

THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK

It has always been recognised that there are seeming discrepancies in the accounts given by the Evangelists of the events of the first Easter day. As one of the writers in the *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* points out, they are not difficult to reconcile and a careful reading of the explanation of each verse in that volume would enable anyone to do so. But besides this exercise of ingenuity there is the further, and historically more important, question of showing that the problems arise naturally from the methods used by each Evangelist in putting his story together. As I have not yet found the answer to this question in that great work I would offer an amateur attempt.

Perhaps it is as well to insist that these accounts were not written to prove the fact of the resurrection. Their readers had already accepted it on the testimony of the five hundred witnesses mentioned by St Paul, and these stories were written to tell how it first became known. Their apparent discrepancies make it unlikely that any of the writers copied from one another in these passages, or from a common written or recitative source. But if we accept the traditional authorship, two of the writers had been in immediate contact with the events, and if the other two were not so qualified they were soon afterwards in close touch with some of the chief actors, and consulted them in putting their stories together. We might expect then large, even surprising, omissions—due to forgetfulness or oversight; but real contradiction would not be likely to occur. It is plain historical sense, therefore, to examine the texture of the accounts so as to eliminate possible misunderstanding due to the method of narration.

In detail the following seem to be contradictions with regard to the events of the First Day of the week. When Cleophas and his companions returned from Emmaus, Luke says that the others told them the Lord had arisen and then heard their account; but according to Mark the others were incredulous and did not believe the new story either. It would seem from Matthew that Our Lord appeared to the women before they had taken the angelic message to the disciples, yet according to Luke, Cleophas had only heard them tell of the angelic message when they made their report; and again, according to Mark, they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. The greatest difficulty occurs with regard to Mary Magdalen to whom all the Evangelists give great prominence. John tells us that she had found the tomb empty and so reported to Peter and to John, and that after-

wards she supposed the gardener had taken away the body. But Matthew seems to say that she was near, or present, when the angel rolled away the stone, that with the other women she received his instructions and went to give them to the disciples, and so met Jesus on the way and recognised Him. Mark again seems to differ from both : Mary Magdalen received the message of the angels along with the other women but told no-one, and then (though this is perhaps an account by another) that Our Lord appeared to her first and she did tell the disciples but they would not believe her.

But let us now take into account the methods of narration. There is a type of reporting where a man writes strictly from his own memory ; it usually contains much insignificant, even irrelevant, detail but it is always vivid ; there will probably be large gaps especially if it is of a long past event, but, if the man is anyway honest, what he says positively will be true, provided we do not try to read more into it from his omissions or his forgetfulness of duration of time. This sort of account is common in St John's Gospel and the account of his race with Peter to the tomb is such. We can say then with certainty that the two Apostles heard Mary Magdalen say that the Lord's body had been taken from the tomb, that they ran as described, that John looked in but did not enter, that Peter went in first and John later. We cannot say that they were in the tomb at the same time or that they went home together or at once—because John does not make any such statements though some of his readers have supplied them.

We could not be sure from this section whether Mary Magdalen had heard or heard of the angelic message before coming to the Apostles. She may have only got half the story out before they started. But John does go on to give a similar vivid account of Our Lord's appearance to her. This could be derived only from her, and it has always been one method of narration to set down what is in fact the story as told by another. In this case Mary Magdalen's account makes it clear that she had not heard of the angelic message on her previous visit to the tomb. Further, it does not say *when* she went back to the disciples and told them of Our Lord's appearance to her ; it may have been immediately, or it may have been much later in the day ; it may have been to all or only to some of the disciples.

Generally speaking, Luke does not follow the method of John. As he indicates at the beginning he has based his Gospel on sources rather than made a collection of them—the historian's method, or at least that of 19th-century historians. Essentially, as Collingwood pointed out, it tells us the historian's conclusions about the events rather than the evidence he considered, although it may be cast in the

form of a description. It can of course give a true account, but it is, however slightly, generalised and we cannot make the same sort of deductions as we can from concrete direct testimony. Luke's account of the visit of the holy women to the tomb is of this type. They are mentioned in general, neither named nor numbered. They entered the tomb and found it empty. Later two men in shining garments give them the message of the Resurrection and they return and tell it to the eleven Apostles and all the rest. It does not derogate from the historical truth of such an account if one of the women, Mary Magdalen, did in fact leave the tomb before the two men came. Nor does the account necessarily mean that the eleven and the rest—the collectivity of Our Lord's followers in Jerusalem, a hundred or so maybe—were assembled waiting for an announcement. They may not have been in one house, or all together. So the first comer, Mary Magdalen, could have told Peter and John about the empty tomb while the other women, later, told of the angelic message to such groups of the disciples as they came across. Nor is there anything against such an interpretation in Lk. XXIV.10-12. Had the account been written by a 19th-century historian these verses would probably have formed two footnotes of detail to bear out the general account. The first gives names of three of the women concerned without specifying the particular parts they played, the second states that Peter ran to the tomb without saying that he did so alone (as indeed he did after starting with John). Consideration then of the manner of writing makes the accounts of Luke and John completely consistent and, I think, even natural.

Even a 19th-century historian would sometimes insert an eyewitness's or actor's account of a happening instead of writing about it in his own words. It reads to me as though Luke has followed this practice in the Emmaus story. It might be that Luke himself was the companion of Cleophas but more likely that this is the latter's immediate report. It is, like John's, vivid and full of detail right up to their recognition of Our Lord. But as is customary in such memory-pictures, there is a blank from then to a later moment; in this case till they rejoin the Apostles and their companions who tell them the Lord has arisen again and appeared to Simon. In that gap of memory there were other incidents; they may have told some of the first disciples they met about their adventure and been disbelieved. But in the memory of Cleophas (or Luke) only the final scene stood out when they heard Our Lord had been seen by Simon and they in turn told how they recognised Him when He broke bread—and then suddenly He stood in the midst of them.

Mark's Gospel gives us two accounts of the first day—though it is

possible indeed that both of them are by the Evangelist himself. The first, xvi.1-8, is written in what I call the witness-style though the writer obviously has only small scraps of the original story. From the incidental question of the women among themselves as they approach the tomb, it would seem that Mark is putting down what he had learned from one of the women—either Mary, the mother of James, or Salome. She may not have known or remembered that one or two other women were following herself and her two companions. Nor would she necessarily remember, or perhaps notice, that Mary Magdalen returned as soon as she saw the tomb was empty. But when the remaining two received the angel's message they fled and wandered about for a time telling nothing to anyone.

In our Gospel of Mark this first-hand narrative breaks off there either unfinished (in our present text), or because it was all that Mark learned from his informant. It is, as far as it goes, consistent with all that Luke and John say, provided we suppose the two women, or at least Mary the mother of James, decided afterwards to take the angel's message to the Apostles.

The second narrative in Mark begins immediately and is wholly of the historian's form. It states that Our Lord appeared first of all to Mary Magdalen and that she reported it to those who had been of His company; in this it is consistent with John but adds (which he does not) that she was not believed. Her message was presumably given while Cleophas and his companions were on their journey and so is not mentioned by Luke. Mark however tells us that when those two returned they also were not believed—but as I have suggested this may well refer to an incident which was blank in the memory of Cleophas (or Luke).

The objections to the concordance I have suggested look serious when we turn to the account given in the last chapter of Matthew's Gospel. But I think they vanish if we pay attention to his treatment of the time factor. It used to be said that the great historians of the 19th century learned to solve their problems by keeping to a chronological order. Such a practice is strictly speaking impossible unless the narration is confined to one person or to one locality in space. Its appearance was obtained by the unconscious assumption of an hypothesised abstraction, a nation or a civilisation, which "lived" through the period chosen; and its failure is apparent when the writers tried to describe the history of a bundle of nations which they called Europe. Earlier chroniclers had tackled the difficulty in two ways. Sometimes they incorporated in a single story a number of actions and speeches which had a common theme, not indicating at all the time of their occurrence. Sometimes they jumped back and forward between two

or more parallel sequences of events, leaving it to the reader to understand that each item is as it were a flash on a cinema screen.

Any of these methods is historically valid to overcome the problem that the mind can only think of one event at a single moment. And so they are all legitimate for the Evangelists. I think it could be shown that Matthew uses both the last two methods I have mentioned in different places in his Gospel, and I suggest that he uses the last one in his final chapter. In that case it is composed of these separate items :

(1) Mary Magdalen and the other Mary drew near to the tomb at the hour of dawn.

(2) There was an earthquake and an angel rolled away the stone, and the guards were terrified.

(3) When the women came the angel gave them a message and they ran rejoicing to tell the disciples.

(4) Jesus met the women and greeted them and gave them a message for His brethren.

(5) The guards reported to the chief priests and their story was arranged.

In such a presentation it does not follow that item 2 is later than item 1 but only that it occurred to a different group of people. So the descent of the angel might, as far as this narrative goes, have happened when the women began their journey or before it. It was necessary to put it in to account for what the women found at the Sepulchre. Accordingly, Matthew does not say in item 3 that the women found the angel sitting on the stone. His version is quite consistent with their finding the stone rolled back, with the departure of Mary Magdalen when she saw the tomb was empty and with the appearance of this angel to the other Mary and to other women who had come up but are not mentioned by Matthew.

Further, item 3 does not contradict the statement in Mark that some of the women, including Salome, went away alarmed and told no-one. Item 3 only says that some of them, including Mary, mother of Jesus, went rejoicing to tell the disciples.

Further, item 4 is not said to happen during that journey. The translation of Mgr Knox makes this seem to be the case but, with all respect, I think he has interpreted the text. The "Et ecce" with which the item is introduced, like the "et ecce" which introduces the earthquake and the terror of the guards, is simply one way (I think a customary way of Matthew) to indicate a switch to a different flash. As far as Matthew is concerned he has finished the story of the women's journey when he says they started out rejoicing. But he is still interested in what happened to the women on that day and

presumably was reporting from Mary of James ; so he gives us the account of their being met by Our Lord at some time during the day and being sent by Him back to the disciples. The concordance with Mark and Luke is then complete ; Mary of James and those with her tell the disciples of the angel's message and are disbelieved. Later they are met by Our Lord and sent back to the disciples but arrive this time after Cleophas has gone ; and they are again disbelieved, or rather it is thought that they have had a vision.

In item 4 Matthew turns back to the story of the guards so as to round off his parallel story. Their visit to the Chief Priests and the bargain reads as though it was told to Matthew by one of the soldiers. But the fixing of the time—while the women were going on their second journey to the disciples—is an historian's trick. There is no difficulty about the passage of time ; after their shock soldiers would almost certainly have taken cover where they could, and only reassembled an hour or two later, and only decided to go to their employers when they had talked the matter over. But the parallel accounts of "the other Mary" and of the soldier informant began and ended at the same points of time ; and the historian had to say so.

If, then, we fix ourselves at the tomb the following sequence takes account of all the Gospel narratives :

1. The angel descends and rolls away the stone, the soldiers are paralysed with fear and then fly to cover.
2. Mary Magdalen, Mary of James and Salome arrive, see the tomb is empty and Mary Magdalen goes back to the Apostles.
3. One or two other women arrive at the tomb (five women are mentioned in all but there may have been some unnamed). One angel appears in the tomb and gives the women there the message for the Apostles. Salome and one other at least go away afraid and give no message immediately. Later two angels appear and repeat the message probably to a second group of women. These, with Mary of James, run to take the message with joy to the Apostles.
4. First John and then Peter arrive, enter the tomb separately and then go away separately.
5. Mary Magdalen arrives and Our Lord appears to her.
6. Our Lord meets the other holy women as they return, greets them and sends them back to the Apostles. He then takes the road to Emmaus.

There is no difficulty about the time sequence for the group of disciples, provided we do not suppose them to be assembled in one body to receive messages. Of Our Lord's appearance to Peter, the only time indication is that it was before Cleophas had made his way

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back to the Apostles ; perhaps it occurred while he and his companion were returning from Emmaus.

It is possible to hazard a guess about the reasons for the methods of narration chosen by the Evangelists. Each of them had one and John (and possibly Matthew) had two verbatim reports to put in, and after doing so added such other details as he had learned. With that plan it is difficult to insist on the chronological sequence. Further, all save Matthew are going to stress the fact of Our Lord's bodily Resurrection shown in His appearance to the Apostles in the evening. Their earlier scepticism was not (*pace* St Gregory) regarded by the Evangelists as additional evidence for the Resurrection but as a reluctance of heart to believe what Our Lord had prophesied. If they had been as intelligent as some of the Priests they would have recalled and understood what he had said, and would not have allowed their human emotional incredulity to dismiss the story of the women as a vision. With some chivalry the Evangelists stress the better spiritual acumen of these holy women, and perhaps for the same reason they dwell on the importance on that first day of Mary Magdalen out of whom the Lord had cast seven devils.

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