

THE CASE AGAINST THE EMPTY TOMB

Peter Kirby

Several scholars doubt the historicity of the empty tomb.¹ I intend to set out the reasons for disbelieving the empty tomb story. I will argue that the empty tomb narrative is the invention of the author of Mark. This conclusion will be supported by showing that all reports of the empty tomb are dependent upon Mark, that there are signs of fictional creation in the empty tomb narrative in Mark, that the empty tomb story as told by Mark contains improbabilities, and that traditions of the burial and appearances support a reconstruction of the events that excludes the discovery of an empty tomb.

If Not an Empty Tomb, then What?

There are at least four other possibilities.

1. Jesus was left hanging on the cross for the birds.²
2. The Romans disposed of the body, perhaps in a "limed pit."³
3. The body of Jesus was buried in a criminal's grave by Jews.⁴
4. The body of Jesus remained buried in a tomb.

¹ A list of 20th century writers on the NT who do not believe that the empty tomb story is historically reliable: Marcus Borg, Günther Bornkamm, Gerald Boldock Bostock, Rudolf Bultmann, Peter Carnley, John Dominic Crossan, Steven Davies, Maurice Goguel, Michael Goulder, Hans Grass, Charles Guignebert, Uta Ranke-Heinemann, Randal Helms, Herman Hendrickx, Roy Hoover, Helmut Koester, Hans Küng, Alfred Loisy, Burton Mack, Willi Marxsen, Gerd Lüdemann, Norman Perrin, Robert Price, Marianne Sawicki, John Shelby Spong, Howard M. Teeple, and Rev. John T. Theodore.

² This possibility is highlighted by several ancient references. See Gerard Stephen Sloyan, *The Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 16. Also see Raymond Edward Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: a Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 1207-1208.

³ Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 257.

⁴ For this possibility, see the procedure as described in Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 6:5.

On the face of it, each one of these hypotheses is plausible. Any one of them would provide an alternative scenario to the empty tomb story, and it is the purpose of this paper to argue that the empty tomb story is a fiction. Thus, while I seek to show that the story of the discovery of the empty tomb of Jesus is most likely a fiction, it isn't necessary to choose a specific alternative. However, a few pieces of evidence are suggestive; for example, the tradition of the burial of Jesus "in the sand" would tend to exclude the first and fourth alternatives.

Dependence on Mark

Several writers have drawn attention to the fact that Paul nowhere mentions the empty tomb in his letters.⁵ To this it may be objected that Paul is not an encyclopedic author, and this objection is not without merit. For my purposes, it is sufficient to note that Paul offers no evidence for a pre-Markan tradition of an empty tomb. This allows me to argue that the empty tomb story appears only in documents dependent upon Mark. For reasons of space, I refer readers to the redaction-critical studies noted in order to find more detailed argumentation.

Concerning the tomb burial and empty tomb story, Fuller states, "Here Matthew follows Mark, with only minor alterations."⁶ Herman Hendrickx analyses the story of the visit to the tomb, the presentation of the angel, and the reaction of the women with the conclusion that "the details found in Matthew but not in Mark are not to be attributed to additional information about the events, but rather to the particular way in which Matthew edited the tradition he found in Mark."⁷ Hendrickx also studies v. 9-10 in detail and states, "Mt 28:9-10 is composed by Matthew to serve as transition between the account of the tomb and the appearance and commission in Galilee (Mt 28:16-20)."⁸ Matthew provides no new information concerning the burial by Joseph of

⁵ For example, Norman Perrin, *The Resurrection according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 80. Also Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Putting Away Childish Things: the Virgin birth, the Empty Tomb, and Other Fairy Tales You Don't Need to Believe to Have a Living Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), p. 131.

⁶ Reginald H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 75.

⁷ Herman Hendrickx, *The Resurrection Narratives of the Synoptic Gospels* (London: G. Chapman, 1984), p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Arimathea or the discovery of the empty tomb by the women, and there is nothing to suggest the opposite opinion that the author of Matthew had independent traditions at his disposal.

Perrin observes several redactional changes made to Mark by Luke: the narrative is written better, the young man in Mark becomes “two men in dazzling apparel,” the message of the angel has been changed from an exhortation to send the disciples to Galilee into a passion prediction, and the women are said to have returned to speak with the disciples.⁹ Perrin also notes that the change of the appearances from Galilee to Jerusalem fits Luke’s scheme in which the faith spreads from Jerusalem out to the ends of the earth.¹⁰ Herman Hendrickx examines the question of redaction in 24:1-12 in detail.¹¹ Hendrickx states: “Summing up, we would say that, although some scholars tend to reduce Luke’s dependence on Mark to secondary reminiscences, the opinion of those who hold that Mk 16:1-8 is the basic account which by itself sufficiently explains the Lucan exposition enjoys a higher degree of probability.”¹²

Many believe that the Gospel of John is literarily independent from the synoptics, and I do not intend to challenge that view in this essay. Nevertheless, I would maintain that, even if John is literarily independent, the section containing the empty tomb narratives is based on oral tradition that has been influenced by the synoptic gospels.¹³ There is evidence for synoptic influence in the return visit of Mary Magdelene. The author of John describes

⁹ Perrin, *Resurrection*, p. 60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹¹ Hendrickx, *Resurrection Narratives*, pp. 39-46.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹³ The idea that the gospels shaped and created oral tradition is not a new one. Raymond Brown, for example, believes that the Gospel of Peter’s numerous points of contact with the canonical gospels can be explained entirely from oral tradition emanating from these gospels. So one must not rule out the possibility that the synoptics have indirectly influenced some of the material found in John. As John P. Meier comments in another context in *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 131: “...our canonical Gospels not only come from ongoing oral tradition, but also generate ongoing oral tradition. It is also affirmed, quite rightly, that oral traditions did not die out the day after a canonical Gospel was published. But the writing of the canonical Gospels did change the situation. The canonical Gospels - long before they were definitively recognized as 'canonical' - were regularly preached on at worship, studied in catechesal schools, and cited strictly and loosely by patristic authors; and so increasingly they lodged themselves in the memory of individual Christians and whole communities. Inevitably they 'contaminated' and modified the oral tradition that existed before and alongside themselves.”

only Mary Magdelene as a visitor to the tomb, and so it is fitting that the author describes an appearance of the Lord to Mary alone, but the story is evolved from the tradition of the appearance to the women in Matthew. Hendrickx argues that the appearance to the women in Matthew is redactional, and so the Johannine account has been influenced by the Matthean story. After making several observations about the story, Bode comments, "John's second visit of Mary shows many signs of being developed by the help of words and themes from synoptic tradition and Johannine motifs found elsewhere."¹⁴ Reginald Fuller comments on the redactional character of the earlier scene with Peter and the beloved disciple.¹⁵ Several have observed the numerous parallels between Luke and John against the other two gospels.¹⁶ It is reasonable to suggest that Luke has influenced the Johannine tradition. Such an explanation would account for the coincidences between Luke and John previously in their Gospels as well as in their final chapters, in which these two evangelists alone narrate appearances to the disciples in Jerusalem.

Many make much fuss over the contradictions between the resurrection narratives, but my interest in them lies solely in their function as a linch-pin in the argument that the empty tomb stories are all dependent on the Gospel of Mark. I will not list such discrepancies, not only because this has been done many times before, but more importantly because the matter under contention is not biblical inerrancy. My interest is in understanding the cause of these discrepancies. My theory is that the evangelists freely shaped their resurrection narratives with theological concerns, not on the basis of historical knowledge, and that their few agreements derive from dependence, particularly dependence on the account in the Gospel of Mark for the empty tomb story.

Bode makes the following observations:

The only Easter event narrated by all four evangelists concerns the visit of the women to the tomb of Jesus. These texts include: Mk 16:1-8, Mt 28:1-8, Lk 24:1-12, Jn 20:1-13. The

¹⁴ Edward Lynn Bode, *The First Easter Morning. The Gospel Accounts of the Women's Visit to the Tomb of Jesus* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970), pp. 82-83.

¹⁵ Fuller, *Resurrection Narratives*, p. 135.

¹⁶ D. Moody Smith, *John among the Gospels: the Relationship in Twentieth-Century Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 85-103.

accounts in themselves present a many-faceted problem, which has been characterized as arising from their palpable differences, frequent contradictions in fundamental matters, evidence of a long development process striving partly to harmonize and partly to express earlier accounts in terms of later convictions. The problem cannot be solved in a few words, but the beginning of a solution will come from a recognition of the themes and views proper to each evangelist.¹⁷

After describing some discrepancies in four pages, John T. Theodore writes:

What are the facts? Which statements of the evangelists are correct? Sad to say, none can tell. All that can be said is that the Gospel of Mark, the oldest Gospel, from which the other evangelists drew most of their materials, was used by them with great freedom, and that their disagreements are indicative of the fact that when these narratives were recorded by them there was no definite and settled tradition concerning the incidents around the tomb of Jesus.

This does not necessarily mean that the evangelists tried to deceive their readers. To them each added detail became a conviction, however ill-founded, unverified and unverifiable, until a string of legends was accepted as historical facts.¹⁸

Thus, the discrepancies between the gospels highlight what redaction criticism explains: the post-Markan gospel narratives of the resurrection are legends and fictions built up around the empty tomb story in the Gospel of Mark. The statement made by James Dunn that the four gospels provide “united testimony” of “at least two or three different accounts” of the empty tomb is wrong.¹⁹ Archbishop Peter Carnley writes:

The presence of discrepancies might be a sign of historicity if we had four clearly independent but slightly different versions of the story, if only for the reason that four witnesses are better than one. But, of course, it is now impossible to argue that what we have in the four gospel accounts of the empty tomb

¹⁷ Bode, *Easter Morning*, p. 5.

¹⁸ John T. Theodore, *Who was Jesus? A Historical Analysis of the Misinterpretations of His Life and Teachings* (New York: Exposition Press, 1961), p. 189.

¹⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus: the Impact of Scholarship on our Understanding of How Christianity Began* (London: SCM, 1985), p. 66.

are four contemporaneous but independent accounts of the one event. Modern redactional studies of the traditions account for the discrepancies as literary developments at the hand of later redactors of what was originally one report of the empty tomb... There is no suggestion that the tomb was discovered by different witnesses on four different occasions, so it is in fact impossible to argue that the discrepancies were introduced by different witnesses of the one event; rather, they can be explained as four different redactions for apologetic and kerygmatic reasons of a single story originating from one source.²⁰

Since all accounts of the empty tomb are dependent on Mark, the story hangs by a slender thread indeed. The evidence that follows will cut that thread by showing that the story in Mark is most likely fictional.

Fictional Characteristics in Mark

One well-known indication in favor of fiction is the existence of previous stories of the same type on which the narrative could have been modeled. There is some precedent for a searching-and-not-finding-the-body story in the Jewish scriptures. In 2 Kings 2:9-18, Elijah is carried off into heaven in a whirlwind in the presence of Elisha. But some believe that Elijah may still be around somewhere, so they persuade Elisha to send fifty men “who searched for three days without finding him.” Obviously the story is different in the Gospel of Mark because the women do not go to the tomb with the purpose of searching for Jesus but simply to anoint him (cf. Mk 16:1). However, the act of the women evinces poor faith and misunderstanding concerning the resurrection of Jesus, and in that way the stories are similar.

There is evidence that Joseph of Arimathea is a fictional character and that the tomb burial story in the Gospel of Mark is also fictional. Roy Hoover notes, “the location of Arimathea has not (yet) been identified with any assurance; the various ‘possible’ locations are nothing more than pious guesses or conjectures undocumented by any textual or archaeological evidence.”²¹

²⁰ Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (New York: Oxford, 1987), p. 47.

²¹ In Paul Copan & Ronald K. Tacelli, ed., *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?: A Debate Between William Lane Craig & Gerd Lüdemann* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 133.

Richard Carrier speculates, “Is the word a pun on ‘best disciple,’ *ari[stos] mathe[tes]*? *Matheia* means ‘disciple town’ in Greek; *Ari-* is a common prefix for superiority.”²² Since commentators have seen the burial by the outsider Joseph of Arimathea as a contrast to the failure of the disciples and intimates of Jesus, the coincidence that Arimathea can be read as “best disciple town” is staggering.

Norman Perrin explains the function of the empty tomb story in the Gospel of Mark by connecting it with Mark’s theme of discipleship. All those who knew Jesus fail, including the three named male disciples, Peter and James and John, as well as the three named female followers. The named women who expect to find and anoint the corpse of Jesus in the tomb also serve as a foil for the unnamed faithful woman who anointed Jesus before his death and receives the only praise in the entire Gospel of Mark (14:3-9). The story of the discovery of the empty tomb by the women integrates well with Mark’s redactional themes and thus most likely stems from Mark himself. Perrin writes, “In the Gospel of Mark the discipleship failure is total. The disciples forsake Jesus as a group and flee from the arrest; Peter denies him with oaths while he is on trial; the women, who take on the role of the disciples in this final three-part narrative, fail to deliver the message entrusted to them.”²³

Lüdemann suggests that the presence of the young man at the tomb points to the recent invention of the empty tomb story in Mark:

Given the identity of the expression “young man” and taking into account that this mysterious person appears in Mark’s Gospel at decisive places and times, I venture the hypothesis that the young man in the tomb also represents the author of the Gospel. If that is correct, Mark speaks here as a preacher of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. By introducing himself into the tomb, he has further endorsed his own authority as an eyewitness. In pointing out that the women did not hand on the message of the resurrection to the disciples (v. 8), Mark implicitly identifies himself as the first one to tell the story of the empty tomb—*forty years* after the death of Jesus.²⁴

²² Richard C. Carrier, private correspondence.

²³ Perrin, *Resurrection*, p. 28.

²⁴ In Paul Copan & Ronald K. Tacelli, ed., *Jesus’ Resurrection*, p. 154.

The ending of Mark is indeed an endless source of fascination for scholars (Mk 16:8): "Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Some suggest that the silence of the women is intended by Mark to denote a "temporary" silence, by which it is meant that Mark believed the women did tell others about the empty tomb later on Easter Sunday (as told in the other gospels). I consider this interpretation to be improbable for two reasons.

The first reason is that it does injustice to the fact that the author of Mark *ends the Gospel* on this note. The gravity placed upon the fact that the author chose to end the gospel by saying this is hardly appreciated by the explanation that the silence was temporary. Indeed, this is hardly an explanation in the proper sense, as opposed to a mere possibility, because it does not help in any way to *explain* why the author of Mark ended by saying this. Even if the author of Mark may have thought the silence to be just temporary, why end the gospel this way? The suggestion that "the silence is temporary" has no explanatory power, if not negative explanatory power!

The second reason is that it is inconceivable for the author of Mark to have believed the silence to be "temporary" and not to continue the narrative. This is subtly distinct from the previous point, for while the previous reason focuses on the gravity of the ending, this reason focuses on the absence of a continuation. The reasoning for this argument is that we have the empirical evidence that at least three writers who knew the Gospel of Mark and who believed the silence was temporary could not bring themselves to fail to continue the narrative. The author of Matthew glosses over Mark's ending by writing, "Then they went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce this to his disciples." While the author of Matthew modifies Mark to say that they were "fearful yet overjoyed" and thus went away quickly to tell the disciples, the author of Luke chooses to ignore Mark 16:8 almost completely. An anonymous scribe, who did not even have the intention of writing a new Gospel but was supposed to be copying Mark, could not resist writing an ending of Mark based on his knowledge of the later Gospel accounts (the longer ending in 16:9-20). The shorter ending may be one more example of the same phenomenon. It seems that someone who believes that the women went on to tell others the same day could not have failed to include some type of

narrative after this point and could not have ended the story in this way.

I believe that the author of Mark must have understood the silence in a more permanent sense than would be allowed by the author of Matthew or Luke. That is, the author of Mark could not have meant that the women told other people the same day. Moreover, I do not think that the author could have meant that the women told the disciples any time before the disciples saw Jesus in Galilee. This is because, if the author believed that, then there is no reason for the author not to place such a telling conveniently on the same day, or at least in the narrative, as all other writers did. Whenever the telling would be in the mind of Mark, it is not plausible for the author to fail to narrate the telling, as the author of Matthew did and as the author of Luke did. Again we have the problem that the author would not have ended his gospel this way unless he took the silence of the women to be more serious than a slight hesitation or delay, perhaps quickly overcome by an appearance of Christ (so Matthew) before rushing onwards to tell the disciples. One function of the silence, seeing as it comes immediately after v. 7 where the women are commanded to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, is to imply that the women did not tell the disciples to go to Galilee. The appearance of Christ to the disciples in Galilee represents the reconstitutive event (cf. Mk 14:28), not an exhortation from the silent women. Galilee is the place from which the mission will go forth. Thus, I do think that it is implied that the men made their way back to Galilee without any impetus from the women.

Several have suggested that the function of 16:8 is to present an explanation for why the story hadn't been heard previously. But I agree with Fuller here:

The silence of the women can hardly be explained as the Evangelist's device to account for the recent origin of the story; that is altogether too modern and rationalistic an explanation, and assumes that the early church was concerned, like the modern historical critics, with conflicting historical evidence. The early church expanded its traditions anew in new situations: it did not investigate them historically to discover their origins and *Sitz im Leben*.²⁵

²⁵ Fuller, *Resurrection Narratives*, pp. 52-53.

While I would not say that the author has included the detail about the silence of the women as a rationalization for why the story hadn't been heard before, can this be taken as an indication of some sort? If the women historically had run off to tell the men in Jerusalem, with Peter and the beloved disciple checking up, and with the discovery of the empty tomb becoming part of early Christian catechesis, then is it likely that the author of Mark would have ended the way that he did? The ability of Mark to end this way, for whatever reason he had, suggests that the story did not exist before the writing of Mark in the way that it had existed before the writing of Matthew and of Luke. For if it had, and if this were known long before Mark, it is not likely that the ending of the story would have been that the women told nothing to anyone. This is certainly *not* to say that the *intention* of the author was to explain why the story had not been heard before. The intention of the author could be a number of different possibilities. But if the story had been known far and wide, from the beginning of Christianity, I would suggest that the author of Mark would not have received it in this form. For that reason, the story is probably of recent origin in the Gospel of Mark.

Improbabilities in Mark

I will start with those objections to the plausibility of the story that have little merit and proceed to those that are more serious. I am not declaring any one of these objections to be insuperable, but I do think that some provide a degree of evidence against the story.

It is sometimes said that the anointing of the body could have been performed by the women on the sabbath, and thus that they would not have needed to wait until Sunday. Craig writes in his essay: "It is true that anointing could be done on the Sabbath, but this was only for a person lying on the death bed in his home, not for a body already wrapped and entombed in a sealed grave outside the city. Blinzler points out that, odd as it may seem, it would have been against the Jewish law even to carry the *aromata* to the grave site, for this was 'work' (Jer 17. 21-22; Shabbath 8. 1)!" To which it may be added that the women may not have known the intricacies of rabbinic laws concerning the sabbath.

It is sometimes said that decomposition would have already begun in the Eastern climate. Craig writes in his essay: "Actually, Jerusalem, being 700 metres above sea level, can be quite cool in

April; interesting is the entirely incidental detail mentioned by John that at night in Jerusalem at that time it was cold, so much so that the servants and officers of the Jews had made a fire and were standing around it warming themselves (Jn 18. 18). Add to this the facts that the body, interred Friday evening, had been in the tomb only a night, a day, and a night when the women came to anoint it early Sunday morning, that a rock-hewn tomb in a cliff side would stay naturally cool, and that the body may have already been packed around with aromatic spices, and one can see that the intention to anoint the body cannot in any way be ruled out." Although the details mentioned in the gospels may not be correct, I don't believe that the weather on a particular weekend nearly 2000 years ago can be divined.

It is sometimes said that women would not have been permitted to anoint the body of Jesus in Jewish society or that only men prepare the bodies of men. While it may be true that it was more common that men would prepare the bodies of other men for burial, there is no evidence that women would be prohibited from doing so, and indeed there exists a statement in a minor tractate of the Talmud to the contrary.²⁶

It is sometimes said that the shroud could not be purchased on a holiday. Currently, I have no idea whether or not any business was done in Jerusalem on a holiday, so I can't evaluate this argument. It is also sometimes said that the burial could not be completed before sundown. This consideration tends to imply that Joseph of Arimathea must have gone to a bit of trouble or included his servants in the project, but this does not directly imply that the story is false.

Somewhat more troublesome is the statement that the women observed the tomb being covered by a stone yet that they seem to realize that nobody would be there to move the stone only while on the way there. Craig observes, "This same devotion could have induced them to go together to open the tomb, despite the stone. (That Mark only mentions the stone here does not mean they had not thought of it before; it serves a literary purpose here to prepare for v. 4). The opening of tombs to allow late visitors to view the body or to check against apparent death was Jewish practice, so the women's intention was not extraordinary." Craig does not succeed in emptying this objection of all force. Certainly,

²⁶ Dov Zlotnick, *The tractate "Mourning" (Semahot) (Regulations relating to death, burial, and mourning). Translated from the Hebrew, with introd. and notes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 82 (XII, 10).

nobody would state that tombs were never opened for visitors. Yet in allowing the likelihood that the women would have thought about the opening of the tomb before, Craig does not address the problem, if they had thought of this, why did they go to the tomb alone? It would seem more likely that they would have inquired at the house of Joseph for permission or assistance, or at least that they would have brought someone who would be able to help, rather than acting like the fools that Mark depicts them as. This tends to lower the likelihood of the story.

Richard Carrier describes what is most likely an anachronism in the story: “the tomb blocking stone is treated as round in the Gospels, but that would not have been the case in the time of Jesus, yet it was often the case after 70 C.E., just when the gospels were being written.”²⁷ It is most likely that the author of Mark retrojected his experience with tombs in his own day back into the time of Jesus.

Concerning the statement that the women “brought spices” on Sunday morning after observing the burial by Joseph of Arimathea, Hendrickx states that, “the embalming of a body was apparently not in accordance with contemporary custom, since there is not a single example available.”²⁸ If what the women were understood to be doing was not embalming, what was it? There was no such thing as a second anointing. The body was washed and anointed before the body was placed in the tomb or grave. Not only is this Jewish custom for burial, but it is also common sense that a body would be cleansed of sweat or blood before being wrapped in the cloth (usually white). Again, there is no example available for people going to a corpse after it was buried, removing the shroud, and anointing the corpse for a second time since the body would have been already washed or anointed before. This would make absolutely no sense; it would not occur to anyone, especially not in a Jewish culture, to anoint the body after it had been buried properly. Craig states in his essay, “what the women were probably doing is precisely that described in the Mishnah, namely the use of aromatic oils and perfumes that could be rubbed on or simply poured over the body.” However,

²⁷ Richard C. Carrier, “Craig’s Empty Tomb and Habermas on the Post-Resurrection Appearances of Jesus” (<URL: http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/indef/4e.html>, 1999). See also the article by Amos Kloner, “Did a Rolling Stone Close Jesus’ Tomb?” (<URL:<http://www.bib-arch.org/barso99/barso99roll1.html>>, 1999).

²⁸ Hendrickx, *Resurrection Narratives*, p. 44.

this obscures the fact that this was done *prior to burial*. Hans van Campenhausen writes, “The desire to anoint, ‘on the third day’, a dead body already buried and wrapped in linen cloths, is, however it be explained, not in accordance with any custom known to us...”²⁹ It comes as little surprise then that Matthew and John, who are usually thought to have more knowledge of things Jewish, do not state that the women came to anoint the body on Sunday morning.

The tomb burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea is unlikely. It is difficult to account for the motivation of Joseph of Arimathea: there are difficulties with the theory that Joseph was merely a pious Jew as well as with the theory that Joseph was a secret disciple of Jesus. These difficulties disappear if there were no tomb burial by Joseph.

Raymond Brown suggests that Joseph was merely a “pious Sanhedrinist” who desired to see that God’s law be carried out with respect to burial before the sun sets.³⁰ This thesis is not without its difficulties. For example, in Mark, Joseph requests the body of Jesus specifically and disregards the other two crucified. The pious Jew presumably would have wanted to take care of all three; alternatively, if it is supposed that the thieves would have been buried by the Romans anyway, then there is no reason for the pious Jew to get involved at all. Brown suggests, “We have to assume that the story in the Synoptics has been narrowed down in its focus to Jesus, ignoring the two others who were no longer theologically or dramatically important.”³¹ This is not entirely unreasonable, although it would be another mark against the reliability of Mark, who does seem to assume that no other bodies were placed in the tomb with Jesus. But is it very likely that a pious Sanhedrinist would be rushing about on the day before the sabbath during the Passover to have the bodies of the crucified properly buried? Pilate was perfectly capable of performing the burial with his own means, and thus there would be no offense to the law of God. Indeed, the Romans were in an easier position to perform the burial, since they would not have acquired ritual impurity thereby. Moreover, the historical Joseph would probably have had better things to do at this time than greatly inconvenience himself for those who could only be commonly perceived as

²⁹ Hans von Campenhausen, *Tradition and Life in the Church; Essays and Lectures in Church History* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 58.

³⁰ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, p. 1218.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1216.

crucified scum, the Galilean just as much as the highwaymen.³² Not only would it require the ritual impurity of himself or the summoning of his servants to the cross, as well as the expense of the linen and anointing oil, but most of all it would require the use of his own nearby rock-hewn tomb (which just happens to have nobody buried there yet). Tombs at that time were undoubtedly expensive to build or to quarry, and for this reason tombs were jealously preserved within families over several generations. The only motivation for a pious Jew to undertake a tomb burial for the man would be a strong belief that the crucified deserved an honorable burial. However, this would require that Joseph considered the charge to be unjust in the sight of God. Not only is it difficult to understand why a simple pious Sanhedrinist would be moved to conclude that such a one had been crucified unjustly, but it is hardly plausible that Pilate would have allowed Jesus to be given an honorable burial, as this would be tantamount to an admission that Jesus was crucified without just cause.

It is not without reason, therefore, that Craig suggests that Joseph was indeed a secret admirer of Jesus: "his daring to ask Pilate for a request lacking legal foundation, his proper burial of Jesus's body alone, and his laying the body in his own, expensive tomb are acts that go beyond the duties of a merely pious Jew."³³ Against such a view, Brown writes,

No canonical Gospel shows cooperation between Joseph and the women followers of Jesus who are portrayed as present at the burial, observing where Jesus was put (Mark 15:47 and par.). Lack of cooperation in burial between the two groups of Jesus' disciples is not readily intelligible, especially when haste was needed. Why did the women not help Joseph if he was a fellow disciple, instead of planning to come back after the

³² It is not exactly clear what the charge was against the *lestai*; they are described as thieves, highwaymen, or sometimes revolutionaries. In any case, the man crucified betwixt the two was not likely to receive better treatment and perhaps even less likely. Among other reasons, there was snobbery of people in Jerusalem against Galileans. There were some who thought that no good could come from Galilee, cf. Jn 1:46, Jn 8:52. But, most importantly, it would be assumed that someone who was crucified most likely deserved it unless there was some compelling reason to think otherwise. I find it hard to see how someone on the Sanhedrin would have been compelled to think otherwise of one who, if the gospel record is to be trusted here, opposed the Temple and was declared "King of the Jews."

³³ Craig, William Lane Craig, "The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus." (<URL: <http://www.origins.org/offices/billcraig/docs/tomb2.html>>, 1985), p. 176.

Sabbath when he would not be there?”³⁴ Again we might wonder what could have motivated the Sanhedrinist to an admiration for this particular crucified Galilean, especially if there were any historical reality to the actions of Jesus against the Temple. An original tradition that Jesus was buried by hostile figures would count against the disciple interpretation. Moreover, the tendency is towards making Joseph appear more like a disciple and thus suggests that the historical reality was nothing of the sort. As Brown says of those who take Mark as meaning that Joseph was a devotee of Jesus, “If that was what Mark meant, why did he take such an indirect and obscure way of saying so?”³⁵

Brown shows the figure of Joseph as it moves from Mark, to the later evangelists, to the Gospel of Peter, to the Gospel of Nicodemus, and eventually into the Glastonbury legend, to exhibit an increasing sense that Joseph was a model disciple of Jesus.³⁶ Craig has added his own speculation to the mix of legend concerning Joseph with his suggestion that Joseph was a delegate of the Sanhedrin and a secret disciple who was commissioned to dispose of all three bodies in a criminal’s grave yet who nevertheless tricked both Pilate and the Sanhedrin by giving a proper burial for the Lord in his own nearby tomb.³⁷ Craig had already noted considerations against the idea that Joseph was acting as anything other than a private citizen: “None of the gospels suggest that Joseph was acting as a delegate of the Sanhedrin; there was nothing in the law that required that the bodies be buried immediately, and the Jews may have been content to leave that to the Romans. That Joseph *dared* to go to Pilate and ask *specifically* for Jesus’s body is difficult to understand if he was simply an emissary of the Sanhedrin, assigned to dispose of the bodies.”³⁸ It is for these reasons that Craig seems to prefer the suggestion that the Romans disposed of the thieves while Joseph took the body of Jesus. However, Jesus is the least likely of the three for Pilate to release, for not only might it suggest that the crucifixion was unjust but it also would lend

³⁴ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, p. 1218.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1215.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1232-1234.

³⁷ Craig, (*supra*, n. 33).

³⁸ Craig, *ibid.*, p. 175.

justification to whatever sedition that Pilate suspected and would honor one who had been condemned as a threat to order.

There is a final reason to think that Pilate would most likely have ensured that Jesus did not receive an honorable tomb burial. Raymond Brown notes, "There was in this period an increasing Jewish veneration of the tombs of the martyrs and prophets."³⁹ Craig agrees, stating, "During Jesus's time there was an extraordinary interest in the graves of Jewish martyrs and holy men and these were scrupulously cared for and honored."⁴⁰ If Pilate considered the historical Jesus to be an enemy of the state, how much more would Pilate have to fear not only making him a martyr but also establishing a shrine to Jesus right in Jerusalem? It is in Pilate's best interest to make certain that Jesus would have been buried without honor and in obscurity.

Burial Traditions

There are traditions concerning the burial and appearances of Jesus that provide evidence against the story of the discovery of an empty tomb.

The Secret Book of James is thought to have been written in the first half of the second century. This is mainly because the sayings of Jesus are thought to be dependent on oral tradition and not the canonical gospels, which is not likely after the mid second century.⁴¹ It is known from a copy in Coptic found at Nag Hammadi. The setting of the work is a post-resurrection encounter with the risen Lord. The summary description of the hardships undergone by Jesus includes that Jesus was buried "in the sand."⁴² This Coptic phrase is sometimes translated non-literally to mean "shamefully," but it should be made clear that the very reason why the burial is shameful is that it is a burial in the sand. To be wrapped in a new linen cloth and placed in a rock-hewn tomb is not the description of a shameful burial. Thus, the *Secret Book of James* reflects a tradition that Jesus was buried in the sand or, to speak generally, in a dishonorable makeshift shallow grave instead of in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

³⁹ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, p. 1280.

⁴⁰ Craig, *ibid.*, p. 356.

⁴¹ Ron Cameron, ed., *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), p. 56.

⁴² *The Secret Book of James*, 5.

It is plausible that Mark unwittingly retained a pericope that was formed by Christians who did not believe Jesus was given proper tomb burial by Joseph of Arimathea. The Parable of the Tenants is interpreted as referring to Jesus. In Mark 12:8, it is said, "So they seized him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard." This most likely reflects an early tradition that those who arranged the execution of Jesus also arranged his shameful burial.

While arguing that Mark did not portray Joseph as a disciple of Jesus in any way, Raymond Brown notes the following passages where the phrasing suggests that Jesus was buried by Jews who were condemnatory of Jesus, not by his disciples:

A sermon in Acts 13:27-29 reports: "Those who lived in Jerusalem and their rulers... requested Pilate to have him killed; and when they had fulfilled all that was written of him *they* took him down from the tree and placed him in a tomb." John 19:31 tells us that *the Jews* asked Pilate that the legs of the crucified be broken and they be taken away. A variant reading at the end of John 19:38 continues the story: "So *they* came and took away his body." Similarly in *Gpet* 6:21 we read, "And then they [the Jews] drew out the nails from the hands of the Lord and placed him on the earth." Justin (*Dialogue* 97.1) phrases the burial thus: "For the Lord too remained on the tree almost until evening [*hespera*], and towards evening *they* buried him" — in a chapter where the context suggests that "they" may be the Jewish opponents of Jesus rather than his disciples.⁴³

Brown suggests, "The plural may be simply a generalization of the memory of Joseph who was one of 'the Jews,' i.e., not a disciple of Jesus at this time but a pious Sanhedrinist responsible for sentencing Jesus and acting in fidelity to the deuteronomic law of burying before sunset those hanged (crucified) on a tree."⁴⁴ However, having seen the difficulties with such a view previously, the consistent plural may be recognized as a tradition that the enemies of Jesus did indeed bury him. A request from some Jews for the bodies of the crucified to be taken down before the Sabbath may be historical, as this is plausible and even to be expected. These Jews would probably expect the crucified to deserve no better than a common criminal's grave. In this way,

⁴³ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, p. 1219.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1219.

the burial of Jesus would be remembered as a burial by his enemies, which in history would be some Jews and the Romans acting complicitly, yet which over time would come to mean the Jews alone (for reasons which will not be explored here).

Thus, there was probably a tradition that some Jews, enemies of Jesus, requested the body of Jesus to be taken down for burial. There is a tradition in the *Secret Book of James* that the body of Jesus was, shamefully, buried in the sand. There is a tradition in the *Gospel of Peter* that the body of Jesus was taken down by the Jews.⁴⁵ Finally, there is a tradition in the *Epistula Apostolorum* that the body of Jesus was taken down from the cross along with the two thieves.⁴⁶ Even if these documents might be harmonized with the Gospel of Mark using a little ingenuity, that does not negate the possibility, indeed the likelihood, that they contain the vestiges of a different tradition or traditions.

So the evidence would indicate that the story of the tomb burial by Joseph of Arimathea was not seared onto Christian consciousness as an indisputable historical fact. But can we say that these other traditions are likely to be pre-Markan? There is reason to think so. After all, there is little cause for Christians to imagine that Jesus was buried shamefully when in fact he was properly interred in the rock-hewn tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. On the face of it, it is more likely that the tradition would develop in the direction that would provide Jesus with a more hospitable burial. Thus, it is likely that the earlier tradition was that Jesus was buried in a shameful manner, what Reginald Fuller describes as “the final insult done to him by his enemies.”⁴⁷ In the words of J.D. Crossan, “It is most probable that Jesus was buried by the same inimical forces that had crucified him and that on Easter Sunday Morning those who knew the site did not care and those who cared did not know the site. The major reason for this conclusion is that the tradition has protested too much: an indifferent burial by Roman soldiers becomes eventually a regal entombment by his faithful followers (cf. Jn 19:31-32 and 38-41).”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Gospel of Peter*, 6.21.

⁴⁶ *Epistula Apostolorum*, 9.

⁴⁷ Fuller, *Resurrection Narratives*, p. 54.

⁴⁸ In Werner H. Kelber, ed., *The Passion in Mark: Studies on Mark 14-16*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 152.

Appearance Traditions

The first appearances were to Peter and his associates. The first appearance recounted in the formula found in 1 Corinthians 15 is the one to Cephas. This is widely acknowledged to be the earliest and best evidence that is available. The Gospel of Mark, the oldest of the four, alludes to the appearance to “the disciples and Peter” in Mark 16:7.⁴⁹ This is the only appearance mentioned in Mark, and it is fairly safe to assume that it is understood to be the first one. After telling the road to Emmaus story, the author of Luke mentions an appearance to Simon in Luke 24:34. The author seems to mention the appearance to Simon so as to avoid contradicting the tradition that Peter was indeed the first to receive an appearance. The testimony of Paul, confirmed by Mark and/or Luke, shows that Peter was the first remembered for an appearance, and an appearance to Peter’s circle follows closely thereafter. A weak indication is found in Ignatius, who mentions only the name of Peter when he describes an appearance of Christ.⁵⁰ The primacy of the appearance to Peter may also be reflected in the “Thou Art Peter” saying in Mt 16:17-19.⁵¹ Finally, it will be argued that John 21 provides a strong confirmation.

The strongest competitor to Peter for the distinction of first appearance is Mary Magdalene. That is not saying much, however, for the evidence is of a much later and weaker variety. It has already been argued that the appearance to the women is probably not a historical tradition. The Gospel of Matthew’s account of the appearance to the women in Mt 28:9-10 is the first one available, but it has every sign of being redactional.⁵² The

⁴⁹ Fuller (*Resurrection Narratives*, pp. 63-64) argues against the interpretation that the disciples are to expect not an appearance but rather the coming parousia for a few reasons, including that Peter was named in particular: “But the decisive argument which proves it to be, in Mark 16:7, a resurrection rather than a parousia reference is the naming of Peter as well as the disciples, a circumstance which indicates clearly that the Evangelist is alluding to the two appearances listed in 1 Corinthians 15:5. If Mark 16:7 were pointing forward to the parousia it is hard to see why Peter should be singled out for special mention. But if it points to resurrection appearances, the reason for the mention of Peter is obvious.”

⁵⁰ *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*, ch. 3.

⁵¹ Fuller, *Resurrection Narratives*, p. 166: “We have already agreed that this saying was circulated originally as a saying of the Risen One...The ‘Thou art Peter’ saying is thus a verbalization of the primary appearance to Peter.”

⁵² Hendrickx, *Resurrection Narratives*, pp. 34-38. See also Bode, *Easter Morning*, pp. 54-56. Bode adds these arguments against the historicity of an appearance to the women (p. 56): “It seems that other arguments, together with that of the repetition of the angel’s command, rule against a historical appearance of Jesus at the tomb. First, such an appearance would seem to nullify any utility

only Gospel to recount a unique appearance to Mary Magdalene is the Gospel of John, but this is probably not a historical account and appears to be a development of Matthew's story.⁵³ It might also be suggested that the author of John included a nod to the earlier tradition that Peter, not Mary Magdalene, was the first to come to faith in the resurrection, while at the same time playing up the role of the beloved disciple with the race to the tomb. Strikingly, we hear nothing from the authors of Mark or Luke about an appearance of Christ to the women, which is difficult to understand if it were a historical tradition. It is somewhat understandable that the women would be omitted from the list in Paul's letter because they got no respect as witnesses. But Mark and Luke are already telling us about the women and their role, so there is no need to be coy about the appearance of Christ to them. Indeed, a straightforward reading of their narratives excludes such a thing.⁵⁴ The story about the women seems to develop from an angelophany to a christophany. In the Gospel of Mark, there is only an angelophany. In the Gospel of Matthew, there is an angelophany followed up by a two verse appearance of Christ to ensure that the women proceed at a brisk pace. In the Gospel of John, now two verses only have been given to the angels, who recede into the background while the appearance of Christ takes center stage. In the *Epistula Apostolorum*, the angels have been dropped entirely, and now there is only the appearance of Christ.⁵⁵ The fact that the appearance of Christ eventually supplants the angelophany suggests that there was no original tradition of an appearance of Christ to the women. Indeed, the simple fact that Mark recounts an angelophany instead of a christophany suggests that Mark did not know of an appearance

in the message of the angel — if Jesus was to repeat the message, why bother with the angel? Second, it would seem strange that the first appearance would be to the women rather than to the official witnesses. Third, of what value would the appearance to the women be, whose report would have been suspect? One cannot think that the purpose of the appearance was to assure the women themselves, as they are already reported to be going with joy to carry out quickly the task assigned to them. Thus we see and understand the appearance in 28:9-10 as a doublet for the previous command by the angel of the Lord. After all, from the angel of Yahweh speaking in the first person for the Lord it is not far to an appearance of the risen Lord of the Christians."

⁵³ Bode, *Easter Morning*, pp. 82-84.

⁵⁴ It is unlikely that these writers knew of an appearance of Christ to the women given the explicit silence left unbroken in Mark and the uninterrupted return of the women in Lk 24:8-9.

⁵⁵ *Epistula Apostolorum*, 9b-10.

to the women and was remaining faithful to the early tradition that the first appearance was to “the disciples and Peter.”

So, the first appearances were to Peter and company. What indications do we have to place these appearances geographically?

Paul does not offer any clear reference in this case for where he believed that the appearances were situated. There may be a hint, however. Hans von Campenhausen argues:

And a final argument is contained in our text of St. Paul. The appearance, there mentioned, to five hundred brethren (and sisters?) can hardly be situated in Jerusalem; it, therefore, points likewise to Galilee. Even if the round number ‘five hundred’ may be an exaggeration, the gathering would be too numerous for a private house, and a synagogue — even were it large enough — would hardly have been accorded to the adherents of Jesus in Jerusalem. We cannot consider an open-air service on the Mount of Olives. That only leaves the temple to be considered. But quite apart from the intrinsic improbability of an appearance there and the impossibility of keeping away the unbelievers then as always, such an extraordinary occurrence would never have passed without trace into oblivion, and Luke certainly, with his love for the temple, would have attached great importance to it and gladly recorded it. Thus there only remains for this appearance a gathering somewhere in Galilee, and, as regards external circumstances, this is least improbable.⁵⁶

Interestingly, the author of Luke mentions the appearance to Peter in passing without giving any description of details or location. This is likely to be deliberate, for if the only tradition available to Luke was that the appearance to Peter took place in Galilee, then Luke would be required to skip the details because of his exclusive emphasis on Jerusalem. Hans von Campenhausen again:

On returning to the city with the great news, they were received with the jubilant cry, ‘The Lord has risen in truth and appeared to Simon.’ What is so striking is how the report of what is, after all, the main thing, is telescoped, announcing but not describing it; and this has long aroused the suspicion that Luke must have had definite grounds for avoiding any description of the

⁵⁶ Von Campenhausen, *Tradition and Life*, pp. 48-49.

appearance to Peter. Perhaps, in its special features, it could not be ascribed elsewhere than to Galilee, and so it contradicted the Jerusalem tendency of his narration. However, he could not simply omit it, since it was crucial and formed part of the most ancient tradition. It was, therefore, simply indicated, and all the detailed circumstances and the precise place of the meeting were, strangely enough, left vague.⁵⁷

Along with Paul, however, the author of Luke does not provide a clear reference, only a suggestive possibility.

However, the earliest evangelist, the author of Mark, clearly tells us that the appearance to "the disciples and Peter" took place in Galilee (cf. Mk 16:7). This indication alone should carry great weight, for it appears that the author has taken some pains to conjoin the empty tomb story (in Jerusalem) to the tradition of appearances in Galilee. Appearances in Jerusalem would fit much more smoothly with the empty tomb story, but the author of Mark manages to link the empty tomb story with the tradition of appearances in Galilee only through the angel's message.⁵⁸ The author of Matthew also seems to know only traditions of Galilean appearances to the disciples, given that 28:9-10 is most likely redactional but in any case not about the disciples.

D.H. van Daalen writes of the Johannine appendix:

It has often been pointed out that the reference to the appearance by the lakeside as the third appearance is rather odd (21:14). It is not true that chapter 20 already has three, because the appearance to Mary Magdalene was not one to the disciples. But the verse seems pointless unless there were some who did not regard this as the third appearance. The note of verse 14 is clearly meant to link this story, traditionally not

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 49-50.

⁵⁸ Fuller, *Resurrection Narratives*, p. 69: "But for the strength of it [the Galilean appearance tradition], Mark might very well have transferred the appearance to Jerusalem, since that is what the exigencies of the empty tomb story would naturally require. Instead, he contents himself with a slight adjustment of the earlier tradition, according to which the disciples fled at the arrest to Galilee (14:27,50, see above, ch. 1). The disciples now wait in Jerusalem to receive the angel's message from the women. In doing so, Mark re-motivates the journey of the disciples to Galilee. It is no longer a flight, but an orderly journey to see the Lord at his express pre-resurrection command (14:28) reiterated by the angel at the tomb (16:7). Mark's procedure in joining the empty tomb narrative to Galilean appearances shows how strong for him the Galilee tradition was. So we can with full confidence, despite recent arguments of W. Marxsen, follow Grass in supplementing 1 Corinthians 15 by Mark's information to the extent of locating the two primary appearances in Galilee."

regarded as the third appearance, to the two already described in chapter 20. But it seems highly unlikely that the tradition would count the Lord's appearances as no. 1, no. 2, no. 3, and so on. The only one that would be remembered with a figure attached would be the first. It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that the Evangelist received this story as the Lord's first appearance.

The contents of the story confirm that. If one reads John 21:2-13 by itself there is nothing to suggest that Jesus known to have been raised from the dead and had already appeared to his disciples.⁵⁹

Indeed, the story in John 21 does give the impression of being a first encounter. The disciples had returned to their old occupation of fishing in Galilee. And as van Daalen also notes, "The conversation between Jesus and Peter (21:15-19) also is much easier to understand if we assume that the risen Lord had not appeared to Peter before."⁶⁰ In the story, Simon is mentioned first and plays the most prominent role; indeed, Peter is the only one who acts individually, apart from a brief statement from the beloved disciple in verse 7. This, then, confirms the tradition of a first appearance to Peter and his group in the land of Galilee.

The Gospel of Peter begins to tell a story similar to the one in the Gospel of John, and it may be based on a common tradition written before them both. In the *Gospel of Peter*, as in the Gospel of Mark, the women flee in fear without saying anything to the disciples. The ending of Peter reads (v. 58-60): "Now it was the last day of unleavened bread and many went away and repaired to their homes, since the feast was at an end. But we, the twelve disciples of the Lord, wept and mourned, and each one, very grieved for what had come to pass, went to his own home. But I, Simon Peter, and my brother Andrew took our nets and went to the sea. And there was with us Levi, the son of Alphaeus, whom the Lord..." There it breaks off. It is interesting that the *Gospel of Peter*, which includes the visit of the women to the tomb, implies that the disciples returned home after the Passover feast of their own accord. The tradition that the disciples repaired to their own homes finds another echo in John 16:32, "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home.

⁵⁹ Van Daalen, pp. 32-33.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

You will leave me all alone.” The author of John in 20:10 seems to have the impression that their home was in Jerusalem, which is anachronistic unless the disciples had already purchased property there.

However, just as the *Gospel of Peter* notes, a group of disciples most likely remained with Peter in Galilee, living together and fishing together. Charles Guignebert writes:

It would be difficult to comprehend how the hopes and confidence of these poor men could have been reborn if at least some of them had not remained together, strengthened by the fellowship of their daily life, comforting one another and compounding their optimistic reactions. I do not think it daring to draw from the few wretched indices we still possess the conclusion that the center and life of this little group was Simon Peter.⁶¹

Note that it is not necessary to postulate a sudden and immediate packing of the bags on Good Friday in order to hold that the first appearances were to the disciples and Peter in Galilee. As van Daalen writes, “And, of course, they had every reason to stay till the end of the festival. No matter whether they were in a festive mood, it would have been extremely imprudent to draw attention to themselves by leaving the city while nobody else did. There is no better hiding-place than a crowd.”⁶² Note also that this would entail travelling on the Sabbath. Besides which, if men then were anything like men today, they would be loathe to let the room which they had paid up for a week go to waste. Yet though they may have remained in Jerusalem for Passover, the first appearances could well have taken place in Galilee.

So the best evidence available indicates that the first appearances were to the disciples and Peter after they had returned to Galilee. D.H. van Daalen notes this without drawing any conclusions: “If this story, before it was added to the Fourth Gospel, circulated as an independent part of the tradition, and was told as a first appearance of the risen Lord, we have an answer to some awkward questions. The most obvious is, what were the disciples doing fishing in Galilee, if the Lord had already appeared to them in Jerusalem and sent them to proclaim the Gospel (John 20:21-23)? The answer now becomes obvious: in the story as it

⁶¹ Charles Guignebert, *The Christ*. Edited and rev. by Sonia Volochova (New Hyde Park: University Books, 1968), p. 59.

⁶² Van Daalen, p. 39.

was originally told they had not seen the risen Lord in Jerusalem."⁶³ And this consideration weighs against the empty tomb story.

The tendency of the tradition is to displace appearances in Galilee for Jerusalem. In the Gospel of Mark, there are no appearances in Jerusalem, only an angelophany. The only appearances mentioned are in Galilee. In the Gospel of Matthew, however, we find that the women have been given an appearance in the area of Jerusalem. But it has been argued that this is redactional. What could provide the earliest tradition of an appearance in Jerusalem turns out to be, rather, a Matthean device that must be used because of the awkward conjunction of the discovery of the empty tomb by the women and the appearance to the disciples in Galilee. The evangelists Luke and John (up to chapter 20) smooth out their story by telling only of Jerusalem appearances. This indicates that the Jerusalem appearance stories follow on the heels of the empty tomb story, and thus that the empty tomb story is a relatively recent development in the Gospel of Mark, because the author of Mark retained the older tradition of appearances to the disciples and Peter in Galilee.

Furthermore, it is difficult to understand what the disciples were doing fishing in Galilee at all. It seems improbable that the disciples were set to wondering with the discovery of the empty tomb yet that the first appearances were in Galilee. For one thing, the empty tomb should have figured more in the kerygma. As Craig would argue, if the women discovered the empty tomb while the disciples were still in Jerusalem, it just makes good sense that the disciples would also visit the empty tomb. But then the empty tomb would have the witness of the male disciples, and thus the most commonly advanced excuse for the lack of attention to the empty tomb in the kerygma, that it was only found by the women, is not cogent. And the discovery of the empty tomb by the men would be likely to be mentioned by the authors of Mark and Matthew, if it were indeed a historical happening.

Finally, it makes little sense for the disciples to leave Jerusalem at all after the discovery of the empty tomb. In Craig's reconstruction, the disciples stayed in Jerusalem for a week, after which the Lord instructed them to meet up with Him again in

⁶³ Van Daalen, p. 33.

Galilee before the final ascension on the fortieth day in Jerusalem once again.⁶⁴ I have a vague sense of implausibility here, which the reader may accept or reject for what it is worth, against the idea that the eternal Creator of the universe would suggest a temporary rendezvous in Galilee. In any case, I think that the evidence favors the theory that the first appearance was in Galilee. The problem that this causes is exhibited by the reconstruction made by Hans von Campenhausen, in which the belief in the resurrection with the discovery of the empty tomb motivates the disciples to go to Galilee and then the belief in the resurrection with the appearances of Christ motivates the disciples to go back to Jerusalem.⁶⁵ If the belief in the resurrection motivated the disciples to go to Galilee, why would the confirmation of that belief motivate them once again to go back to Jerusalem? It makes more sense to posit that the belief in the resurrection was born in Galilee and that the disciples subsequently decided to return to Jerusalem.⁶⁶

One Last Argument

There is an argument from silence that is sometimes made by those who support the historicity of the empty tomb. James D. G. Dunn makes this argument:

Christians today of course regard the site of Jesus' tomb with similar veneration, and that practice goes back at least to the fourth century. But for the period covered by the New Testament and other earliest Christian writings there is no evidence whatsoever for Christians regarding the place where Jesus had been buried as having any special significance. No practice of tomb veneration, or even of meeting for worship at Jesus' tomb is attested for the first Christians. Had such been the practice of the first Christians, with all the significance which the very practice itself presupposes, it is hard to believe that our records of Jerusalem Christianity and of Christian visits

⁶⁴ Craig, *supra*, n. 71, p. 307.

⁶⁵ Von Campenhausen, *Tradition and Life*, pp. 85-86.

⁶⁶ Charles Guignebert explains the movement to Jerusalem in terms of "the conviction that the imminent manifestation of the Kingdom would take place in Jerusalem and that the Messiah would come forward there" (*The Christ*, p. 59)

thereto would not have mentioned or alluded to it in some way or at some point.⁶⁷

I agree with Dunn up to this point but cannot agree with his conclusion that “[t]he tomb was not venerated, it did not become a place of pilgrimage, because the tomb was empty!”⁶⁸ This conclusion is highly illogical. I agree that it would be most reasonable to conclude that early Christians did not know that Jesus was resting in his tomb because we would then expect tomb veneration. I agree that this is evidence against knowledge of a full tomb. But I would state further that this is equally evidence against knowledge of an empty tomb. It is plain to see that the site of the tomb of Jesus would become a site of veneration and pilgrimage among early Christians regardless of whether it were full or empty. The factors of nagging doubt, pious curiosity, and liturgical significance would all contribute towards the empty tomb becoming a site of intense interest among Christians. Contrary to Dunn, and in agreement with Peter Carnley, the obvious explanation is that early Christians had no idea where Jesus was buried.⁶⁹

Like Dunn, Craig also accepts the “fact that Jesus’s tomb was not venerated as a shrine” as an indication in favor of the empty tomb.⁷⁰ Again, however, if it is granted that there was no tomb veneration among early Christians, the correct conclusion is that early Christians did not know where the tomb of Jesus was. This argument is effective not only against a full tomb theory but also against an empty tomb theory. As Craig states at one point in his essay, “Indeed, is it too much to imagine that during his two week stay Paul would want to visit the place where the Lord lay? Ordinary human feelings would suggest such a thing.”⁷¹ Indeed, is it too much to imagine that other early Christians would have the same ordinary human feelings as Paul would? Raymond Brown states, “A particular reason for remembering the tomb of Jesus would lie in the Christian faith that the tomb had been

⁶⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus: The Impact of Scholarship on our Understanding of How Christianity Began* (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 67-68.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶⁹ Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 58.

⁷⁰ William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1989), p. 372.

⁷¹ William Lane Craig, “The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus.” (<URL: <http://www.origins.org/offices/billcraig/docs/tomb2.html>>, 1985).

evacuated by his resurrection from the dead.”⁷² Thus, it is extremely likely that an empty tomb would become a site of veneration from the very start of Christianity. For this reason, the fact that there was no tomb veneration indicates that the early Christians did not know the location of the tomb of Jesus, neither of an empty tomb nor of a full tomb. The best way to avoid this conclusion is, I think, to assert that there was tomb veneration despite the silence of any first, second, or third century writers on such an interest. However, as Dunn and Craig would agree, this is unlikely. So this consideration provides evidence against the empty tomb story.

Conclusion

How do these arguments relate to the resurrection of Jesus? The relationship is asymmetrical. If there were an empty tomb, there needn't have been a resurrection; an alternative explanation, such as the second burial hypothesis, will serve us well. But if there were no empty tomb, then there was no resurrection. If these arguments succeed in making a convincing case that the empty tomb story is a fiction, then the story of the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a fiction as well.

But what if these arguments do not succeed? What if the evidence against the empty tomb is deemed to be no stronger than those arguments that may be adduced in its favor? Nevertheless, the very ambiguity of the evidence concerning the empty tomb may be taken as evidence against the idea that God raised Jesus from the dead. Surely God could have made sure that the evidence was unilaterally in favor of the empty tomb; moreover, given the importance of the event, it is hard to imagine that God should not have done so. So even if the evidence concerning the empty tomb of Jesus is uncertain, that very uncertainty discredits the idea of a miraculous resurrection.

⁷² Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, p. 1281.