

The Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John) - Differences and Alleged Discrepancies

A careful hearing of thirty six alleged discrepancies in the Gospel accounts

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are the Synoptic Gospels. John supplies a fourth account. There are people, both born again believers and non-believers who ask why are there differences among the Gospel accounts. This study compares all four where a reader could reasonably ask whether they disagree. Its purpose is to look objectively at the claims or concerns, examine the relevant passages, and reach only the conclusions the evidence supports.

Picture four accounts presented in court. We must first hear what each of the Gospel account writers have to say. Then we hear the claimed discrepancies. We consider all of the evidence and reasonable inferences fairly and objectively drawn therefrom. Finally, based upon the clear evidence from the Word of God reach a conclusion as to the validity or the lack thereof as to the discrepancies contended for by those raising the objections before reaching a verdict about the claimed errors.

The central question is not whether the writers give different details. They do. The question is what follows from the given

differences: a contradiction, a selective report, an arrangement of events, or a matter we cannot presently settle.

How to read the evidence

A difference is not automatically a contradiction. Reporting the presence of one person does not necessarily deny the presence of a second. Omitting an event does not ordinarily deny that it occurred. On the other hand, we cannot prove every proposed reconciliation merely because it is possible. We will identify the text, state a fair skeptical contention, and give insightful responses based upon all of the facts and circumstances.

Some critics argue that discrepancies disprove biblical inerrancy; some go further and allege that the Gospels are inventions. Those are different claims. For example, you might have four persons give a written account of the entry of the person named Jesus into Jerusalem on what is referred to as Palm Sunday.

- One person may focus on what the crowd was doing.
- Another person might focus on what Jesus was riding.
- Another might focus on how Jesus appeared and various other details.

The existence of those discrepancies does not by any means negate the fact that he did arrive. There is no goal or desire to see anything beyond that which the whole counsel of the Word of God provides. On the other hand, it is important to have a full

understanding of the differences in the four accounts as to who was writing, why they were writing, what the focus of their writing was, and the totality of the evidence and circumstances.

Differences in what was reported does not, by any fair standard, lead to a conclusion that disputes the reality of Jesus' identity as God become man (while still remaining fully God), the fact of Jesus' teachings, healings, miracles, purpose, goal, and accomplishments. The evidence in regard to these are so overwhelming as to defy reasonable conclusions to the contrary. Left open is the issue of whether the alleged discrepancies materially impact the reliability of the reports of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. We will test each inference separately.

1 Read the passages What does each writer say?

2 Test the claim Do the accounts exclude each other?

3 Ask so what What conclusion actually follows?

The central proclamation

Paul says that he received and passed on the news that Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared to witnesses (1 Corinthians 15:3–8). This early written

The Four Gospels | Differences and Alleged Discrepancies

witness states what the apostles proclaimed; by itself, the existence of that proclamation does not settle whether every claimed event occurred. Paul himself insists that if Christ was not raised, Christian faith is futile (1 Corinthians 15:12–20). The resurrection therefore belongs at the center of the inquiry, and reports bearing on it deserve our closest attention.

A further distinction matters in court and here: agreement on a central claim is evidence to assess, not a substitute for assessing it. Equally, a difference about an accompanying detail is evidence to assess, not a verdict against the central claim.

Five lines of evidence to examine

The picture below adapts the five-pillar graphic in the supplied notes. Each line contributes a question and must be weighed for what it actually supports.

1 EARLY REPORT Paul passes on the resurrection proclamation (1 Cor 15:3–8).

2 NAMED WITNESSES The texts identify people and claim eyewitness testimony.

3 LOCAL SETTING People, places, and customs can be checked individually.

4 CANDID DETAILS The writers retain the disciples' failures and doubts.

5 OUTSIDE SOURCES Tacitus mentions the execution; he does not attest the rising.

The questions at a glance

Birth and early years Questions 1–4

Ministry and miracles Questions 5–13

Final week and crucifixion Questions 14–23

Empty tomb and appearances Questions 24–34

Additional comparisons Questions 35–36

Birth and early years

1 The two family lines

The passages Matthew 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38

What appears to differ Matthew runs through David's son Solomon; Luke runs through David's son Nathan. Many later names differ.

The skeptical contention The lines cannot both be historical, so one evangelist invented an ancestry.

Our response The lists differ, but different ancestral or legal relationships are possible. Neither writer explains the whole family relationship. Matthew openly arranges his list in three groups of fourteen. We cannot prove a full reconstruction from the surviving accounts.

2 Jacob and Heli

The passages Matthew 1:16; Luke 3:23

What appears to differ Matthew calls Joseph the son of Jacob; Luke calls him the son of Heli.

The skeptical contention A man cannot have two fathers; one Gospel is false.

Our response Biological and legal fatherhood could differ. Julius Africanus offered an early family-law explanation, preserved by Eusebius, but it cannot be independently verified. The popular claim that Luke explicitly gives Mary's genealogy also overstates the text: Luke names Joseph.

3 Egypt and Nazareth

The passages Matthew 2:13–23; Luke 2:22–39

What appears to differ Matthew reports the family's flight to Egypt and later settlement in Nazareth. Luke reports the temple presentation and their return to Nazareth.

The skeptical contention Luke's return to Nazareth rules out Matthew's flight to Egypt.

Our response Luke does not state that the trip was direct or that nothing intervened. The precise calendar is unrecoverable from these accounts. A possible omitted journey is not a demonstrated contradiction.

4 Shepherds and wise men

The passages Matthew 2:1–12; Luke 2:8–20

What appears to differ Luke reports shepherds at the manger; Matthew reports wise men visiting a child in a house.

The skeptical contention The writers disagree over who visited Jesus at His birth.

Our response Neither account says its visitors were the only visitors. The texts do not place the wise men alongside the shepherds at the manger. Matthew gives neither the number of wise men nor their exact arrival date.

Ministry and miracles

5 The order of the temptations

The passages Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13

What appears to differ Both begin with bread. Matthew places the temple before the kingdoms; Luke places the kingdoms before the temple.

The skeptical contention One author misremembered what happened second and third.

Our response The order on the page genuinely differs. Neither writer explicitly promises a minute-by-minute sequence. An editorial arrangement is possible, though the historical order cannot be proved from these passages.

6 Peter's first meeting and call

The passages John 1:35–42; Matthew 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11

What appears to differ John describes Andrew bringing Simon to Jesus. The Synoptics describe Jesus calling fishermen to follow Him. Luke includes a remarkable catch.

The skeptical contention Peter cannot both meet Jesus through Andrew and meet Him by the lake.

Our response A first meeting and a later call are distinct claims. Matthew and Mark do not call the lakeside meeting Peter's first encounter. Whether Luke expands the same call or narrates another stage remains open.

7 The temple cleansing

The passages John 2:13–22; Matthew 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48

What appears to differ John places a cleansing early; the Synoptics place one in Jesus' final week.

The skeptical contention One author moved an event and therefore falsified Jesus' history.

Our response Two cleansings and a rearranged account are both proposed; neither is proved simply by these passages. We should acknowledge the chronological tension rather than insist on two events as an established fact.

8 The mount and the level place

The passages Matthew 5–7; Luke 6:17–49

What appears to differ Matthew presents a long sermon on a mountain; Luke presents related teaching on a level place, with different length and wording.

The skeptical contention Jesus could not preach both versions of the sermon.

Our response Jesus could repeat teaching on more than one occasion; writers could also select and condense from a larger discourse. The texts do not establish exactly how the two presentations relate.

9 One man or two among the tombs

The passages Matthew 8:28–34; Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–39

What appears to differ Matthew reports two demon-oppressed men; Mark and Luke focus on one.

The skeptical contention Mark and Luke say there was only one man.

Our response Neither Mark nor Luke says “only one.” Reporting the man whose words and later actions matter to the story does not deny another man’s presence.

10 Gadarenes and Gerasenes

The passages Matthew 8:28; Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26

What appears to differ The ESV prints Gadarenes in Matthew and Gerasenes in Mark and Luke; the place names also vary among manuscripts.

The skeptical contention The Gospel writers did not know where the event occurred.

Our response Nearby regional names and textual variants complicate the place identification. The accounts agree that the event occurred across the lake from Galilee. The precise locale deserves geographical and textual study.

11 Jairus's daughter

The passages Matthew 9:18–26; Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:40–56

What appears to differ Matthew reports the father saying his daughter has died; Mark and Luke first report that she is dying and then report news of her death.

The skeptical contention Matthew has the father give the wrong information at the wrong time.

Our response Matthew may compress the approach and later death notice into a shortened appeal. That is plausible, not a verbatim reconstruction of Jairus's words. All three accounts say Jesus restored the child.

12 One blind man or two

The passages Matthew 20:29–34; Mark 10:46–52; Luke 18:35–43

What appears to differ Matthew reports two blind men; Mark names one, Bartimaeus; Luke describes one.

The skeptical contention One eyewitness invented a second man.

Our response Naming or following one man does not assert that he was alone. This resolves the numerical objection without requiring us to invent the other man's name.

13 Approaching or leaving Jericho

The passages Matthew 20:29; Mark 10:46; Luke 18:35

What appears to differ Matthew and Mark place the healing as Jesus leaves Jericho; Luke places it as He approaches Jericho.

The skeptical contention The location and movement cannot both be correct.

Our response This is a harder geographical and sequencing question. Proposals involving different Jericho sites or a healing spanning entry and exit are possible but not demonstrated by the passages. We leave the precise sequence open.

Final week and crucifixion

14 The entry animals

The passages Matthew 21:1–7; Mark 11:1–7; Luke 19:29–35; John 12:14–15

What appears to differ Matthew mentions a donkey and her colt; the others focus on the young animal Jesus rode.

The skeptical contention Matthew has Jesus ride two animals.

Our response Mentioning two animals is different from saying He sat astride both. Matthew's wording about placing cloaks and Jesus sitting on "them" requires careful reading, but the text does not force the picture of Jesus riding two animals simultaneously.

15 The temple visit and cleansing

The passages Matthew 21:10–17; Mark 11:11–19

What appears to differ Matthew narrates entry and cleansing in close succession; Mark reports an initial temple visit and a cleansing the following day.

The skeptical contention One writer got the day wrong.

Our response Matthew's short narrative may omit Mark's intervening overnight stay. Its sequence still deserves close reading; absence of the overnight detail alone is no contradiction.

16 When the fig tree withered

The passages Matthew 21:18–22; Mark 11:12–14, 20–25

What appears to differ Matthew presents the tree withering immediately; Mark describes the disciples finding it withered the next morning.

The skeptical contention The miracle has incompatible timing.

Our response Matthew specifies the onset of withering; Mark specifies when its condition was noticed. Whether Matthew also compresses the later discussion deserves attention. These descriptions need not specify the same observation time.

17 The Last Supper and Passover

The passages Matthew 26:17–20; Mark 14:12–17; Luke 22:7–15; John 18:28; 19:14

What appears to differ The Synoptics describe preparations for a Passover meal. John's references to eating the Passover and the day of preparation raise a chronological question.

The skeptical contention John places the crucifixion on a different calendar day from the Synoptics.

Our response This is among the weightier issues. Interpretations of "Passover," "preparation," and calendar reckoning differ. We should examine the terms and dates in a separate full treatment; the present passages do not justify an effortless one-sentence harmonization.

18 Peter's predicted denials

The passages Matthew 26:34; Mark 14:30; Luke 22:34; John 13:38

What appears to differ Mark predicts two rooster crows; the others refer to the rooster crowing as Peter denies Jesus three times.

The skeptical contention Jesus gave incompatible predictions.

Our response A more detailed reference to two crows can coexist with a shorter reference to crowing. We must compare the actual wording and settings of each prediction before claiming that they describe every sound of the night.

19 The rooster and the denials

The passages Matthew 26:69–75; Mark 14:66–72; Luke 22:54–62; John 18:15–27

What appears to differ The accounts select and arrange questions put to Peter differently; Mark notes an earlier crow.

The skeptical contention The witnesses cannot agree who challenged Peter or when.

Our response Several people could challenge Peter during three episodes of denial, and each writer may report a different speaker or utterance. That is a possibility, not a license to combine every phrase into a detailed invented script.

20 Who carried the cross

The passages Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26; John 19:17

What appears to differ John says Jesus went out bearing His cross; the Synoptics say Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry it.

The skeptical contention Two men cannot each have carried the same cross.

Our response They could carry it at successive points. The writers do not state that either man carried it for the entire route. The exact handoff point is not given.

21 The two criminals

The passages Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32; Luke 23:39–43

What appears to differ Matthew and Mark speak of criminals reviling Jesus; Luke records one criminal rebuking the other and appealing to Jesus.

The skeptical contention The repentant criminal could not also have mocked Jesus.

Our response A change of heart during the crucifixion is possible, as is summary wording that groups the mockery. The precise sequence is not explicitly reconstructed in the Gospels.

22 Jesus' words from the cross

The passages Matthew 27:46, 50; Mark 15:34, 37; Luke 23:34, 43, 46; John 19:26–30

What appears to differ Each evangelist records different words Jesus spoke while crucified.

The skeptical contention The different final sayings show fabricated quotations.

Our response A writer's choice to report one saying does not deny the others. Some words attributed to Jesus can occur at different moments. Exact order and the wording of every final utterance cannot be recovered solely by stacking the quotations.

23 The hour of crucifixion

The passages Mark 15:25; John 19:14–16

What appears to differ Mark says it was the third hour when Jesus was crucified; John says it was about the sixth hour when Pilate presented Him.

The skeptical contention The clocks prove one Gospel historically wrong.

Our response This is a significant timing tension. Ancient approximations and different time reckonings have been proposed; neither should be asserted without further evidence. The passages themselves leave the exact reconciliation unresolved.

Empty tomb and appearances

24 Who went to the tomb

The passages Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10; John 20:1–2

What appears to differ All name Mary Magdalene; Matthew names another Mary, Mark adds Salome, Luke names Joanna and others, and John focuses on Mary.

The skeptical contention John says Mary went alone.

Our response John does not say “alone,” and Mary says “we” when reporting the empty tomb. Her words suggest others were involved, without identifying exactly who stood with her at each moment.

25 Dark or sunrise

The passages Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1

What appears to differ John says it was still dark; Mark says the sun had risen; Matthew and Luke speak of dawn.

The skeptical contention The visitors cannot arrive before and after sunrise.

Our response Departure, approach, and observation can occur over a span of time, and descriptions of dawn need not be stopwatch measurements. Whether every report describes one arrival at one moment is not stated.

26 Why the women went

The passages Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1

What appears to differ Matthew says the women went to see the tomb; Mark and Luke mention spices.

The skeptical contention The authors invented different motives.

Our response A visit can have more than one purpose. Matthew does not deny the spices; Mark and Luke do not deny a wish to see the tomb.

27 When the stone moved

The passages Matthew 28:2; Mark 16:4; Luke 24:2; John 20:1

What appears to differ Matthew narrates an angel rolling the stone away; the others first report the stone already moved when it is noticed.

The skeptical contention One account says the women watched the stone move and the others say they did not.

Our response Matthew describes the event but does not explicitly say the women watched every moment of it. The other writers begin with the result. The exact timing relative to each person's arrival remains unstated.

28 The guards

The passages Matthew 27:62–28:4, 11–15; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–18

What appears to differ Matthew describes guards and their report; the other Gospels do not.

The skeptical contention If guards were present, all writers would have mentioned them.

Our response That expectation is not part of any Gospel's claim. Omission alone does not disprove Matthew's account. Matthew's

distinctive report should be evaluated on its own evidence, without pretending that the other writers corroborate it.

29 One messenger or two

The passages Matthew 28:2–7; Mark 16:5–7; Luke 24:4–7; John 20:11–13

What appears to differ Matthew and Mark focus on one speaker; Luke reports two men; John later reports two angels seen by Mary.

The skeptical contention One and two cannot both describe the scene.

Our response One visible or speaking messenger does not exclude a second unless the text says “only one.” John’s scene also occurs later in his own narrative. The accounts should not be flattened into one instantaneous tableau.

30 Where the messengers stood

The passages Matthew 28:2–7; Mark 16:5–7; Luke 24:3–7; John 20:11–13

What appears to differ Matthew places an angel at the stone; Mark describes a young man inside; Luke describes two standing by the women; John places two angels inside when Mary looks in.

The skeptical contention The figures could not occupy all those positions at once.

Our response The Gospels do not say the scenes happened simultaneously or that the messengers never moved. More than one encounter is possible. We cannot reconstruct every movement with certainty.

31 The angelic messages

The passages Matthew 28:5–7; Mark 16:6–7; Luke 24:5–7

What appears to differ The reports share the announcement of resurrection but select different words and instructions, including references to Galilee.

The skeptical contention A supernatural message must have identical wording in every report.

Our response These are accounts of what was said, not claims that each preserves every word. The writers agree on the main announcement. Whether all reported phrases came from one speech or more than one remains unstated.

32 Did the women tell anyone

The passages Matthew 28:8; Mark 16:8; Luke 24:9–10

What appears to differ Mark ends his earliest attested narrative at 16:8 saying the women spoke to no one because they were afraid; Matthew and Luke describe a report to the disciples.

The skeptical contention Mark proves the women never told anyone.

Our response Mark can describe their immediate silence as they fled in fear; Matthew and Luke describe later reporting. The timing is not fully given in Mark. Mark 16:9–20 is a separate manuscript question and should not be silently used to settle 16:8.

33 Peter alone or accompanied

The passages Luke 24:12; John 20:2–10

What appears to differ Luke narrates Peter running to the tomb; John describes Peter and another disciple running there.

The skeptical contention Luke says Peter went alone.

Our response Luke names Peter; he never says “alone.” John’s second runner adds detail, not a denial of Peter’s visit.

34 Jesus and the women

The passages Matthew 28:9–10; John 20:11–18

What appears to differ Matthew describes Jesus meeting the women as they leave; John follows Mary’s later encounter outside the tomb.

The skeptical contention Jesus appeared first to incompatible people in incompatible places.

Our response John follows Mary’s own sequence after she runs to Peter and later returns to the tomb. Matthew follows the departing women. Their exact overlap and the identities of

everyone in Matthew's scene remain uncertain; neither passage alone gives a complete appearance chronology.

Additional comparisons

35 The centurion and his messengers

The passages Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10

What appears to differ Matthew presents the centurion making his request to Jesus. Luke says the centurion sent Jewish elders, then friends, and did not consider himself worthy for Jesus to enter his house.

The skeptical contention One author says he came in person; the other says he did not.

Our response A principal may speak and act through his authorized messengers; Matthew may summarize the request under the centurion's name while Luke describes its delivery. This is a plausible explanation, not proof that Matthew intended an agency convention at every line. Both accounts attribute the request and remarkable faith to the centurion.

36 The inscription on the cross

The passages Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19–20

What appears to differ Each Gospel reports the charge over Jesus in somewhat different wording; John adds Jesus of Nazareth and says the notice appeared in three languages.

The Four Gospels | Differences and Alleged Discrepancies

The skeptical contention If it was a written sign, every quotation must reproduce precisely the same sequence of words.

Our response Every account retains the charge that Jesus was King of the Jews. The texts may abbreviate the fuller notice; John's three languages may also account for variations, though we have no surviving original sign by which to verify exact wording in each language.

The courtroom conclusion

Let every difference be placed on the table. Let witnesses notice different people, recall different words, and begin their accounts at different moments. So what follows? We still have to decide whether two claims actually exclude each other and what the accounts establish together.

I spent years in a courtroom hearing people describe the same event. One witness began with what he saw. Another began with what she heard. One remembered who spoke first; another remembered what happened next. A difference in detail called for examination. It did not require me to throw out every fact on which the witnesses agreed.

That is how I want us to hear the Gospels. We should give every objection a fair hearing. We should reject the word "only" when the writer never used it. We should refuse an ingenious explanation when we have no evidence for it. And when the exact timing of an event cannot be recovered, we should say so.

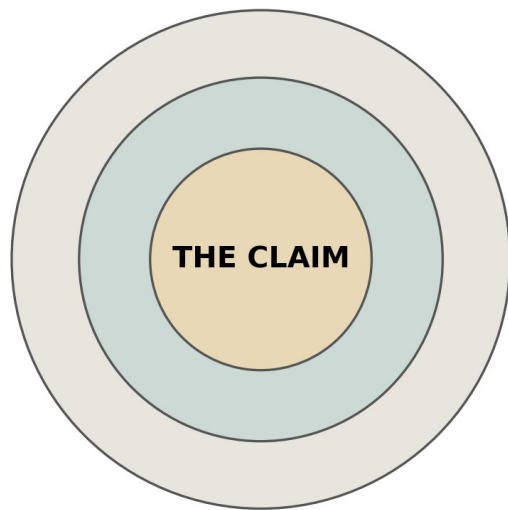
Perfectly matching accounts would not automatically establish coaching; different accounts do not automatically establish independence. Matthew, Mark, and Luke share substantial wording, and their literary relationship is itself a matter of study. I would ask in either case how the accounts came to be, what each writer claims, and whether each claim is supported.

The verdict on the skeptical shortcut is clear: differences in selection, emphasis, and sequence do not, by themselves, establish fabrication. Some questions remain difficult, especially the Passover chronology and the hour of crucifixion. The Gospels repeatedly bring us to the same central witness: Jesus lived, taught, was crucified, and was proclaimed risen. We should examine that proclamation and its reported witnesses on their own evidence, not declare it false because four writers did not produce four identical books.

What the questions do and do not settle

A useful “so what” question follows each case: even if a proposed reconciliation remains unproved, does this particular difference disprove the event under examination? Sometimes the answer is plainly no; at other times, especially with the accounts of Resurrection Sunday morning, the difference bears directly on how we evaluate the witnesses and calls for more work. We will not assign all thirty six questions the same weight.

Where a difference belongs



Central proclamation

Christ died, was buried, and was raised

Reported witnesses

Who claims to have seen and heard what?

Details and context

What supports or challenges those reports?

These are areas of inquiry, not walls. A detail in an outer ring can affect our assessment of the reported witnesses or of the central claim. The drawing tells us what question to ask next; it does not decide the answer.

Paul's earlier written testimony in 1 Corinthians 15 provides another source for the resurrection proclamation, although it belongs to the same early Christian movement and must not be mislabeled wholly independent. Tacitus, Annals 15.44, speaks of Christus suffering execution under Pilate; he does not attest the resurrection. These distinctions make the cumulative case more candid and more useful.

Sources and scope

Scripture comparisons use the ESV. Read the full passages listed under each question. The literary spotlighting example and the

discussion of ancient biographical selection were prompted by Lee Strobel, *Seeing the Supernatural* (2025), pages 215–217, and L. Berkhof, *New Testament Introduction* (1915), pages 47–48, as supplied in the initial notes. Their claims are not substitutes for checking the Gospel text.

The method, evidence, and concentric-circle illustrations are newly drawn adaptations of visual ideas in the supplied *Can We Trust the Gospels* notes. They avoid precise dating and conclusions that those visuals alone cannot establish.

For the early legal-parentage proposal, see Eusebius, *Church History* 1.7, preserving Julius Africanus. For the execution under Pilate see Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44. The ESV notes that some of the earliest manuscripts omit Mark 16:9–20. This selected study does not claim to enumerate every difference in wording across the four Gospels.

Primary text: [esv.org/Matthew+1:1–17;Luke+3:23–38/](https://esv.org/Matthew+1:1-17;Luke+3:23-38/) and the passages listed in each entry. Early source: newadvent.org/fathers/250101.htm.