Comparing the resurrection accounts: study guide

Module 10: The Resurrection Narratives and Early Creedal Traditions.

Testing yourself builds memory; rereading and highlighting feel productive but build little. Cover each answer, try to recall it, then check, and come back on the days in the tracker.

Review schedule: tick each box when you have done it

- [ ] First study and self-test (today)
- [ ] Review 1 (one day later)
- [ ] Review 2 (one week later)
- [ ] Review 3 (one month later)

Warm-up

1. From the Mark lesson: where do Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, two handwritten Greek Bibles from about the middle of the 4th century, end the Gospel of Mark?
2. From the Synoptic lesson: which Gospel do most scholars think Matthew and Luke used?
3. What is the difference between when an event happened and when an account of it was written?

Key terms

The sources

- Account: One writer's telling of an event. On the Accounts compared page the five accounts are Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke with Acts, and John.

Why it matters: Why does the Accounts compared page treat Luke and Acts as one account?

- Received tradition: Teaching a writer says was handed on to him and that he passes on in turn, as Paul says of the list in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7. Brown calls the list an early sequence and reports the suggestion that Paul learned it on his visit to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18-19), which Brown dates about 39 CE.

Why it matters: How can material in a letter be older than the letter itself?

- Cephas: The name Paul uses for Peter in 1 Corinthians 15:5.

Why it matters: Luke 24:34 reports an appearance to "Simon". What does that tell you about Paul's list?

The comparison

- Same detail: On the Accounts compared page, a detail told the same way in more than one account.

Why it matters: What does a detail shared by several accounts tell a historian, and why is it not the end of the question?

- Minor variation: The same detail told with a small difference, such as "at dawn" or "while it is still dark" for the same morning.

Why it matters: Why might two writers describe the same morning in different words?

- Different detail (both could be true): A different or extra detail that does not rule out the other accounts, such as two figures at the tomb in Luke where Mark mentions one, or a detail only one account tells, such as the guards in Matthew.

Why it matters: Why does the site not call one figure or two a contradiction?

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- Conflicting detail (as written, both cannot be true): A detail that, read as written, cannot be true alongside the other accounts. The site marks two, both labeled debated: the women's silence in Mark 16:8, and Luke's "remain in the city" (24:49) where Mark and Matthew send the disciples to Galilee.

Why it matters: What reason does the site have for labeling both conflicting details "debated" and naming the works on each side?

The method

- Dependence: One writer using another as a source. Most scholars hold that Matthew and Luke each used Mark, because they follow Mark's order and much of its wording: Matthew 28:7 repeats much of Mark 16:7.

Why it matters: Why does dependence change how much an agreement between two accounts counts?

- Internal evidence: Clues inside a text itself, such as its wording and how it joins what comes before, as opposed to which copies have it. Metzger notes that Mark 16:9-20 uses many words found nowhere else in Mark, and that verse 9 introduces Mary Magdalene as if she had not just been named in 16:1.

Why it matters: Why do scholars look at the wording of Mark 16:9-20 as well as at which copies have it?

- Longer ending of Mark: Mark 16:9-20. Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus (both about the middle of the 4th century) lack it; Irenaeus quotes it about 175 to 185 CE, and Codex Alexandrinus (early 5th century) and most later copies have it. Nearly all scholars agree it was added later.

Why it matters: Why is the longer ending left out of the Accounts compared page unless you switch it on?

- Peter at the tomb (Luke 24:12): The verse where Peter runs to the tomb. Papyrus 75, a papyrus book of Luke and John from about 225, and Codex Vaticanus have it; Codex Bezae, a Greek and Latin copy of the Gospels and Acts from the 5th century, lacks it. The editors kept it but were divided, and the site labels the judgment "Scholars are split".

Why it matters: Why might a copyist add a verse like this, or leave it out?

Timeline

- 30 CE: Crucifixion of Jesus (Most scholars agree). Dated to about 30 CE. Ehrman and Méndez say no one knows for certain, but scholars agree it was around 30; Brown, and Carson and Moo, give 30 or 33, and Carson and Moo find 30 slightly preferable.
- 32 to 36 CE: Paul's conversion to the Jesus movement (Most scholars agree). Dated between 32 and 36 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 56 to 57 CE: 1 Corinthians (Most scholars agree). Written between 56 and 57 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 64 to 67 CE: Death of Paul in Rome (Most scholars agree). Dated between 64 and 67 CE, the date most scholars give. The date and manner rest on early tradition (1 Clement 5).
- 65 to 75 CE: Mark (Most scholars agree). Written between 65 and 75 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 70 CE: Destruction of the Temple (Nearly all scholars agree).
- 80 to 90 CE: Matthew (Most scholars agree). Written between 80 and 90 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 80 to 90 CE: Luke (Most scholars agree). Written between 80 and 90 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 80 to 95 CE: Acts (Most scholars agree). Written between 80 and 95 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 90 to 100 CE: John (Most scholars agree). Written between 90 and 100 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 175 to 185 CE: Irenaeus (Nearly all scholars agree). Dated between 175 and 185 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.

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- about 225: Papyrus 75 (Bodmer Papyri XIV and XV) (Most scholars agree). Brown dates it about 225 and Metzger to about 200.
- about the middle of the 4th century: Codex Vaticanus (B (03)) (Nearly all scholars agree). Brown and Metzger both date it to about the middle of the 4th century.
- early 5th century: Codex Alexandrinus (A (02)) (Nearly all scholars agree). Brown dates it to the early 5th century, and Metzger calls it a 5th-century book.

Explain it

In your own words: why does it matter for comparing the accounts that most scholars think Matthew and Luke used Mark?

Worked example: the appearance to the eleven

How a historian compares one row of the Accounts compared page, "Jesus appears to the Twelve or the eleven", in four steps.

1. Lay out the accounts: Paul: to the Twelve, no place given (1 Corinthians 15:5). Matthew: to the eleven on a mountain in Galilee (28:16-17). Luke: to the eleven and others in Jerusalem (24:33-36). John: to the disciples in Jerusalem, again a week later with Thomas, then in Galilee. Mark's earliest text tells of no appearance; the longer ending has one, to the eleven at a meal.
2. Date and relate the sources: Paul wrote first (56 to 57 CE). Matthew and Luke wrote later (80 to 90) and, most scholars hold, each used Mark. Mark's earliest text ends at 16:8, after the young man says that Jesus is going ahead of the disciples into Galilee (16:7).
3. Sort the details: The site groups Luke, John, Paul and the longer ending together, as a main wording and minor variations (Jerusalem, or no place given). It marks Matthew's mountain in Galilee as a different detail that could be true alongside the others, since John tells appearances in both places, and labels the call debated: Brown asks whether Luke's Jerusalem appearances and Matthew's Galilee appearance can be made one sequence.
4. Reach a qualified judgment: A historian can say that all five accounts report an appearance to the group, that they differ on where it happened, and that scholars disagree on whether the places can be combined. That describes the sources; it does not answer whether the event happened.

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Your turn: who the women see at the tomb

The row "Who the women see at the tomb" on the Accounts compared page. The first two steps are done; write the last two before you open the answer.

1. Lay out the accounts: Mark: a young man in a white robe, sitting inside (16:5). Matthew: an angel sitting on the stone (28:2-3). Luke: two men in dazzling clothes (24:4). John: two angels in white, seen by Mary (20:12). Paul's list has nothing in this row.
2. Date and relate the sources: Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels (65 to 75 CE). Most scholars hold that Matthew and Luke (80 to 90) each used Mark. John is the latest (90 to 100).
3. Sort the details: How would you group the four descriptions, and which of the four categories fits the differences?

4. Reach a qualified judgment: What can a historian say about this row, and what can they not say?

Common misconceptions

The steps in this lesson (date each report, ask who used whom, sort what they share from where they differ) are how journalists and investigators weigh any set of accounts too.

- Some people think that if accounts of an event differ in detail, a historian must set them all aside. A difference in detail does not cancel a source. Historians record where accounts agree and where they differ, ask why, and treat both as evidence about the sources and how they relate. On the Accounts compared page the Gospels agree on the first day of the week and on Mary Magdalene at the tomb, and differ on who was seen there and where the eleven saw Jesus. Most differences are details that could both be true; for the ones the site marks as conflicting as written, it gives what the works it cites say about whether they can be reconciled, with works on each side.
- Some readers assume the Gospels are the earliest written accounts of the resurrection. On the dates most scholars give, the earliest that survives is in a letter of Paul. Most scholars date 1 Corinthians to 56 to 57 CE and Mark, the earliest Gospel, to 65 to 75. Paul also says he passed on what he had received, and Brown calls the list in 15:3-7 an early sequence. When Paul received it is not known, so the site gives the list no date of its own.
- Some readers take five accounts that agree on a detail to be five separate confirmations of it. Not when some of the writers used others. Most scholars hold that Matthew and Luke each used Mark, and nearly all agree that one author wrote Luke and Acts. Where Matthew and Luke follow Mark, as Matthew 28:7 follows the wording of Mark 16:7, their agreement may come from Mark, and so may be one report repeated rather than several.

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Self-test: the answer, then the reason

1. Which of the five accounts on the Accounts compared page was written first, by the dates most scholars give?

A. Mark, the earliest Gospel

B. Paul's list in 1 Corinthians

C. Matthew, the first book of the New Testament

Reason: How do we know?

A. Paul's letters come after the Gospels and Acts in the Bible, so they were written later.

B. The Gospels tell the events themselves, so they must be older than a letter that lists them.

C. Most scholars date 1 Corinthians to 56 to 57 CE, and Mark, the earliest Gospel, to 65 to 75.

2. What does Paul say about the list in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7?

A. That he saw every one of the appearances himself

B. That he copied it from the Gospel of Mark

C. That he received it and passed it on

Reason: What does that tell a historian?

A. The list may hold material older than the letter it appears in.

B. The list must be later than Mark, since Paul had to learn it from a Gospel.

C. Brown dates the list itself to about 39 CE.

3. Which appearance do Paul and Luke both report?

A. To Peter, called Cephas by Paul and Simon by Luke

B. To more than five hundred at once

C. To James

Reason: Why does the site put these two in one row?

A. Both accounts were written by Paul's companion Luke.

B. Both place the appearance in Galilee.

C. Both name the same person, under two different names.

4. Where does Matthew place the appearance to the eleven?

A. In Jerusalem, a week later, with Thomas

B. In Jerusalem, after the two disciples return from Emmaus

C. On a mountain in Galilee

Reason: How does the site mark this detail?

A. As a conflicting detail: read as written, a Galilee appearance and a Jerusalem appearance cannot both be true.

B. As a different detail that could be true alongside Jerusalem, with the works cited differing on it.

C. As the same detail as Luke's, told in other words.

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5. Most scholars hold that Matthew and Luke each used Mark. What follows for comparing their resurrection accounts?

A. Three Gospels that agree on a detail are three separate confirmations of it

B. Where Matthew and Luke follow Mark, their agreement with Mark may come from Mark

C. Matthew and Luke should agree with Mark on every detail of the ending

Reason: Which method is this?

A. Asking who used whom before counting an agreement as separate support.

B. Counting how many accounts tell a detail and following the majority.

C. Preferring the latest account, since it had the most sources.

6. Where does Mark's earliest text end?

A. At 16:8, with the women afraid and saying nothing

B. At 16:20, after Jesus is taken up into heaven

C. At 16:9, with Jesus appearing first to Mary Magdalene

Reason: How do we know?

A. No copy of Mark has verses 9 to 20.

B. No early writer ever quotes verses 9 to 20.

C. Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, from about the middle of the 4th century, stop at 16:8, and the wording of verses 9 to 20 is unlike Mark's.

7. What label does the site give the judgment that Luke 24:12, where Peter runs to the tomb, belongs to the earlier text?

A. Nearly all scholars agree

B. Scholars are split

C. Church tradition

Reason: Why is it less certain than the end of Mark?

A. The editors were divided: Papyrus 75 and Codex Vaticanus have the verse, while Codex Bezae lacks it.

B. No early copy of Luke 24 survives.

C. Most modern Bibles leave the verse out.

8. Which statement is a historical comparison rather than a statement of belief?

A. Because the accounts differ, the event cannot have happened.

B. Because Paul's list is early, the event must have happened.

C. Matthew and Luke place the appearance to the eleven in different places.

Reason: What makes it historical?

A. Most people would agree with it.

B. It can be checked by reading the passages, and it makes no claim about whether the event happened.

C. It names two of the Gospels.

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Flashcards

Fold the page along the dashed line, or cover the right column, and say each answer before you look.

Question	Answer
When do most scholars date 1 Corinthians?	56 to 57 CE.
When do most scholars date Mark?	65 to 75 CE.
When do most scholars date Matthew and Luke?	80 to 90 CE.
When do most scholars date John?	90 to 100 CE.
Whom does Paul list as seeing the risen Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8?	Cephas, the Twelve, more than five hundred at once, James, all the apostles, and last of all Paul himself.
What does Brown call the list in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7?	An early sequence, which Paul says he received and passed on.
Is it known when Paul received the list?	No. Brown reports the suggestion that he learned it on his Jerusalem visit, about 39 CE (Galatians 1:18-19).
Which woman do all four Gospels name at the tomb?	Mary Magdalene.
Where does Mark's earliest text end?	At 16:8, with the women afraid and saying nothing.
Which two copies, from about the middle of the 4th century, end Mark at 16:8?	Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus.
Which early writer quotes the longer ending of Mark, and when did he write?	Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, about 175 to 185 CE.
Name one piece of internal evidence that Mark 16:9-20 was added later.	Its wording: many of its words are found nowhere else in Mark, and verse 9 introduces Mary Magdalene as if she had not just been named (Metzger).
Which account tells of guards at the tomb?	Only Matthew.
Where do Matthew and Luke place the appearance to the eleven?	Matthew: on a mountain in Galilee. Luke: in Jerusalem.
Which writer do most scholars think Matthew and Luke each used?	Mark.
What four categories does the Accounts compared page use to sort details?	Same detail; minor variation; different detail (both could be true); conflicting detail (as written, both cannot be true).

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Question	Answer
Which two details does the site mark as conflicting, and how does it label them?	The women's silence in Mark 16:8, and Luke's "remain in the city" against Galilee in Mark and Matthew. Both are labeled debated.
What label does the site give Luke 24:12?	Scholars are split.

Answers

Warm-up

1. At 16:8.
2. Mark.
3. An account can be written years after the event, so historians date the account as well as the event.

Why it matters

- Account: Nearly all scholars agree that the same author wrote Luke and Acts, so Acts 1:3-12 continues Luke's own story; an agreement between them is one writer agreeing with himself.
- Received tradition: A writer can pass on teaching he was given earlier. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in 56 to 57 CE but says he received the list; when he received it is not known, and the date Brown gives, about 39 CE, is for the Jerusalem visit, not for the list.
- Cephas: Simon is Peter's other name, so Luke and Paul report the same appearance under two names: one of the few details Paul's list shares with a Gospel.
- Same detail: It shows what the accounts have in common. But if one writer used another, the agreement may come from that source, and it cannot count as separate support until you know who used whom.
- Minor variation: Writers retell in their own words and add or drop small details. The site counts "at dawn" and "while it is still dark" as the same morning told differently, not as a contradiction.
- Different detail (both could be true): Mark mentions one young man but does not say there was only one, so read as written both accounts could be true. The difference is still evidence about the sources, and a historian reports it rather than smoothing it over.
- Conflicting detail (as written, both cannot be true): The works it cites disagree, and a historian describes that disagreement without deciding it. Ehrman and Méndez set Luke against Mark and Matthew and read Mark's women as telling no one; Brown reports readings that would let both stand (a suspended ending in Mark, long efforts to combine Jerusalem and Galilee) while asking whether combining them is possible.
- Dependence: If Matthew took a detail from Mark, their agreement is one source repeated, not two separate reports. Only details a writer could not have taken from the other count as separate support.
- Internal evidence: The copies disagree, so the wording gives a second, separate test. When the oldest copies and the wording both point the same way, the judgment that the verses were added later is stronger.
- Longer ending of Mark: Because Mark's earliest text ends at 16:8. Including the longer ending by default would count a later addition as part of Mark's own account; the switch lets you see what it adds.

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- Peter at the tomb (Luke 24:12): Those who think it was added suggest a copyist brought it in from the similar story in John 20; most of the editors think it is original and that Codex Bezae lost it. Both sides reason about what copyists were likely to do.

Explain it

Where Matthew and Luke follow Mark, their agreement with Mark may come from Mark itself: one source repeated, not three separate reports. A historian counts such agreements once and looks hardest at where Matthew and Luke go their own ways, such as Galilee or Jerusalem for the appearance to the eleven.

Your turn: who the women see at the tomb

3. Sort the details: The site groups Mark and Matthew (one seated figure; Matthew calls him an angel) and Luke and John (two figures; John calls them angels). It marks Matthew's, Luke's and John's as different details that could both be true: Mark mentions one figure but does not say there was only one, and an angel on the stone and a young man inside could come in one visit. None is marked conflicting.
4. Reach a qualified judgment: They can say that all four Gospels tell of a figure or figures at the tomb, that the number and the description differ, and that Matthew, who most scholars think used Mark, keeps one figure and calls him an angel. The comparison does not settle what the women saw.

Self-test

1. Answer B, reason C. 1 Corinthians is dated 56 to 57 CE and Mark 65 to 75; Matthew comes later still (80 to 90). The order of books in the Bible is not the order in which they were written, and a letter can be older than a narrative of the same events.
2. Answer C, reason A. Paul says he passed on what he had received, so the list may be older than the letter. When he received it is not known: about 39 CE is the date Brown gives for Paul's visit to Jerusalem, where some suggest he learned it, not a date for the list. Paul lists himself last of all, and Mark was written after 1 Corinthians.
3. Answer A, reason C. Paul says Jesus appeared to Cephas (1 Corinthians 15:5); in Luke the others report that he has appeared to Simon (24:34). Only Paul tells of the five hundred and of James. Paul wrote his own letter, and neither account places the appearance to Peter in Galilee.
4. Answer C, reason B. Matthew 28:16-17 places it on a mountain in Galilee. The appearance with Thomas a week later is in John, and the return from Emmaus is in Luke, both in Jerusalem; the meal is in the longer ending of Mark. A Galilee appearance does not by itself rule out one in Jerusalem (John tells both), so the site marks Matthew's as a different detail, labeled debated because Brown asks whether the two can be made one sequence. What the site marks conflicting is Luke's instruction to remain in the city.
5. Answer B, reason A. Writers who used the same source can agree because of that source, as Matthew 28:7 repeats Mark 16:7, so a historian asks who used whom before counting an agreement. A writer who used Mark could still change it: Matthew and Luke differ from Mark and from each other on many details.
6. Answer A, reason C. The two old copies end at 16:8, and Metzger points to the wording of verses 9 to 20. Codex Alexandrinus and most later copies do have the verses, and Irenaeus quotes them about 175 to 185, so the judgment rests on weighing the copies and the wording, not on the verses being missing everywhere.

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7. Answer B, reason A. Papyrus 75 (about 225) and Codex Vaticanus have the verse and Codex Bezae (5th century) lacks it; the editors kept it but were divided. Early copies of Luke 24 do survive, and all six translations in the site's data include the verse.
8. Answer C, reason B. A comparison of sources can be checked by reading Matthew 28:16-17 and Luke 24:33-36. The other two draw a verdict on the event from a difference or a date, which goes beyond the comparison; people reach such judgments on other grounds, and this lesson does not ask for them.

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