

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ
Lecture 38
Historicity of the Empty Tomb (Part 3)

We have been looking at the historical evidence for the fact of the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. We've reviewed now four lines of evidence in support of the historicity of that fact. First, we saw that the historicity of the burial narrative of Jesus supports in turn the historicity of the empty tomb. Secondly, we saw that the empty tomb is multiply attested in extremely early and independent sources, indeed as many as six independent sources. Thirdly, we explained that the use of the phrase "on the first day of the week" in the pre-Markan passion account of the empty tomb is indicative of a very early primitive tradition that antedates the already very early third day motif that you find in 1 Corinthians 15. Finally, number four, we saw that the story is simple and lacks any signs of legendary embellishment or theological reflection.

We come now to the fifth line of evidence in support of the discovery of the empty tomb, and that is that the tomb was probably discovered empty by women. In order to appreciate this point we need to understand two things about the role of women in first-century Jewish society.

First, women were not regarded as reliable witnesses. This attitude toward the testimony of women is evident in the remark of the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, section 219, where he describes the rules that were supposedly left by Moses which would regulate the admission of testimony. According to Josephus he says, "Let not the testimony of women be admitted because of the levity and the boldness of their sex." So women's testimony was allegedly inadmissible because of their levity and boldness, or, in other words, women are rash airheads and therefore cannot serve as credible witnesses. No such regulation is, in fact, to be found in the Pentateuch. Rather, this is a reflection of the patriarchal first-century Jewish society in which Josephus wrote.

Secondly, women occupied a relatively low rung on the Jewish social ladder compared to men. Compared to men, women were frankly second-class citizens. Consider these rabbinical texts:

"Sooner let the words of the Law be burnt than delivered to women."¹

"Happy is he whose children are male, but woe to him whose children are female!"²

¹ cf. Talmud, Sotah 19a

² cf. Talmud, Kiddushin 82b

The daily prayer of every Jewish man included the benediction: “Blessed art thou, O’ Lord our God, king of the universe, who has not created me a Gentile, a slave, or woman.”³

Given their low social status and their lack of credibility as legal witnesses, how amazing it is that it is women who are the discoverers of and the principal witnesses to the empty tomb of Jesus. If the empty tomb story were a late developing legend then it is most likely that male disciples such as Peter or John would have been made to be the discoverers of the empty tomb. The fact that it is women (whose testimony was deemed unreliable) who were the chief witnesses to the fact of the empty tomb is best explained if, like it or not, they actually were the discoverers of the empty tomb and the Gospel writers faithfully recorded what, for them at least, was a rather awkward and embarrassing fact.⁴

Skeptical critics have proposed all sorts of creative explanations for the women’s role in the narrative apart from their historicity. Some of these are just quite fantastic. For example, John Dominic Crossan held that the women in the pre-Markan passion story are the residue of an earlier source used by Mark called *The Secret Gospel of Mark*. This theory blew up in Crossan’s face when it was demonstrated that *The Secret Gospel of Mark* was, in fact, a forgery by Morton Smith and so never actually existed. The general problem with these hypotheses is that any conceivable role for women to play in the narrative would have been better served by men. Therefore the role of the women remains unexplained. For example, Richard Carrier notes that when Josephus himself gives an account of the conquest of Masada, the last stronghold of the Jewish resistance that was finally taken by the Romans, that he relies upon the testimony of two women to what happened in Masada. Well, the reason that Josephus relies upon women for that narrative is because they were the only ones left after the slaughter at Masada. What happened was that all of the men killed everybody else in the Jewish compound. They slit everyone’s throats, and then committed suicide themselves. So the only people that were left were a couple of women and their children who hid in a cave and so escaped this mass murder that occurred when the Romans took Masada. But had Josephus had male witnesses he would certainly have preferred those. He was stuck with the female witnesses because that is all there was. So actually this bears out the very point concerning the evangelists’ use of women witnesses. They were all there was! They were the ones who discovered the tomb empty and so the Gospel writers faithfully recorded their testimony. But had this been a late legend not rooted in fact then male disciples would have been preempted to fill the women’s role. The contrived nature of these various attempts to explain away the women witnesses I think only serves to reinforce the

³ cf. Berachos 60b

⁴ 5:02

historical credibility of this feature of the narrative. Indeed, I would say that probably no other factor has proved as persuasive to contemporary New Testament critics in accepting the historicity of the empty tomb as the role of these female witnesses.

Number six is that the earliest Jewish polemic presupposes the empty tomb. In Matthew chapter 28 verses 11 to 15 we have the earliest Christian attempt to refute the Jewish polemic against the disciples' proclamation of Jesus' resurrection. This is what Matthew reports:

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sum of money to the soldiers and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed; and this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Our interest is not so much in Matthew's story of the guard at the tomb as in his incidental remark at the very end – "this story has been spread among the Jews to this day." This remark reveals that Matthew was concerned to refute a very widespread Jewish counter-explanation of the resurrection.⁵ At the time Matthew wrote this is what was being circulated among unbelieving Jews of his day. What were the unbelieving Jews saying in response to the disciples' proclamation *He is risen from the dead*? Were they saying, *These men are full of new wine*, or, *No, his body is still lying there in the tomb in the hillside*? No! They said the disciples came by night and stole away his body. Now think about that. His disciples came by night and stole away his body. The earliest Jewish polemic did not deny the fact of the empty tomb, but instead entangled itself in a hopeless series of absurdities trying to explain it away. In other words, the Jewish claim that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus itself presupposes that the body of Jesus was missing. It was not to be found and therefore had to be explained away.

Skeptical New Testament scholars have dismissed Matthew's story of the guard at the tomb as an apologetic legend – something that was just made up to refute this Jewish allegation of theft of the body on the part of the disciples. But even if that were correct, even if we admitted that the story of the guard is just a Christian apologetic creation, the fact cannot be denied that the story of the guard at the tomb is aimed at, has its target as, this widespread Jewish allegation that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body which itself presupposes the empty tomb – that the body was missing.

That the story of the guard at the tomb is not a creation by Matthew out of whole cloth is evident in the non-Matthean vocabulary that the story contains. You will remember last

⁵ 10:08

week I described how Matthew's story is filled with non-Matthean phrases or words that are not only unusual for Matthew but many of which are unique to the New Testament showing that he is relying on prior tradition. He is not just making this story up.

But more than that, there is a kind of tradition history behind the narrative of the guard at the tomb. I think that the guard at the tomb story evinces a kind of developing pattern of assertion and counter-assertion between unbelieving Jews and Christians Jews in Jerusalem. For example, at the first stage of the controversy is the Christian proclamation, *The Lord is risen!* This is what they preached in Jerusalem. In response to that, unbelieving Jews said, *No, the disciples stole away his body.* To this allegation the Christian Jews then responded, *No, the guard at the tomb would have prevented any such theft.* To this then the Jews offered the counterclaim, *No, the guard fell asleep, and that is how they were able to steal the body.* Then the Christian counterclaim is, *No, the chief priests bribed the guard to say that.* So you can see how there is this developing pattern of assertion, counter-assertion, counter-assertion, counter-assertion, as the polemic goes on. This pattern probably goes right back to the earliest controversies between believing Jews and unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem following the disciples' proclamation of Jesus' resurrection in Jerusalem. In response to the Christian proclamation that *He is risen from the dead* the Jewish reaction initially was simply to say that the disciples had stolen the body. That was sufficient to explain why the body was missing – the disciples had stolen it. The idea of the guard at the tomb could only have been a Christian development, not a Jewish development. All the Jew had to say was that the disciples stole the body from the tomb.⁶ But then the Christians would say, *No, the guard would have prevented them from stealing the body.* That would be a Christian development. Then at the next stage there isn't any need for the Christians to tell about how the guard was bribed. Rather, what happens at that stage is for the Jews to say, *No, the guard fell asleep.* Then it is only in response to the allegation that the guard had fallen asleep that the notion of the bribe needs to come up. So you can see that there is this developing pattern of tit-for-tat, give-and-take, assertion, counter-assertion that lies behind this story. At the final stage, at the time that Matthew was writing, the Christian response that the guard was bribed is the one that is then given by Matthew.

I think that we have here not a Matthean creation but we have the end of a controversy that stretches right back to the early days in the city as unbelieving Jews and Christian Jews made their assertions and counter-assertions about Jesus' resurrection. What the Jewish polemic or response to the Christian proclamation reveals is that the tomb was in fact empty – that the body of Jesus was missing – and somehow this needed to be explained away. This is historical evidence of the highest quality because it comes not from the Christians; it comes from the very opponents of the early Christian movement

⁶ 15:00

itself. Those who had the most interest in denying the fact of the resurrection themselves presupposed the historicity of the empty tomb.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Has anybody ever done any calculations on how much that stone that they were supposed to have moved weighed?

Dr. Craig: I have seen some calculations on that though I can't quote the estimate off the top of my head. If you go to Jerusalem today, in the park behind the King David Hotel near the Old City, there is a first-century tomb. It is called The Tomb of Herod's Family. It still has its rolling disk-shaped stone that goes across the door of the tomb. So we actually have extant one of these stones, and one could approximate how much it would weigh. It is absolutely massive.

Student: And how many people would it take to move this stone?

Dr. Craig: Right, it would take a lot of men because the way these tombs were built is there was a kind of groove that would descend to the door, the stone would roll down the groove, and then would be secured in place with a smaller stone. It would be very, very difficult to push the rolling stone back up the tomb because you are working against gravity in doing so. This would be a truly massive stone that would require several men to move.

Student: And the guards, of course, slept through all this.

Dr. Craig: That is part of the absurdities of the story. As I've said, what the Jewish leaders did was entangle themselves in a series of absurdities by this explanation because it is obviously absurd to think that a Roman guard sleeping in la-la-land at the foot of the tomb would not hear a bunch of men trying to roll this massive stone up the groove and open the tomb. The story is a bald-face fabrication on the face of it, and that is part of the difficulty with this story.

Student: I always laughed at this explanation because if they were asleep how would they have known it was disciples who stole the body? So even inherent in the explanation itself it seems like there's a problem.

Dr. Craig: I think that is technically true. If they were asleep and they woke up and found the body was missing, how would they know that it was the disciples? On the other hand, I think that would be a pretty fair inference when you think about it. Who else would have an interest in stealing it? I think it would be very natural to accuse the disciples of having done so. So while that point might be technically correct, I think at the end of the day it is probably not a very strong one.

Student: If the Romans fell asleep on the job weren't they executed? Is that a true historical thing?⁷

Dr. Craig: That is my understanding. They could be executed for dereliction of duty. Again that is one of the absurdities involved in this story – that they would agree to spread a rumor for which they could be executed. That is difficult to handle. Although, on the other hand, in allowing the body to be stolen (which was undeniable) they were already in dereliction of duty. So perhaps compounding it wouldn't be that serious after all if the chief priests could keep them out of trouble with Pilate.

Student: Is there any sources that we have outside of Matthew that refer to this explanation that came up? Any Jewish sources or church fathers or anything? That the disciples stole the body.

Dr. Craig: Justin Martyr, who was one of the early apostolic fathers, mentioned it. Justin Martyr wrote in the first decade of the first century, and he has a dialogue with a Jewish unbeliever called Trypho. It is called *A Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*. In there, Justin Martyr mentions that Jews were saying this – that the disciples stole the body. What we don't know is whether Justin had independent contact with Jews where he learned this or whether he is reading his Gospel of Matthew and gets it from there. That is the difficulty with these later sources. They know the Gospels and so they could be using them as one of their sources. Similarly with the guard at the tomb, it is mentioned in *The Gospel of Peter* which is this apocryphal gospel from the second half of the second century, and it has a Roman guard around the tomb, but this is probably based on Matthew's Gospel. He is probably embellishing Matthew's own story and so it is not really an independent witness to the guard.

Student: My question is about the actual guards themselves. Some believe that they were actually temple guards and not Roman guards. That is why they went to the chief priests and not to the Roman authorities. What is your opinion on that?

Dr. Craig: I initially was attracted to that view simply because it would make it easier to understand how the guard would agree to spread a rumor like this. If they were temple guards then they would be under the direction of the chief priests and perhaps they could keep them out of trouble. But I honestly think that that is probably special pleading. It seems to me that the natural way to read the narrative – when they go to Pilate and ask for a guard for the tomb and he says, *You have a guard*, he is not saying, *You've got your own guard, use them*. He is granting them the guard. He is saying, *Yes, you may have a guard; go and make it as secure as you can*. We do know that there was a Roman guard involved in the arrest of Jesus in John because it mentions a centurion or captain of the guard. So that was not a Jewish guard that went to Gethsemane and arrested Jesus. That

suggests that there was some sort of a Roman detail of soldiers that were seconded to the temple authorities and were under their direction. That would make sense of the comment of the chief priests, *If this gets to the governor's ears we will pacify him and keep you out of trouble*. That would naturally be understood as a way to protect these Roman guards from the governor's reprisals. I think at the end of the day that this probably is thought by Matthew to be a Roman guard. But you are quite right that the temple authorities did have a temple guard that could have been used instead.

Student: Is it common for non-believing biblical historians to say that the whole story was fabricated in order to make it sound like it was plausible? How would you respond to a person who would say that?

Dr. Craig: I would respond in exactly the way I have responded, namely, show that this is not a Matthean creation, that Matthew is using prior tradition as the vocabulary indicates, and you have this evident tradition history behind it of assertion and counter-assertion that would drive you right back to the earliest Jewish and Christian disputes in Jerusalem itself when the status of the tomb would have been public knowledge.⁸ I think that gives good reason to think that this can't just be written off as an apologetic creation that was made up later. But what I want to emphasize is that that is not the crucial point here. Because that is very controversial whether the guard was historical or not. What I am suggesting is that the apologetic value of this story is that it shows that even the opponents of the early Christian faith presupposed that the body was missing and this had to be explained away. Even if you say that the Christians invented the guard story to refute these Jewish unbelievers, nevertheless you are still left with the fact that the Jewish polemic itself presupposes the empty tomb.

Student: I was referring more to the Jewish polemic itself. Is it common to have that type of counter-argument to say that the whole thing was made up or is it not common for non-believing biblical historians?

Dr. Craig: I guess I am not following your question. It is very common among contemporary New Testament scholars to say that the Matthean story of the guard at the tomb is just an invention by Matthew or is a late apologetic legend that arose in the church to refute this Jewish claim that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body.

END DISCUSSION

Let me wrap up now. I think taken together these six lines of evidence constitute a very powerful case that the tomb of Jesus was in fact found empty on the first day of the week by a group of his women followers. As a historical fact, this seems to be well established. The New Testament scholar D. H. Van Daalen has said, "It is extremely difficult to

⁸ 25:20

object to the empty tomb on historical grounds; those who deny it do so on the basis of theological or philosophical assumptions.”⁹ But those assumptions cannot alter the evidence itself. According to the late Jacob Kramer, who was a New Testament critic who specialized in the study of the resurrection, “By far most exegetes hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements about the empty tomb.”¹⁰ He is talking there not about conservative or evangelical scholars; he is talking about the broad mainstream of New Testament scholarship, by far the majority of them hold to the historical reliability of the empty tomb account.

In fact, Gary Habermas, in a bibliographical survey which he published in 2006¹¹, surveyed 2,200 publications since 1975 on the subject of the resurrection in English, French, and German. He found that 75% of the scholars who have written on the subject accept the historicity of the discovery of the empty tomb. Since the publication of that article in 2006, Gary has continued to survey this literature. I think he is up over 3,500 articles and books today, and the percentage is roughly constant – about 75% of scholars who have written on the subject embrace the historicity of the empty tomb. In fact, the evidence is so good that quite a number of contemporary Jewish scholars such as Geza Vermes and Pincus Lapide have declared themselves to be convinced on the basis of the evidence that the tomb of Jesus was in fact found empty. These Jewish scholars don’t themselves believe in the resurrection of Jesus but they do grant the historicity of the discovery of the empty tomb. I think that this first fact is one that is well established, is very credible, and therefore we can have confidence in the discovery of Jesus’ empty tomb on the first day of the week by a group of his women followers.¹²

⁹ D. H. Van Daalen, *The Real Resurrection* (London: Collins, 1972) p.41.

¹⁰ Jacob Kremer, *Die Osterevangelien--Geschichten um Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977), pp. 49-50.

¹¹ Gary Habermas, “Experience of the Risen Jesus: The Foundational Historical Issue in the Early Proclamation of the Resurrection,” *Dialog* 45 (2006), p. 292.

¹² Total Running Time: 30:14 (Copyright © 2017 William Lane Craig)