matthew 1:16).⁷

There are other problems. In some ways Matthew's genealogy is the more remarkable because he stresses the numerological significance of Jesus' ancestry. From Abraham to David, Israel's greatest king, there were fourteen generations; from David to the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians, Israel's greatest disaster, there were fourteen generations; and from the Babylonian disaster to the birth of Jesus, fourteen generations (1:17). Fourteen, fourteen, and fourteen—it is almost as if God had planned it this way. In fact, for Matthew, he had. After every fourteen generations there occurs an enormously significant event. This must mean that Jesus—the fourteenth generation—is someone of very great importance to God.

The problem is that the fourteen-fourteen-fourteen schema doesn't actually work. If you read through the names carefully, you'll see that in the third set of fourteen there are in fact only thirteen generations. Moreover, it is relatively easy to check Matthew's genealogy

against his source, the Hebrew Bible itself, which provides him with the names for his genealogy. It turns out that Matthew left out some names in the fourteen generations from David to the Babylonian disaster. In 1:8 he indicates that Joram is the father of Uzziah. But we know from 1 Chronicles 3:10–12 that Joram was not Uzziah's father, but his great-great-grandfather.⁸ In other words, Matthew has dropped three generations from the genealogy. Why? The answer should be obvious. If he included *all* the generations, he would not be able to claim that something significant happened at every fourteenth generation.

But why does he stress the number fourteen in particular? Why not seventeen, or eleven? Scholars have given several explanations over the years. Some have pointed out that in the Bible seven is the perfect number. If so, then what is fourteen? Twice seven. This could be a "doubly perfect" genealogy. Another, possibly more convincing, theory is that the genealogy is designed to stress Jesus' status as the Messiah. The Messiah is to be the "son of David," a descendant of Israel's greatest king. It is important to know that in ancient languages, the letters of the alphabet functioned also as numerals, so that the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, aleph, was also the numeral 1, the second, beth, was 2, the third, gimel, was 3, and so on. Also, in ancient Hebrew no vowels were used. So the name David was spelled D-V-D. In Hebrew, the letter D (daleth) is the number 4 and the V (waw) is 6. If you add up the letters of David's name, it equals 14. That may be why Matthew wanted there to be three groups of precisely fourteen generations in the genealogy of the son of David, the Messiah, Jesus.

Unfortunately, to make the numbers work he had to leave out some names. I might also point out that if Matthew was right in his fourteen-fourteen-fourteen schema, there would be forty-two names between Abraham and Jesus. Luke's genealogy, however, gives fifty-seven names. These are different genealogies.

And the reason for the discrepancies? Each author had a purpose for including a genealogy—or, more likely, several purposes: to show Jesus' connection to the father of the Jews, Abraham (especially Mat-

thew), and the great king of the Jews, David (Matthew), and to the human race as a whole (Luke). Probably the two authors inherited, or possibly they made up, different genealogies. Of course neither could know that his account would be placed in a "New Testament" and be carefully compared with the other by historical critics living two thousand years later. And they certainly didn't consult with each other to get their facts straight. Each gave his account as well as he could, but their accounts ended up different.

Other Discrepancies from the Life of Jesus

Now that we have looked in some detail at a few of the interesting discrepancies among the Gospel accounts, I can touch on some others more quickly. For the most part you can examine these on your own if you choose. And you can find plenty more, simply by reading the Gospels horizontally, story by story.

We can approach some of the discrepancies by asking some simple questions. I'll limit myself here to five.

What Did the Voice at Jesus' Baptism Say?

It depends on which account you read. The baptism is not narrated in John, but we do have accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all very similar. This is what one would expect: scholars have long known that Matthew and Luke got a number of their stories from Mark, one of their key sources; that's why there are so many cases of verbatim agreement. But there are differences because Matthew and Luke changed the wording of their sources in certain places. In any event, in all three accounts of Jesus' baptism, when he emerges from the water the heavens open up, the Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and a voice comes from heaven. But what does the voice say? In Matthew it says, "This is my son, in whom I am well pleased." The voice appears to be speaking to the people around Jesus, or possibly to John the Baptist, informing them who Jesus is. In Mark, however,

the voice says, "You are my son, in whom I am well pleased." In this case the voice appears to be speaking directly to Jesus, telling him, or confirming to him, who he really is. In Luke we have something different (this is a bit complicated, because different manuscripts of Luke's Gospel give the voice different words. I am taking here the original wording of the verse as found in some older manuscripts of the Bible, even though it is not found in most English translations).⁹ Here the voice says, "You are my son, today I have begotten you" (3:22), quoting the words of Psalm 2:7.

Each account is trying to do something different with the voice. That is to say, the different words mean different things and have different functions: in Matthew, the words identify Jesus to John the Baptist and the crowd; in Mark, to confirm Jesus' identity to him directly; in Luke, they declare that the baptism has made (or ratified?) him as God's special son. But there remains the question, What did the voice actually say? Early Christians were confused by this problem, so much so that a later Gospel, called the Gospel of the Ebionites, resolved it by indicating that the voice came from heaven on three occasions. First it said the words as related by Mark, which were addressed to Jesus; then it said the words as related by Matthew, addressed to John the Baptist and the crowd; and finally the words as related by Luke. But unless someone is willing to rewrite all three Gospels, the fact is they indicate that the voice said different things.

Where Was Jesus the Day After He Was Baptized?

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the so-called Synoptic Gospels—Jesus, after his baptism, goes off into the wilderness where he will be tempted by the Devil.¹⁰ Mark especially is quite clear about the matter, for he states, after telling of the baptism, that Jesus left "immediately" for the wilderness. What about John? In John there is no account of Jesus being tempted by the Devil in the wilderness. The day after John the Baptist has borne witness to the Spirit descend-

ing on Jesus as a dove at baptism (John 1:29–34), he sees Jesus again and declares him to be the Lamb of God (John is explicit, stating that this occurred "the next day"). Jesus then starts gathering his disciples around him (1:35–52) and launches into his public ministry by performing his miracle of turning water into wine (2:1–11). So where was Jesus the next day? It depends on which Gospel you read.

Was Jairus's Daughter Already Dead?

To illustrate my point that minor, irreconcilable differences can be found throughout the Gospels, I have chosen just one simple example from Jesus' healing ministry. In Mark, our earliest account, a leader of the synagogue named Jairus comes up to Jesus and begs him to hasten home with him, because his daughter is very sick and he wants Jesus to heal her. Before they can start on their way, though, Jesus is interrupted by a woman with a hemorrhage, whom he heals. Then servants from Jairus's house arrive to tell him that it is too late—the girl has died. Jesus tells them not to fret; he goes to the house and raises the girl from the dead (Mark 5:21–43). Matthew has the same story (9:18–26), but with a key difference. In Matthew's version Jairus comes to Jesus because his daughter has already died. He wants Jesus to come not to heal her but to raise her from the dead. And Jesus does so. It may seem like a minor difference, but it can be seen as highly significant—a matter of life and death.

Who Is for Jesus and Who Is Against Him?

Some sayings of Jesus are rendered in similar but nevertheless diverging ways. One of my favorite examples of this phenomenon is the pair of sayings related in Matthew 12:30 and Mark 9:40. In Matthew, Jesus declares, "Whoever is not with me is against me." In Mark, he says, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Did he say both things? Could he mean both things? How can both be true at once? Or is it possible that one of the Gospel writers got things switched around?

How Long Did Jesus' Ministry Last?

Our earliest Gospel, Mark, does not give an explicit indication of the length of Jesus' public ministry, but does give some suggestive comments. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, in chapter 2, his disciples are going through the wheat fields and eating the grain, to the consternation of the Pharisees, who believe they are violating the Sabbath. This must be taking place, then, in the fall, at the time of the harvest. After this point the action moves very quickly: one of Mark's favorite words is *euthus*, "immediately"—"immediately" Jesus did this, "immediately" he did that. By chapter 11, after lots of "immediately's" we come to the last week of Jesus' life, at the Passover feast in Jerusalem. Passover is in the spring, and the distinct impression is that the ministry has lasted a few months, from harvest time to spring.

A few months? Doesn't everyone know that Jesus' ministry lasted three years? Actually, the idea that it lasted three years comes not from the Synoptic Gospels—Mark, Matthew, and Luke—but from the last Gospel, John. On three separate occasions John refers to different Passover celebrations, which since they were a year apart would seem to indicate that the ministry must have lasted at least over two years, rounded up to three. But which is it? I would say this is not technically a discrepancy, but it is hard to know what to make of all of Mark's "immediately's" if he didn't really mean them.

One can find many other discrepancies in the accounts of Jesus' ministry if one were inclined to track them all down. Rather than continue on the same track, though, at this point I'd like to move on and talk about discrepancies found in the Passion Narratives—the accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection. Some of these discrepancies, too, are highly significant.

Discrepancies in the Passion Narratives

We have already talked about a couple of the discrepancies between the Gospels of Mark and John with regard to the Passion Narratives: the date of the Temple cleansing (Mark 11; John 2) and the day and time of his death (Mark 14–15; John 18–19). These are not the only differences in our Gospels' accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection. Here I will talk about three important differences at some length, and then give a short rundown of a few others.

The Trial Before Pilate

We start with a comparison of Mark, our earliest canonical Gospel, and John, our latest. In both accounts Jesus is put on trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and condemned to death for calling himself the King of the Jews. But there are some very interesting differences between Mark's and John's narratives of the trial.

Mark's account is short and straightforward. Early in the morning the Jewish leaders bring Jesus to Pilate, who asks him if he is, in fact, the King of the Jews. Jesus replies in just two words, in Greek: "*su legeis*." "You say so." The Jewish priests accuse him of many things, and Pilate expresses surprise that Jesus puts up no defense. We are then told that Pilate had a custom of releasing a prisoner to the Jewish people during Passover, and he asks the gathered crowds whether they want him to release the "King of the Jews." The chief priests intervene to stir up the crowd to ask for a murderer named Barabbas to be released to them instead of Jesus. Pilate asks the crowd what they want done with Jesus. They reply that he should crucify him. And "to satisfy the crowd" he does what they ask: he releases Barabbas, has Jesus flogged, and hands him over to be crucified.

If Mark's were our only account of the event, we would have the impression that the trial was very quick; that Jesus said almost nothing (just two words); and that Pilate, the Jewish leaders accusing

Jesus, the crowds, and Jesus himself were all in one place exchanging their views.

But John (18:28–19:14) has a very different account. In John the Jewish leaders take Jesus to Pilate early in the morning, but they refuse to enter Pilate's headquarters because they want to "avoid ritual defilement" so that they can "eat the Passover" that evening (18:28; remember, though, that in Mark's Gospel they had already eaten the Passover meal the night before). We're not told why they would be defiled by entering the headquarters. Because it was a pagan place? Built on a cemetery? Something else? But the result is that the trial proceeds in a rather peculiar way. Jesus is inside the headquarters with Pilate, the Jewish authorities who accuse him are outside the headquarters, along with the Jewish crowd, and Pilate runs back and forth between accuser and accused, talking first to one, then to the other. Pilate enters and leaves the headquarters six times over the course of the trial and has discussions both with Jesus and with the accusers—reasoning with them, pleading with them, trying to get them to listen to sense.

You can find numerous other differences between the accounts if you read them horizontally. Here I mention just three and point out their potential significance. First, Jesus has a lot more to say in John's account than in Mark. In fact, he has sustained conversations with Pilate, speaking of his "kingdom that is not of this world" (18:36), indicating that he has come into the world to speak the truth (18:37), declaring that Pilate has no ultimate power over him, except what has been given him by God (19:11). These extended dialogues conform well with what you find throughout all of John's Gospel, where Jesus engages in long protracted speeches, quite unlike the series of aphorisms and one-liners that you frequently find in the Synoptic Gospels.

Second, rather than having Jesus flogged after his trial is over and the sentence has been pronounced—which, one might think, would be the sensible time to carry out the sentence—in John, Pilate has Jesus flogged in the middle of the proceedings (19:1). A variety of

explanations have been given for John's change of this detail; it may be because of what happens next: Pilate brings Jesus out of the headquarters to present him, beaten, bloodied, and in a purple robe, to the Jewish people, and says to them, "Behold the man." For the author of John, Jesus is much more than a man, but Pilate and the Jewish crowds don't recognize it. Pilate and his soldiers are mocking Jesus by dressing him up in a crown of thorns and giving him a purple robe and declaring, "Hail, King of the Jews." In fact, unbeknownst to them their declaration is true. For John, Jesus really is the King, appearances notwithstanding.

Finally, it is significant that in John's Gospel, on three occasions Pilate expressly declares that Jesus is innocent, does not deserve to be punished, and ought to be released (18:38; 19:6; and by implication in 19:12). In Mark, Pilate never declares Jesus innocent. Why this heightened emphasis in John? Scholars have long noted that John is in many ways the most virulently anti-Jewish of our Gospels (see John 8:42–44, where Jesus declares that the Jews are not children of God but "children of the Devil"). In that context, why narrate the trial in such a way that the Roman governor repeatedly insists that Jesus is innocent? Ask yourself: If the Romans are not responsible for Jesus' death, who is? The Jews. And so they are, for John. In 19:16 we are told that Pilate handed Jesus over to the Jewish chief priests so that they could have him crucified.

The Death of Judas

In all four Gospels Judas Iscariot is said to be the one who betrayed Jesus to the authorities, leading to his arrest. The four accounts differ on why Judas did the foul deed. There is no reason stated in Mark, although we are told that he received money for the act, so maybe it was out of greed (14:10–11). Matthew (26:14) states explicitly that Judas did it for the money. Luke, on the other hand, indicates that Judas did it because "Satan entered into him" (22:3). In other words, the devil made him do it. In John, Judas is himself called "a devil"

(6:70–71), and so presumably he betrayed his master because he had an evil streak.

More interesting yet is the question of what happened to Judas after he performed the act of betrayal. Mark and John say nothing about the matter: Judas simply disappears from the scene. So, too, in the Gospel of Luke, but Luke wrote a second volume to accompany his Gospel, the book of Acts.¹¹ Acts gives an account of what happened to Judas after the betrayal, as does the Gospel of Matthew, but it is striking that the two accounts stand directly at odds with each other on a number of points.

The commonly held view that Judas went out and “hanged himself” comes from Matthew (27:3–10). After Judas sees that his betrayal has led to Jesus’ conviction, he feels remorse and tries to return his pay of thirty pieces of silver to the Jewish chief priests, telling them that he has “sinned by betraying innocent blood.” They refuse to accept the money, however, so he throws it down in the Temple and goes out and hangs himself. The chief priests then collect the money, but decide that they cannot put it back into the Temple treasure because it is “blood money”—money that has been tainted with innocent blood. So they decide to put it to good use and purchase a “potter’s field,” presumably a field from which potters took clay, as a place to bury foreigners who died in Jerusalem. It is because it was purchased with Judas’s blood money, we are told, that the place “has been called the Field of Blood to this day.”

Luke’s account in the book of Acts has some similarities: the death of Judas is connected with the purchase of a field that is called “the Field of Blood.” But the details are in stark contrast to—even contradict—the story as told by Matthew. In Acts (1:18–19) we are told that Judas himself, not the Jewish priests, purchased the field with “the reward of his wickedness,” the money he earned for his betrayal. And it is not said that he hanged himself. Instead we learn that he fell “headlong” and “burst open in the middle” so that “his bowels gushed out.” For Luke the reason the field was called the Field of Blood was because Judas bled all over it.

Over the years readers have tried to reconcile these two accounts of the death of Judas. How could he both hang himself and “fall headlong” so that his stomach split open and his intestines spilled all over the ground? Ingenious interpreters, wanting to splice the two accounts together into one true account, have had a field day here. Maybe Judas hanged himself, the rope broke, and he fell to the ground, head first, bursting in the middle. Or maybe he hanged himself, and that didn’t work, so he climbed onto a high rock and did a swan dive onto the field below. Or maybe . . . well, maybe something else.

The point is, though, that the two reports give different accounts of how Judas died. However mysterious it may be to say he fell headlong and burst open, at the least that is not “hanging” oneself. And they are flat out contradictory on two other points: who purchased the field (the priests, as per Matthew, or Judas, as per Acts?) and why the field was called the field of blood (because it was purchased with blood money, as Matthew says, or because Judas bled all over it, as Acts says?).

The Resurrection Narratives

Nowhere are the differences among the Gospels more clear than in the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection. I often have my first-year students do a simple comparison exercise in which they list everything said in each of the four Gospels about the events between the time Jesus was buried and the end of the Gospels. There can be no better introduction to the idea of horizontal reading. There are scads of differences among the four accounts, and some of these differences are discrepancies that cannot be readily (or ever) reconciled. Students find this a valuable exercise because I’m not simply telling them there are differences between the accounts: they discover the differences themselves and try to make sense of them.

Here let me stress the point that I made in my book *Misquoting Jesus*: we don’t have the originals of any of these Gospels, only copies

made later, in most instances many centuries later. These copies all differ from one another, very often in the accounts of Jesus' resurrection. Scholars have to determine what the originals said on the basis of these later manuscripts. In some places the decisions are quite straightforward; in others there is a lot of debate.

In one aspect of the resurrection narratives there is little debate: it appears that the final twelve verses of Mark's Gospel are not original to Mark's Gospel but were added by a scribe in a later generation. Mark ended his Gospel at what is now 16:8, with the women fleeing the tomb and not telling anyone what they had seen. In my discussion I accept the scholarly consensus that verses 16:9–21 were a later addition to the Gospel.¹²

With that detail out of the way, what can we say about the resurrection narratives in the four canonical accounts? All four Gospels agree that on the third day after Jesus' crucifixion and burial, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and found it empty. But on virtually every detail they disagree.

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)? Had the stone already been rolled away from the tomb (as in Mark 16:4) or was it rolled away by an angel while the women were there (Matthew 28:2)? Whom or what did they see there? An angel (Matthew 28:5)? A young man (Mark 16:5)? Two men (Luke 24:4)? Or nothing and no one (John)? And what were they told? To tell the disciples to “go to Galilee,” where Jesus will meet them (Mark 16:7)? Or to remember what Jesus had told them “while he was in Galilee,” that he had to die and rise again (Luke 24:7)? Then, do the women tell the disciples what they saw and heard (Matthew 28:8), or do they not tell anyone (Mark 16:8)? If they tell someone, whom do they tell? The eleven disciples (Matthew 28:8)? The eleven disciples and other people (Luke 24:8)? Simon

Peter and another unnamed disciple (John 20:2)? What do the disciples do in response? Do they have no response because Jesus himself immediately appears to them (Matthew 20:9)? Do they not believe the women because it seems to be “an idle tale” (Luke 24:11)? Or do they go to the tomb to see for themselves (John 20:3)?

The questions multiply. You can read horizontally to do a cross-Gospel comparison yourself of what happens next: to whom Jesus appears (if anyone) and when, what he says to them, and what they say in response. On virtually every issue at least one Gospel is out of step.

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. In Matthew's version the disciples are told to go to Galilee to meet Jesus, and they immediately do so. He appears to them there and gives them their final instruction. But in Luke the disciples are not told to go to Galilee. They are told that Jesus had foretold his resurrection while *he* was in Galilee (during his public ministry). And they never leave Jerusalem—in the southern part of the Israel, a different region from Galilee, in the north. On the day of the resurrection Jesus appears to two disciples on the “road to Emmaus” (24:13–35); later that day these disciples tell the others what they have seen, and Jesus appears to all of them (24:36–49); and then Jesus takes them to Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem and gives them their instructions and ascends to heaven. In Luke's next volume, Acts, we're told that the disciples are in fact explicitly told by Jesus after his resurrection *not* to leave Jerusalem (Acts 1:4), but to stay there until they receive the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after Passover. After giving his instructions, Jesus then ascends to heaven. The disciples do stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes (Acts 2). And so the discrepancy: If Matthew is right, that the disciples immediately go to Galilee and see Jesus ascend from there, how can Luke be right that the disciples stay in Jerusalem the whole time, see Jesus ascend from there, and stay on until the day of Pentecost?

Other Differences in the Passion Narratives

These then are just some of the key discrepancies in the accounts of Jesus' last week of life, his death, and his resurrection. They are by no means the only differences, but instead of listing them all I point out here a few of the more interesting ones that you would find if you were to do a complete analysis. I can give these in rapid-fire succession by asking just five simple questions.

1. *When Jesus entered Jerusalem during the Triumphal Entry, how many animals did he ride?* It seems like there should be an obvious answer: he rode one animal, a donkey or a colt. And that in fact is what is said in three of the Gospels, including Mark 11:7. In Matthew's Gospel, however, this triumphal act is said to fulfill prophecy; as we have seen, Matthew sets great store on the fulfillment of Scripture, and in 21:5 he states, quoting Zechariah 9:9:

Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey

Scholars of the Hebrew Bible recognize this kind of poetic prophecy: the third line of the text restates what is said in the second line. This is called "synonymous parallelism"—where two lines of poetry say basically the same thing in different words. But Matthew evidently did not understand this poetic convention in this place, leading to some rather bizarre results. 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.

2. *What did Jesus tell the high priest when questioned at his trial?* My sense is that historically, this is something we could never know. Jesus was there, and the Jewish leaders were there, but there were no followers of Jesus there, taking notes for posterity. Nevertheless,

Mark gives us a clear account. The high priest asks Jesus if he is the "Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One" (14:61), and Jesus gives a straightforward reply, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62). In other words, in the near future God would be sending a cosmic judge of the earth, in fulfillment of the predictions of the Old Testament (Daniel 7:13–14). In fact, it was so near that the high priest himself would see it happen.

What if it doesn't happen? What if the high priest were to die before the Son of Man arrived? Wouldn't that invalidate Jesus' claim? Maybe. And that may be why Luke, writing some fifteen or twenty years after Mark—presumably after the high priest has died—changes Jesus' answer. Now when he replies he says nothing about the high priest being alive when the Son of Man arrives in judgment: "I am, and from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (Luke 22:69).

3. *Why does Matthew quote the wrong prophet?* When Matthew indicates that Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, he notes (as by now we expect of him) that this was in fulfillment of Scripture: "Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, 'And they took the thirty pieces of silver . . . and they gave them for the potter's field'" (Matthew 27:9–10). The problem is that this prophecy is not found in Jeremiah. It appears to be a loose quotation of Zechariah 11:3.

4. *When was the curtain in the Temple ripped?* The curtain in the Temple separated the holiest place, called the "holy of holies," from the rest of the Temple precincts. It was in the holy of holies that God was thought to dwell here on earth (he obviously is reigning in heaven as well). No one could enter that room behind the curtain except once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), when the high priest could go in to offer a sacrifice, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. According to Mark's Gospel, after Jesus breathes his last, the curtain of the Temple is torn in half (15:38). This has long been recognized as a symbolic statement,

for there is no historical evidence to suggest the curtain was ever destroyed before the Temple itself was burned to the ground forty years later in the war with the Romans. For Mark, Jesus' death means the end of the need for Temple sacrifices. In his son's death God is now available to all people; he is no longer separated from them by a thick curtain. Jesus' death makes people one with God: it is an atonement (at-one-ment) for sin.

Luke's Gospel also indicates that the curtain in the Temple was ripped in half. Oddly enough, it does not rip after Jesus dies but is explicitly said to rip while Jesus is still alive and hanging on the cross (23:45-46). I will speak about the significance of this discrepancy in the next chapter, as this change is directly tied to Luke's understanding of Jesus' death.

5. *What did the centurion say when Jesus died?* Again the answer may seem obvious, especially to those who remember the great biblical epic on the silver screen, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, and the immortal words of the centurion played by John Wayne: "Truly this man was the Son of God." And that is, in fact, what the centurion says in the Gospel of Mark (15:39). But it is worth noting that Luke has changed the words. In his account the centurion says, "Truly this man was innocent" (23:47). There have always been interpreters who have wanted to insist that this comes to the same thing: of course if he's the Son of God he's innocent. But the words are different and have different meanings. If a potential criminal is declared "not guilty" by the court, that is certainly not the same thing as being declared the Son of God. Did the centurion say both things? One could say yes if one's goal were to reconcile the Gospels, and thereby create yet a third version of the scene, unlike either Mark or Luke. But it is probably better to consider why the later Luke might have changed the words. For Luke it was important to stress that Jesus was completely innocent of the charges against him. In John, for example, as in Luke, three times Pilate tries to release Jesus by declaring him innocent (unlike in Mark). And at the end, so, too, does the centurion. The Romans all agree on Jesus' innocence. Who

then is guilty for his death? Not the Romans, but the Jewish authorities, or the Jewish people themselves.

CONCLUSION

We have seen lots of discrepancies in the New Testament in this chapter, some small and relatively inconsequential, others important for understanding what the different authors wanted to say. Some of the discrepancies could probably be reconciled if sufficient interpretive ingenuity were brought to bear; others appear to be flat-out contradictions. This is not an exhaustive treatment of the discrepancies, just a representative example. I picked some that I find to be the most interesting.

What conclusions can we draw from these discrepancies? Three points strike me as the most significant.

1. On one level the discrepancies are significant because they show that the view of the Bible as completely inerrant appears not to be true. There are errors, if the Bible is looked at historically. If two descriptions of an event (for example, Jesus' death) are contradictory in their details, both accounts cannot be historically correct. One of them is historically wrong, or both of them are wrong, but both cannot be right, at least with regard to what actually happened. Does this mean that the Bible should be tossed aside, jettisoned as just another piece of old and basically worthless literature? Not in the least. I argue in my final chapter that we should continue to read, study, and cherish the Bible—but not as an inerrant historical account.

Does this mean that it is impossible any longer for a person to be a Christian? Only Christians of a certain persuasion—such as many of those among whom I live, in the American South—would ever think to ask such a question. But the answer, again, is decidedly no. A Christianity dependent on the inerrancy of the Bible probably cannot survive the reality of the discrepancies. But there are lots of other forms of the Christian faith, many of them unscathed by the fact that the Bible is not a completely perfect book. I will deal with this at greater length in my final chapter.

2. Since there are discrepancies between what different authors want to say—sometimes small, insignificant contradictions and

sometimes significant—it is important to let each author speak for himself and not pretend that he is saying the same thing as another. The discrepancies should teach us that Mark's view is not John's, John's is not Matthew's, Matthew's is not Paul's, and so on. Each author has to be read for his own message, so that when you read Mark, you do not import the teachings of Matthew. Read Mark for Mark and Matthew for Matthew. This is an issue we will take up at greater length in the next chapter.

3. The discrepancies that involve historical narratives—what did Jesus or Paul actually say, do, and experience?—make it difficult to establish what really happened in the life of Jesus or the history of the early church. You can't read these books as disinterested historical accounts. None of them is that. What would you do as a judge in a court trial in which you have conflicting testimony from eye witnesses? One thing you would certainly not do is assume that each witness is 100 percent correct. Someone—or everyone—is getting some information wrong. The trick would be to figure out who is wrong and who is right—if anyone is right. The same applies to ancient documents like those in the New Testament. If there is conflicting testimony about historical events, all the witnesses cannot be (historically) right, and we have to figure out ways to decide what most probably really happened. We take up this task in chapter 5.