

Dale Allison On Jesus' Empty Tomb, His Post-Mortem Appearances, and the Origin of the Disciples' Belief in His Resurrection

William Lane Craig

SUMMARY

I limit myself principally to a discussion of Dale Allison's treatment of what I take to be the three central facts undergirding a historical inference to Jesus' resurrection, namely, the discovery of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief that God had raised Jesus from the dead. I am not here concerned with the question of which hypothesis best explains these three facts but rather with the historicity of the events themselves. I argue that Allison's handling of the evidence, particularly for the empty tomb, is uneven and overly sceptical, while his case against the empty tomb is surprisingly weak. I close with some reflections on why worldview considerations need not lead to a suspension of judgement on the best explanation of these facts.

DALE ALLISON ON JESUS' EMPTY TOMB, HIS POST-MORTEM APPEARANCES, AND THE ORIGIN OF THE DISCIPLES' BELIEF IN HIS RESURRECTION

Dale Allison's essay "Resurrecting Jesus" is one of the most impressive pieces of work I have read in this well-ploughed field. His treatment is commendable for its candor, both about his proclivities toward belief in the physical resurrection and his philosophical misgivings about it, for its rigorous argument, and especially for its dazzling scholarly erudition. One is duly impressed when a fine New Testament scholar evinces a thorough mastery of the literature in his field pertinent to the subject; but it is especially impressive when he begins citing literature in philosophy relevant to problems of personal identity and material constitution and in psychology and parapsychology concerning bereavement visions, collective hallucinations, and the like.

Allison forced me, as no one else has, to re-think the evidence for Jesus' resurrection afresh. Indeed, I've never seen a more persuasive case for scepticism about the historicity of Jesus' resurrection than Allison's presentation of the arguments. He's far more persuasive than Crossan, Lüdemann, Goulder, and the rest who actually deny the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. That Allison should, despite his sceptical arguments, finally affirm the facts of Jesus' burial, empty tomb, post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection and hold that the resurrection hypothesis is as viable an explanation as any other rival hypothesis, depending upon the worldview one brings to the investigation, is testimony to the strength of the historical case for Jesus' resurrection.

In my response I'm going to limit myself principally to a discussion of Allison's treatment of what I take to be the three central facts undergirding a historical inference to Jesus' resurrection, namely, the discovery of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief that God had raised Jesus from the dead. I shall not be concerned with the question of which hypothesis best explains these three facts but rather with the historicity of the events themselves.

The Empty Tomb

Let's consider first Allison's treatment of the empty tomb. It is noteworthy in this connection that Allison makes a strong case for the historicity of Jesus' entombment by Joseph of Arimathea (Excursus 2, pp. 252-63). One of the ironies of his treatment of the burial and empty tomb narratives--which is apparently unnoticed by Allison--is that virtually the same arguments which lead him to his confident and unqualified verdict of "highly likely" for the burial by Joseph (e.g., multiple attestation, lack of legendary embellishment, embarrassing features of the narrative, use of proper names, public knowledge of the burial and the tomb's location) also support the historicity of the empty tomb, which he deems "with great hesitation" to be "historically likely" (pp. 332, 362)!

There is clearly a double standard operative here, which is born, I think, out of Allison's disdain for material continuity between the mortal body and the resurrection body. He says, "I believe, rightly or wrongly, in a future existence free from the constraints of material corporeality as we have hitherto known them. . . . I do not believe that our life in the world to come in any way depends upon the recovery of our current flesh and bones; and if not for us, why for Jesus?" (pp. 225, 344). Philosophical problems about identity are then exploited in the attempt to justify this proclivity toward platonism. But those problems at the very most show that the resurrection bodies of people whose mortal bodies have been utterly dissolved are duplicates of those bodies rather than the numerically identical bodies. Such problems have no relevance to the case of Jesus of Nazareth. Allison says that then Jesus would be "the exception, an anomaly, an aberration" (p. 225). I think this claim is dubious [1], but never mind: the more important point is that such doctrinal concerns are simply irrelevant to the historian's assessment of the evidence for the historicity of the women's discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. Allison's lack of even-handedness in his treatment of the burial and empty tomb traditions betrays a theological prejudice.

In treating the empty tomb, Allison examines seven arguments for the fact of the empty tomb ranked in order of increasing strength. Before discussing these, we should note a general weakness in Allison's handling of the arguments. He seems to treat each argument as though it had to bear the full weight of

the case for the empty tomb, rather than as part of a cumulative case for that fact. If an argument does not make the empty tomb more probable than not, Allison dismisses it. This procedure is all too quick. Even if an argument makes the empty tomb, say, only 10% probable on a particular piece of evidence, that does not imply that the argument is of no value. For probabilities are cumulative. An event can be more probable than not relative to a composite body of evidence even if it is improbable relative to any single component of that body of evidence. In a court of law a case for the prosecution is not infrequently built upon an accumulation of such individually inadequate but cumulatively convincing pieces of evidence. One thinks, for example, of the circumstantial case which led to the conviction of Scott Peterson for the murder of his wife Lacey and their unborn child. In the case of the empty tomb, the fact of the empty tomb could have a probability greater than 0.5 relative to the seven arguments taken together even if no single argument renders it more probable than not.

Let's turn, then, to an examination of the individual arguments Allison scrutinizes.

1. *The earliest Jewish polemic presupposes the empty tomb.* It has been claimed that the Jewish charge that the disciples stole the body presupposes that the body was missing (Matt 28:11-15). Allison disputes this argument because of the uncertainty of the age of the Jewish polemic. He notes that "Some have, to be sure, surmised that the verses bear 'the mark of a fairly protracted controversy'," but he responds, "why this should be so escapes me" (p. 312). In so saying, Allison overlooks, I think, the developing pattern of assertion and counter-assertion in the tradition history that plausibly lay behind Matthew's guard story:

Christian Jew: "The Lord is risen!"

Non-Christian Jew: "No, his disciples stole away his body."

Christian Jew: "The guard at the tomb would have prevented any such theft."

Non-Christian Jew: "No, the guard fell asleep."

Christian Jew: "The chief priests bribed the guard to say this."

In response to the Christian proclamation of Jesus' resurrection, the non-Christian Jewish reaction was simply to assert that the disciples had stolen the body. The idea of a guard could only have been a Christian, not a non-Christian development. At the next stage there is no need for Christians to invent the bribing of the guard; it was sufficient to claim that the tomb was guarded. The bribe arises only in response to the second stage of the polemic, the non-Christian allegation that the guard fell asleep. This part of the story could only have been a non-Christian development, since it serves no purpose in the Christian polemic. At the final stage, the time of Matthew's writing, the Christian answer that the

guard were bribed is given. So the story does, I think, show signs of fairly protracted controversy. The story also is peppered with non-Matthean vocabulary, indicative of a prior tradition. [2] I see no reason to think that it does not represent the sort of controversy that went on between Jewish Christians and Jewish non-Christians soon after the message of the resurrection began to be proclaimed in Jerusalem. Given the early date of the pre-Markan Passion story, there is no need to quarrel with Allison's surmise that the controversy arose between Mark and Matthew, so long as by "Mark" we mean Mark's tradition.

2. *There was an absence of veneration of Jesus' tomb.* Given the extraordinary interest shown in the tombs of holy men, this lack of veneration of Jesus' tomb is said to be best explained by the fact that Jesus' bones no longer lay there. Allison rejects this argument because the location of the tomb was, in fact, preserved in Christian memory; the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has a credible claim to stand on the site (p. 313). But Allison's response seems to miss the point. The point is that there was no place where Jesus' remains were remembered to lie, where they might be preserved and honored. That fact is not in doubt historically. It is best explained by the fact that the tomb no longer contained Jesus' remains. Allison makes sport of the argument by noting that Lüdemann turns it inside out, arguing:

1. If the site of the tomb were known, it would have been venerated.
2. It was not venerated.
3. Therefore, the site of the tomb was unknown.

But, in fact, Lüdemann's logic is impeccable. The problem is that Allison disagrees with Lüdemann that the site of the tomb was unknown. Since the tomb was not venerated, it follows that Lüdemann's first premiss is false: it is not the case that if the site of the tomb were known, it would have been venerated. The correct premiss is

- 1'. If the site of the tomb were known and Jesus' remains still lay in the tomb, it would have been venerated.

Allison attempts to dispute this premiss by suggesting that the burial place may have been an unwholesome criminals' gravesite and therefore not venerated. But this contradicts his later claim in discussing the burial that people capable of redeeming so shameful an event as the cross could easily have redeemed burial in a trench (p. 354), *e.g.*, the presence of Jesus' bones sanctified the site. (This is just one of the many internal tensions in Allison's treatment of the evidence. He often seems to play the devil's advocate, putting forward arguments which are in tension with his own views elsewhere.) In any case, it seems to me that Allison has esteemed this argument too lightly and that it has an

honorable part to play in a cumulative case for the empty tomb.

3. *The formula cited by Paul in I Cor. 15. 3-5 presupposes an empty grave.* Allison thinks that while this consideration shows that Paul may have *believed* in the empty tomb on theological grounds, it does not exclude that he may have done so "without knowing a tradition about its discovery" (p. 316). The weakness of this response is that a comparison of the four-line formula passed on by Paul with the Gospel narratives on the one hand and the sermons in the Acts of the Apostles on the other reveals that the formula summarizes in its second and third lines the burial and empty tomb stories:

I Cor 15.3-5	Acts 13.28-31	Mk. 15.37-16.7
Christ died . . .	Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed.	And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.
he was buried . . .	they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.	And he [Joseph] bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb.
he was raised . . .	But God raised him from the dead . . .	"He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him."
he appeared 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.	"But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him."

This remarkable correspondence of independent traditions is convincing proof that the four-line formula (which, as is evident from the grammatically unnecessary repetition of "and that" (*kai hoti*) at the head of each line, lists sequentially four distinct events) is a summary in outline form of the basic events of Jesus' passion and resurrection, including the discovery of his empty tomb. Curiously, Allison himself recognizes that "1 Cor. 15:3-8 must be a summary of traditional narratives that were told in fuller forms elsewhere" (*ibid.*, p. 235; cf. his footnote 133). This is another example of the many

internal tensions in Allison's treatment.

4. *The disciples could not have preached the resurrection in Jerusalem in the face of an occupied tomb.* Here we find Allison's scepticism becoming somewhat desperate. He says that perhaps the disciples were so convinced of Jesus' resurrection that they "never bothered to visit the gravesite" (p. 318). This suggestion is, frankly, fantastic when you think about it (they *never* went back, if not to verify, even to see where the Lord lay?) and contradicts Allison's own point that the site of the tomb was preserved in Christian memory (cf. p. 236, n. 143). Just as fantastic is Allison's suggestion that the Jerusalem authorities never inspected the tomb because they "just did not care because they did not take the business very seriously or regarded it as nothing more than a minor, transient nuisance" (319) —this despite their engaging Saul of Tarsus to ravage the early Jesus movement!

5. *The empty tomb story lacks theological and legendary embellishment.* Allison agrees; this is also one of the reasons he accepts the historicity of the burial account.

6. *Post-mortem visions alone are insufficient to account for early belief in Jesus' resurrection.* Although Allison makes very heavy weather of visions of recently deceased persons by the bereaved, in the end he admits, "If there was no reason to believe that his solid body had returned to life, no one would have thought him, against expectation, resurrected from the dead. Certainly visions of or perceived encounters with a postmortem Jesus would not by themselves, have supplied such reason" (pp. 324-5). So the tomb was probably found empty.

7. *The tomb was discovered empty by women.* Probably no other factor has proved so persuasive to scholars of the empty tomb's historicity as the role of the female witnesses. Allison is no exception.

Allison concludes that that "a decent case" can be made for the empty tomb (p. 331). We've seen that this is an understatement. The case for the empty tomb is every bit as, if not more powerful than, the case for Jesus' burial.

But Allison thinks that there is also "a respectable case" against the empty tomb (p. 331). I found this assertion surprising. The supposedly respectable case consists of only two arguments: first, "the ability of early Christians to create fictions" and, second, "the existence of numerous legends about missing bodies" (p. 332). But these two considerations show at the very most the possibility that the empty tomb narrative is a legend. That same possibility exists for the crucifixion and burial accounts. This is a possibility we become aware of based on our general background knowledge *prior* to an examination of the specific evidence. These two considerations do nothing to show that, based on an examination of the specific evidence, we ought to judge that the narrative of the empty tomb *is* a fiction or legend. It's shocking to me that Allison could construe such *a priori* possibilities based on general background knowledge as constituting a respectable case against the fact of the empty tomb.

In short, the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb emerges from Allison's scrutiny as very credible historically.

The Post-Mortem Appearances

So now we turn to the post-mortem appearances of Jesus. Allison argues for the historicity of post-mortem appearances of Jesus on the part of Peter, the disciples, Mary Magdalene, and others. I should mainly quibble with him here about details, *e.g.*, his attempt to collapse all the appearances into Galilean appearances, despite multiple, independent attestation of Jerusalem appearances. *Pace* Allison (p. 257), the fact that Mark foreshadows a Galilean appearance (and perhaps narrated only that one, if his ending has been lost) in no wise entails that Jerusalem appearances did not, in fact, occur first. It follows from Mark's foreshadowing that a Galilean appearance alone occurs in Mark's storyworld, just as in Luke's storyworld only Jerusalem appearances take place. The historical question is not thereby settled. Neither Matthew nor Luke thought that Mark's predictions of a Galilean appearance precluded prior appearances in Jerusalem. Why should we? Contrary to Allison (p. 258), the story of the disciples' fishing in John 21 does not represent a return to their old way of life, for neither Thomas nor Nathaniel were fishermen. It does not therefore preclude prior appearances to the disciples, as indicated by the testimony of the Beloved Disciple. As for the Gospel of Peter 12-14, this Gospel, as a compilation based on the four canonical Gospels, provides no independent grounds for thinking that no Jerusalem appearances occurred prior to the disciples' return to Galilee.

But let all this pass. The overriding point is that Allison agrees with the consensus of scholarship concerning the historicity of post-mortem appearances of Jesus to various individuals and groups after his death.

The Origin of the Disciples' Belief in Jesus' Resurrection

Finally, there is the fact of the disciples' coming sincerely and suddenly to believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead. Although Allison doesn't discuss this as a separate point, he recognizes this fact throughout his handling of the evidence. For example, in discussing the third day motif, Allison concludes that we can say with some confidence "that Christians found the three-day language appropriate because they believed that very little time elapsed between Jesus' crucifixion and God's

vindication of him. This is some reason to suppose the Gospels correct when they represent Easter faith as emerging very soon, indeed, within a week, after the crucifixion" (p. 232). Again, Allison rejects the suggestion by some that the earliest disciples spoke of Jesus' vindication without using the concept of eschatological resurrection, commenting, "proclamation of his eschatological resurrection must go back to people who knew Jesus himself and were part of the earliest Jerusalem community" (p. 244, n. 180).

So Allison recognizes the three facts which I have elsewhere argued are best explained by the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead.

Explaining the Facts

Allison disagrees, however, with the judgement that "The best historical explanation . . . is that Jesus was indeed bodily raised from the dead" (p. 345). Here Allison's basic complaint is that the evidence for the resurrection cannot challenge the investigator's worldview which he brings to the inquiry. He observes that for the determined naturalist even abduction by space aliens will be thought a better explanation than the resurrection hypothesis. Allison takes this to show that "Probability is in the eye of the beholder. It depends upon one's worldview, into which the resurrection fits, or alternatively, does not fit" (p. 340). Hence, "Arguments about Jesus' literal resurrection cannot establish one's *Weltanschauung*" (p. 342).

This argument is multiply confused. In the first place, historical apologetics for Jesus' resurrection was traditionally undertaken only *after* some case for theism had been presented. The question then became, given a theistic worldview, what is the best explanation for the evidence? It's not clear what Allison's answer to that question would be. He never interacts directly with the question of how someone who comes to the evidence with a robust natural theology (e.g., R. Swinburne, S. Davis) should assess the competing hypotheses (see p. 341, note 557). I should therefore like to ask him directly, "How would you evaluate the comparative probability of the resurrection hypothesis and the theft *cum* bereavement vision hypothesis given theism and a good understanding of the life, claims, and activities of Jesus of Nazareth leading up to his death?"

Second, Allison confuses the fact that probabilities are *conditional* with their being *subjective*. Probabilities are relative to a body of information, but the fact that probabilities are conditional in no way implies that they "are in the eye of the beholder." The theist will agree with the naturalist that relative to naturalism, the resurrection is hopelessly improbable. The question will then be what

justification one has for one's relevant background beliefs. Because Allison thinks that probability is just in the eye of the beholder, his way of determining what belongs in one's background beliefs is to look within and analyze introspectively what one believes. He advises, "we need to scrutinize not just the texts but also ourselves" (p. 343). What he fails to advise is that we scrutinize the evidence and arguments for our background beliefs. Introspection is no substitute for argument.

Third, Allison fails to take into account the differing degrees of conviction or tenacity with which people hold their background beliefs. He tends, again, to consider only the extreme case of people who approach the evidence "with the sure and certain conviction that there is no God" (p. 340). But suppose that the person's atheism is just a cultural veneer, thoughtlessly or lightly held as a result of being raised, for example, in Soviet or Chinese society. Such persons may well be led to abandon their atheism as a result of seeing that the resurrection "does not fit" into such a worldview. If they become convinced that the evidence is better explained by the resurrection hypothesis than by rival hypotheses, then they may well change their worldview in order to accommodate the better explanation.

Or suppose someone is agnostic but open and searching with respect to God's existence. Such a person might also adopt a theistic worldview because he is convinced that the evidence is better explained by the resurrection hypothesis than by rival hypotheses. Not only is this possible, but it in fact happens frequently. Allison has given no good reason for thinking that such a change of worldview must be irrational.

Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#)

In Jewish belief the primary object of the resurrection was the bones of the deceased (hence, the Jewish practice of preserving the bones in ossuaries for the eschatological resurrection), and skeletal remains are amazingly durable, existing even from prehistoric times. Moreover, the world's population explosion almost guarantees, barring worldwide catastrophe, that there will always be more recently deceased than long deceased. Thus, Jesus' case, involving as it does the raising of the mortal remains, is not atypical. The theological concern here, I suppose, is that Jesus' resurrection must be prototypical for our own. But such theological concerns are just irrelevant to the historian's task.

[\[2\]](#)

E.g., several words or expressions which are unique in all the New Testament, such as "on the next day," "the preparation day," "deceiver," "guard (of soldiers)," "to make secure," "to seal." The expression "chief priests and Pharisees" is unusual for Matthew and never appears in Mark or Luke.

The expression "on the third day" is also non-Matthean; he always uses "after three days." In general only 35 of Matthew's 136 words in the empty tomb story are found in Mark's 138 words.