

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ
Lecture 36
Historicity of the Empty Tomb

Last time we saw that an assessment of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus will proceed in two steps. The first step will be establishing the facts which will serve as the evidence that any adequate historical hypothesis must explain. The second step is to assess the competing hypotheses to see which one does provide the best explanation of the facts. This morning let's begin with stage one: an examination of those facts which must be explained by any adequate historical account of the fate of Jesus of Nazareth.

It seems to me that these facts can all be summed up under three broad headings: the empty tomb of Jesus, his postmortem appearances, and finally the very origin of the Christian faith itself.

Let's look first at the historicity of the empty tomb. Here I want to summarize briefly six lines of evidence supporting the fact that the tomb of Jesus was found empty by a group of his women followers on the first day of the week after his crucifixion. Notice the modesty of that statement. Let me repeat it. The tomb of Jesus was found empty by a group of his women followers on the first day of the week after his crucifixion. We are not going to try to establish the facticity of the number of women at the tomb, whether they left before the sun had risen or after the sun had risen, whether there was a guard at the tomb or whether it was unguarded, whether there was one angel or two angels. All of those are secondary details. We are interested in the historical core of this narrative which, I think, is the fact that the tomb of Jesus was in fact found empty by a group of his women followers on the Sunday morning after his crucifixion.

The first line of historical evidence in support of this fact is that the historical reliability of Jesus' burial supports the empty tomb. You might ask yourself: how does the fact that Jesus was buried support the fact that his tomb was found empty? The answer to that question is simply this. If the burial account is accurate then the location of Jesus' tomb was known in Jerusalem to both Jew and Christian alike. To Jews, because he was entombed by a Jewish Sanhedrist, Joseph of Arimathea; and to Christians, because the women followed the burial party, saw where he was laid so that they might come and carry out their devotions to the corpse on Sunday morning. So if the burial account is accurate it means that the site of Jesus' tomb was known in Jerusalem to both Jews and Christians. But in that case his tomb must have been empty when the disciples began to preach that God had raised Jesus from the dead. Why? Three reasons.

First, the disciples would not have believed in Jesus' resurrection if his corpse still lay in the tomb. It would have been wholly un-Jewish, not to say foolish, to believe that a man was raised from the dead while his body still lay in the tomb. One of the greatest merits

of N. T. Wright's massive study of the resurrection of Jesus is his demonstration that the word "resurrection" always meant physical, bodily resurrection.¹ He writes,

Let us be quite clear at this point . . . when the early Christians said 'resurrection' they meant it in the sense it bore both in paganism (which denied it) and in Judaism (. . . which affirmed it). 'Resurrection' . . . meant bodily resurrection; and that is what the early Christians affirmed.²

So the disciples, in affirming that Jesus had been raised from the dead, could not possibly have held such a belief if the corpse still lay in the tomb.

Some critics have suggested that the disciples were so convinced of Jesus' resurrection that they never bothered to check the grave site. They never bothered to look and see whether in fact the tomb was empty. But I think if you just reflect on that a little bit it is rather silly when you think about it. Are we to believe that the Christians living in Jerusalem never went to the tomb where Jesus had been interred? If not to verify that it was empty, at least to see the place where the Lord lay? It seems to me that that is utterly implausible. Moreover it contradicts the evidence that the site of the tomb was in fact preserved in Christian memory.

The second reason that the tomb must have been empty once the disciples began to preach the resurrection is that even if they had preached the resurrection of Jesus despite his occupied tomb scarcely anybody else in Jerusalem would have believed them. One of the most remarkable facts about early Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection was that it flourished not simply in Galilee or far away Damascus but rather in the very city where Jesus was publicly crucified. So long as the people of Jerusalem even thought that Jesus' body lay in the tomb few would have been prepared to believe such nonsense as that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Finally, number three, even if they had somehow so believed, the Jewish authorities would have exposed the whole affair as a hoax simply by pointing to the occupied tomb of Jesus. Indeed, they could have even gone to the extreme measures of actually exhuming the corpse as decisive proof that Jesus had not risen from the dead as the disciples claimed. Even if the remains of the body in the tomb where Jesus had been laid were no longer identifiable because of putrefaction, nevertheless the burden of proof would have been on the shoulders of those who denied that it was Jesus' remains that were there in the tomb. But there is no such dispute ever over such an identification of the remains of Jesus. There simply isn't any evidence that such a dispute ever existed. On the contrary, as we will see later on, the dispute that did exist in Jerusalem between Jewish

¹ 4:51

² N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God Series*, (Fortress Press, 2003) 3:209.

non-Christians and Jewish Christians was over the fact of the empty tomb and how best to explain it. But they did not dispute over the identification of Jesus' corpse.

Some have said that this lack of exposure on the part of the Jewish authorities of the disciples' proclamation of Jesus' resurrection is because the Jewish authorities didn't really take this whole business very seriously. For them this proclamation that Jesus was risen from the dead by this little group in Jerusalem was just a minor nuisance that wasn't really worth dealing with and therefore they didn't bother to refute it by pointing to the tomb of Jesus. Once again, however, I think that such a suggestion is just fantastically implausible. In any case it is solidly contrary to the evidence which shows that the early Jewish authorities in Jerusalem were very concerned about this budding Christian movement. After all, just think of their engaging the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus to persecute the early Christian church, even sending him with letters to Damascus. And we know that from Saul's own hand. We have his own letters about his activity as a persecutor of the church.³

So it seems to me that if the story of Jesus' burial in the tomb is historical then it is a very short inference to the historicity of the empty tomb as well. It would be very difficult to maintain the historicity of the burial account and yet deny the historicity of the empty tomb story. For that reason skeptical critics who deny the historicity of the empty tomb have felt obligated to deny the historicity of the burial account as well.

Unfortunately for them, however, Jesus' burial in the tomb is one of the best-established facts about Jesus of Nazareth. I go into this in considerable detail in my published work, for example in *Reasonable Faith*, but this morning let me just mention a couple of points in support of the historicity of the burial narrative.

First, Jesus' burial in the tomb is multiply attested in extremely early and independent sources. The account of Jesus' burial in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea is part of Mark's source material that he used in writing his Gospel. This source is usually known as the pre-Markan passion story. It is the story of the final week of Jesus' life, of his suffering, crucifixion, death, and burial. This pre-Markan passion story is an extremely early source that antedates Mark which is already the earliest of the four Gospels. It is probably based on eyewitness testimony. The German commentator Rudolph Pesch dates it to within seven years of Jesus' crucifixion. So this passion source, according to Pesch at least, goes back to within the first seven years after Jesus' death. This is an extremely early account then of the burial of Jesus in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea and completely explodes the hypothesis by someone like David Strauss that the empty tomb story is the product of a long period of legend and mythological development.

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Not only do we have the early pre-Markan passion source, but secondly we've already seen that Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 quotes from an old Christian tradition that he himself had received and then in turn passed on to his Corinthian converts. Paul probably received this tradition no later than his visit to Jerusalem that is mentioned in Galatians 1:18 which took place in the year AD 36. He probably received it no later than that visit if not earlier while he was still in Damascus. When you recall that Jesus was crucified around AD 30 that means that this tradition that Paul quotes goes back to within the first five years after Jesus' crucifixion. Thus, it is an extremely early source.

The tradition that Paul hands on is a summary of early Christian preaching, and it may have been used in Christian instruction. Its form would have made it suitable for memorization. It consists of four lines, the first and third of which are parallel and the second and fourth of which are parallel. So it is easily memorized. Here is what it says:

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve.

Notice that the second line of this tradition – “and that he was buried” – refers to Jesus' burial. This is therefore an extremely early tradition that Jesus, following his crucifixion, was given burial.⁴

We might wonder, however, was the burial that is mentioned in Paul's tradition the same as the burial by Joseph of Arimathea that is related in the pre-Markan passion story? I think the answer to that question can be made clear by comparing Paul's four-line formula with the pre-Markan passion story on the one hand and the sermons in the Acts of the Apostles on the other, particularly the apostolic sermon that is found in Acts 13. If I had time to write these out that would be the best way to compare these. Compare in one column the events related in 1 Corinthians 15 and then the events in Mark chapters 15 and 16 and then finally the apostolic sermon in Acts 13. When you compare these, what do you find? Well, in 1 Corinthians 15 the pre-Pauline formula begins, “Christ died.” The pre-Markan passion story says, “and Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.” Then the Acts 13 sermon says, “Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed.” So in each case – in the pre-Pauline tradition, in the pre-Markan passion story, and in the apostolic sermon in the book of Acts – they all begin with Christ's death.

Second, “he was buried.” That is what the pre-Pauline formula of 1 Corinthians 15 says – he was buried. In Mark 15, it says, “And he [that is, Joseph] bought a linen shroud and taking him down wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb.” So this is the

story of the burial in the tomb by Joseph. The Acts 13 passage says, “They took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.” So the second line is the burial in the tomb.

The third line in the formula by Paul quoted in 1 Corinthians 15 is “he was raised.” The pre-Markan passion story says, “He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him.” Then in the apostolic sermon in the book of Acts, chapter 13, the apostle says, “But God raised him from the dead.” So the third element is the resurrection from the dead.

Finally, fourthly, in the pre-Pauline tradition Paul says, “he appeared.” Chapter 16 of Mark says, in the words of the angel, “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him.” The apostolic sermon in Acts 13 says, “and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem who are now his witnesses to the people.”

So you have a remarkable correspondence here of three independent traditions which I think is convincing evidence that this four-line formula quoted by the apostle Paul is, just as he says, a summary in outline form of the apostolic preaching and hence of the principal events of the passion account including Jesus' burial in the tomb which is summarized by the second line of the formula.

Thus we have evidence from two of the very earliest independent sources behind the New Testament for the burial of Jesus in the tomb, namely the pre-Markan passion story on the one hand and the pre-Pauline tradition quoted in 1 Corinthians 15 on the other.

But that is not all, for further independent testimony to Jesus' burial by Joseph is also found in the sources behind Matthew and Luke and in the Gospel of John, not to even mention the extra-biblical Gospel of Peter.⁵ The differences between Mark's account of the burial and those of Matthew and Luke suggests that Matthew and Luke had additional sources besides Mark alone. They certainly used Mark's account but they had additional sources as well.

You could try to explain the differences between Mark and Matthew and Luke as just being the result of Matthew and Luke's editorial work in telling the story in their own words. But I think those differences are not plausibly explained as due to just editorial work by Matthew and Luke for a number of reasons. For example, these differences tend to be very sporadic and uneven. They don't seem to be theologically motivated. They seem to be just off-hand and uneven in their nature. For example, Mark talks about a tomb which had been *hewn out of rock* whereas the way Matthew puts it is a tomb which *he hewn in the rock*. The differences just seem trivial, not that Matthew is making any kind of editorial point here. Moreover there is the curious omission in Matthew and Luke

⁵ 20:11

of Pilate's interrogation of the centurion. Remember in Mark the centurion is interrogated by Pilate to see whether or not Jesus was really dead. Both Matthew and Luke omit this story. Finally, there are agreements between Matthew and Luke in wording in contrast to Mark. That is to say, Matthew and Luke have a shared wording and vocabulary that actually contrasts to Mark. For example, in Matthew 27:58 you have a sentence which is identical to Luke 23:52. Matthew 27:58 is identical to Luke 23:52. It says, "This man went into Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus." That is not from Mark. It is identical in Matthew and Luke, and yet they didn't get it from Mark, which suggests they are working with some sort of independent source. Also the phrase "wrapped it in linen" is identical in Matthew and Luke and yet they didn't get this from Mark.

For these reasons I think that the differences between Matthew and Luke's account of the burial and Mark's account of the burial are not to be explained most plausibly as being editorial changes but rather because they had additional sources that told the story differently and in some places they follow these other sources rather than follow Mark.

In addition to the sources behind Matthew and Luke we have another independent source for the burial in John's Gospel. John is generally considered to be independent of the three Synoptic Gospels. Paul Barnett, a New Testament scholar, says,

Careful comparison of the texts of Mark and John indicate that neither of these Gospels is dependent on the other. Yet they have a number of incidents in common: For example, . . . the burial of Jesus in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.⁶

So given the independence of John from the Synoptics we have yet another independent source for the burial of Jesus in the tomb by Joseph of Arimathea.

Finally, we have the early apostolic sermons in the book of Acts which I've already alluded to such as Acts 13. These apostolic sermons in the book of Acts, although Luke's creation, are probably not wholly made out of whole cloth by Luke but rather preserve in his own words the early preaching of the apostles. These also make mention, as I've already said, of Jesus' interment in the tomb. Acts 13 refers to Jesus' body being taken down and laid in a tomb.⁷

So we have the remarkable number of at least four and perhaps even more independent sources for Jesus' burial, some of which are extraordinarily early – among the earliest materials behind the New Testament.

The second factor supporting the historicity of the burial account is that, as a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea is unlikely to be a

⁶ Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (IVP Academic, 1997), pp. 104-5.

⁷ 24:58

Christian invention. In the Gospels, Joseph is described as a rich man and a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a sort of Jewish High Court composed of seventy of the leading men of Judaism which presided in Jerusalem. There was an understandable hostility in the early church toward these Jewish Sanhedrists who had condemned Jesus to death. In Christian eyes, these Sanhedrists had basically engineered a judicial murder of Jesus of Nazareth. So, for example, the sermons in the book of Acts go so far as to say that it was the Jewish leaders that crucified Jesus. Never mind the Romans, the book of Acts blames it on the Jewish leaders. For example, Acts 2:23, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” The lawless men were the Romans, but the blame is laid on the Jewish authorities who are said to have crucified and killed Jesus by the hands of these lawless men. In verse 36 of the same chapter, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Again they are attributing the crucifixion to the Jewish authorities. Look over at Acts 4:10, “be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well.” Once again the Jewish authorities are said to have crucified Jesus.

So there was a tremendous hostility and antipathy in the early church toward these Jewish Sanhedrists for their role in the condemnation of Jesus to death. Given his status as a Sanhedrist, all of whom Mark says voted to condemn Jesus (the vote was unanimous, says Mark), Joseph is the last person in the world that we would expect to care properly for Jesus when his family and disciples completely neglected him. Therefore, according to the late New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, Jesus' burial by Joseph is “very probable” since it is “almost inexplicable” why Christians would make up a story about a Jewish Sanhedrist who does what is right by Jesus.

On this view any sort of legendary or fabulous later account of the burial of Jesus would probably attribute it to his faithful disciples or to his family like his mother. In fact, very often in passion plays or Catholic statuary you will see Mary, the mother of Jesus, receiving the body of Jesus from the cross as though she was the one who was responsible for helping to lay Jesus in the tomb. In fact, it wasn't his family or his friends or his disciples, it was this Jewish Sanhedrist, Joseph of Arimathea, who is responsible for Jesus' burial in the tomb.

For these and many other reasons the wide majority of New Testament scholars today concur that Jesus of Nazareth was, in fact, buried by this man Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb.⁸ According to late John A. T. Robinson of Cambridge University, the burial of

⁸ 30:00

Jesus in the tomb is “one of the earliest and best attested facts about Jesus.” But if this is right then, as I’ve explained, the inference that the tomb was empty is very close at hand.

That is a rather long and complicated account of the first line of evidence in support of the historicity of the empty tomb, namely the historicity of the burial narrative supports the historicity of Jesus’ empty tomb.

The second point or second line of evidence is that the discovery of Jesus’ empty tomb is also multiply attested in very early and independent sources. I think in view of the length and complexity of an examination of those sources it is best to just end early. This is a good point to break. Next time we will come back and look at point 2 which is that, like the burial account, the empty tomb account is also multiply attested in very early and independent sources.⁹

⁹ Total Running Time: 32:13 (Copyright © 2017 William Lane Craig)