

How did I deal with inconsistencies and discrepancies as a young Christian? And why does the NT indicate that some of Jesus' own followers doubted the resurrection? Those are the two questions I deal with in this week's readers' mailbag.

#### QUESTION:

I assume that Bart Ehrman today when he reads the books of the New Testament sees large discrepancies between them. My question is about the precocious sixteen-year-old Ehrman, Did he too see this variety (which opens up the possibility of inconsistency)? Or did it all as he read it cohere, seem of a piece, convey one doctrinally comprehensive and orthodox and uniform message? And if it did, how does today's Ehrman think young Ehrman managed to overlook all those obvious discrepancies?

#### RESPONSE:

Ah, right, my former life! When I was young and Christian - say, between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two - I was already passionate about the Bible, but was absolutely convinced that it was, in every way, the Word of God. I never doubted it. And I never saw any reason to doubt it. What it said was true and inspired. If there were problems - for example, potential discrepancies or contradictions with the findings of science - they were problems with me and my inability to understand, not with the Bible itself.

When I went to Moody Bible Institute, we learned that there were non-believers and liberal Christians who found problems with the Bible. But they were motivated by wicked impulses, or, more likely, were simply willful or ignorant. We could reconcile most everything in the Bible, and to do so was not imposing an interpretation on the Bible that smoothed over all the differences; it was letting the Bible speak for itself and accepting that what the Bible said about itself was true, that it was the inspired Word of God. If that's what it truly was, then mere humans could not tear it apart. Anyone who tried to do so simply couldn't see the truth that the Bible itself conveyed. It was one God-given, inspired, harmonious whole, and human interpreters could only try to understand its depth and intricacies. They couldn't show that it was flawed.

What I didn't realize at the time is that this was a view I was *\*imposing\** on the Bible, not one that was emerging *\*from\** the Bible. The way I later came to look at it was this: there are two ways you can approach the Bible (or any other book). On one hand, you could say that it is an inerrant book with no mistakes and no problems of any kind. If that's what you say before you even read it, and you are committed to that view, then you simply won't find any mistakes or problems. There can't be any, because you have decided there aren't.

On the other hand, you could hold the question in abeyance and be open to the view that the Bible has mistakes, while open as well to the view that it has no mistakes. In that case, you read it and simply see if it *\*does\** have any mistakes. If it does, then you conclude it is not inerrant; if it is not, then you conclude it is inerrant.

That is the approach we take with every other book, or authority of any kind. Should we approach the Bible differently? If so, why? Because someone else tells us to do so? Because religious leaders say we should? Because... why? My view now is that whatever

else we say about the Bible, it is a human book. Humans wrote it. And copied it. And translated it. And published it. And read it. If it is a human book, we should treat it the way we treat human books. That does not compromise its greatness, at all, for me. But it does mean that I am not imposing on the Bible a theological standard of my own that is going to make me twist and misconstrue parts of it so as to satisfy the requirements of my own standard.

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QUESTION:

If the gospel writers believed in Jesus' bodily resurrection, why did they portray so many as not recognizing him?

RESPONSE:

Ah, this is a great question that does not get asked frequently enough. I deal with it in my book How Jesus Became God. Here is what I say about it there.

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In considering the significance of the visions of Jesus, a key question immediately comes to the fore that in my judgment has not been given its full due by most scholars investigating the issue. Why do we have such a strong and pervasive tradition that some of the disciples doubted the resurrection, even though Jesus appeared to them? If Jesus came to them, alive, after his death, and held conversations with them - what was there to doubt?

The reason this question is so pressing is because, as we will see later in this chapter, modern research on visions has shown that visions are almost always believed by the people who experience them. When people have a vision - of a lost loved one, for example - they really and deeply believe the person has been there. So why were the visions of Jesus not always believed? Or rather, why were they so consistently doubted?

Jesus, of course, does not appear to anyone in Mark's Gospel. But he does in Matthew, Luke, John, and the book of Acts. Most readers have never noticed this, but in every one of these accounts we find indications -or rather direct statements - that the disciples doubted that Jesus was raised.

In Matthew 28:7 we are told that Jesus appeared to the eleven, but "some doubted." Why would they doubt if Jesus was right there, in front of them? We have already seen that in Luke 24, when the women report that Jesus has been raised the disciples consider it an "idle tale" and do not believe it (Luke 24:10-11). Then, even when Jesus appears to them, he has to "prove" that he is not a spirit by having them handle him. Even that is not enough: he needs to eat a piece of broiled fish in order finally to convince them (Luke 24:37-42). So too in John's Gospel, at first Peter and the Beloved Disciple do not believe Mary Magdalene that the tomb is empty; they have to see for themselves (John 20:1-10). But what is more germane, the text clearly implies that even when the disciples see Jesus they don't believe it

is he: that is why he has to show them his hands and feet, to convince them (John 20:20). So too with doubting Thomas – he sees Jesus but his doubts are overcome only when he is told to inspect the wounds physically (John 20:24-29).

And then comes one of the most puzzling verses in all of the New Testament. In Acts 1:3 we are told that after his resurrection Jesus spent forty days with the disciples – forty days! – showing them that he was alive by “many proofs.” Many proofs? How many proofs were needed exactly? And it took forty days to convince them?

Closely related to these doubt traditions are the scenes in the Gospels where Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection and they don’t recognize who he is. This is the leitmotif of the famous story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-27. These two do not realize they are talking to the person they have just been talking about, and they do not recognize Jesus until he literally breaks bread with them. Similarly in John 20:14-16, Mary Magdalene is the first to see Jesus raised, but does not immediately recognize him. She thinks she is talking with the gardener. So too in John 21:4-8, the disciples are fishing after the resurrection and Jesus appears to them on the shore and speaks with them, but they don’t realize at first who it is until the Beloved Disciple does.

What is one to make of these stories? Some readers have suggested that if the disciples had merely had “visions,” it would make sense that there was considerable doubt about what they had seen. That is an interesting point, but as I have already pointed out, and as we will see more fully later, people who have visions tend not to doubt what they have seen. The most impressive thing about people who report visionary experiences in numerous different contexts is that they consistently insist, sometimes with some vehemence, that the visions were real, not made up in their heads. This applies across the board, to people who have seen loved ones after they have died (and sometimes talk to them, and hold them) to people who see great religious figures such as the Blessed Virgin Mary (whose sightings are reported and documented to an astonishing extent) to people who claim that they have been abducted by UFO’s. People who have visions really seem to believe it. But a number of the disciples are reported not to believe it, until they were given “proof.”

My tentative suggestion is that there were three or four people – though possibly more – who had visions of Jesus sometime after he died. One of these was almost certainly Peter, since reports about him seeing Jesus are found everywhere in our sources, including our earliest record of Paul in 1 Cor. 15:5. And it needs to be remembered that Paul actually knew Peter. Paul too explicitly states that he had a vision of Jesus, and I think we can take him at his word that he believes Jesus appeared to him. It is also significant that Mary Magdalene enjoys such prominence in all the Gospel resurrection narratives, even though she is virtually absent everywhere else in the Gospels. She is mentioned in only one passage in the entire New Testament in connection with Jesus during his public ministry (Luke 8:1-3). And yet she is always the first to announce that Jesus has been raised. Why is that? One plausible explanation is that she too had a vision of Jesus after he died.

These three people – Peter, Paul, and Mary, as it turns out – must have told others about their visions. Possibly others had them as well – for example, James, Jesus’ brother – but I think it is difficult to say. Most of their close associates believed them and came to think then that Jesus was raised from the dead. But possibly some of the original disciples did not believe it. That would explain why there is such a strong “doubt” tradition in the Gospels, and why there is such an emphasis (in Luke, John, and especially Acts) on the fact that Jesus had to “prove” that he was raised, even when he was allegedly standing in front of the

disciples. If historically only a few persons had the visions, and not everyone believed them, that would explain just about everything. Mary didn't doubt what she had seen; either did Peter or Paul. But others did. Still, as the stories of Jesus' "appearances" were told and retold, of course, they were embellished, magnified, and even made up, so that soon, probably within a few years, it was said that all of the disciples had seen Jesus, along with other persons.

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