

Suppose, for instance, that we collect many such histories [of post-mortem encounters], recorded on first-hand evidence in our critical age; and suppose that all these narratives break down on analysis; that they can all be traced to hallucination, misdescription, and other persistent sources of error; — can we then expect reasonable men to believe that this marvelous phenomenon, always vanishing into nothingness when closely scrutinised in a modern English scene, must yet compel adoring credence when alleged to have occurred in an Oriental country, and in a remote and superstitious age?<sup>396</sup>

The obvious answer to Myers's question is that we cannot expect such. One similarly suspects that those of us who believe that some apparitional encounters are not wholly subjective will be more inclined to entertain a nonhallucinatory genesis for the appearances of Jesus, if only because we do not view the world as a closed system or fully explicable in current scientific terms.

## AN OPENED TOMB AND A MISSING BODY?

We must next consider the issue of Jesus' tomb, which I have heretofore ignored. It is a great riddle, a problem presented by Providence to the ingenuity of the historians. Yet in reading the secondary literature on the subject, I have often been struck by the assurance with which two opposing camps come to their contrasting conclusions: they resolve the riddle so easily. Many are wholeheartedly convinced that the story of women finding a vacant tomb can be shown to any unbiased observer to be unassailable history. There are just as many who, with raised eyebrows, are incredulous over conservative claims; they are equally sure that the story is apocryphal, without any historical foundation at all. This brimming of confidence on both sides, which is incommensurate with the imperfect data, reflects the deep personal convictions that often attend this particular issue. While some Christians think that the empty tomb is at the heart of their faith, others believe, to the contrary, that it is dead mythology, a mind-boggling irrelevance that distracts us from much more important matters and so needs to be either neglected or disposed of. What counts in the immediately following pages, however,

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396. Myers, *Survival*, 2:288.

is not the theological or philosophical convictions of the disputants but the arguments that they have been able to muster. It is these that I now review in turn. First, then, some of the reasons for holding that the story of the empty tomb is not early but late, not history but legend.

(I refrain here from taking the pulse of contemporary scholarship. There are passages in the literature asserting that belief in the empty tomb is the consensus of scholarship, others that it is the minority opinion. For myself, I do not know how to count such things, nor in the end do I care. Polling is a poor stand-in for argument, and the belief that the majority must be right is a little like believing in trial by combat.)

1. Informed opinion is divided over how many sources we have for the report of the empty tomb. While there are relevant stories in all four canonical Gospels, those in Matthew and Luke are commonly thought to depend, in whole or in part, upon Mark. So to what extent, if any, the first and third evangelists had to hand non-Markan tradition about an empty tomb is controversial. As for John 20, it could be largely independent of the Synoptics, but that too is wide open for debate.<sup>397</sup> Some infer that John as well as Matthew and Luke probably knew and used Mark and that our only primary source for the unfilled tomb may accordingly be the latter alone.<sup>398</sup> A few, moreover, regard Mark 16:1–8 as redactional.<sup>399</sup> Their judgment, if accepted, clears the way to see behind the four canonical accounts little else but Mark's literary imagination.

On such a view, maybe Mark was, like Paul and some who today take up polemical arms against Jehovah's Witnesses, opposed to the notion of

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397. For dependence upon John, see Catchpole, Crossan, and Neirynck, as in n. 196. There are an intriguing number of links between John 20 and Luke 24. These include two angels (Luke 24:4; John 20:12), disciples at the grave (Luke 24:24; John 20:3–10), appearance of Jesus to disciples in Jerusalem on the first Easter (Luke 24:36; John 20:19), "stood in the middle" (Luke 24:36; John 20:19), "and saying this he showed them his hands" (Luke 24:40; John 20:20), the theme of joy (Luke 24:41; John 20:20), bestowal of the Spirit (Luke 24:49; John 20:22), the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47; John 20:23).

398. So, e.g., John Dominic Crossan, "Empty Tomb and Absent Lord," in *The Passion in Mark: Studies on Mark 14–16* (ed. Werner H. Kelber; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 134–52. In this essay Crossan does not take into account the *Gospel of Peter*, which features prominently in his later work on the passion and resurrection; see, e.g., his *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of the Canon* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1985), 125–81. Given my own judgment that, though the *Gospel of Peter* probably preserves some independent oral tradition, it primarily reworks the four canonical Gospels and does not draw upon an extended, pre-Synoptic passion narrative, I shall consider it only occasionally in what follows.

399. So, for instance, Adela Yarbro Collins, "Apotheosis and Resurrection," in *The New Testament and Hellenistic Judaism* (ed. Peder Borgen and Søren Giversen; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 88–100; and Crossan, "Empty Tomb."

a purely spiritual survival of bodily death. In that case, the evangelist may have created his story in order to implicate Jesus' body unambiguously in his resurrection.<sup>400</sup> Or perhaps his motive was altogether different. Adela Yarbro Collins, calling attention to several ancient texts in which heroes are translated to heaven, has suggested that "the focus on the tomb in Mark may have been inspired by the importance of the graves of the heroes in the Greco-Roman world. Even if the location of the tomb of Jesus was unknown to the author of Mark, and even if there were no cultic observance at the site of the tomb, it would still be important as a literary motif in characterizing Jesus as hero-like."<sup>401</sup>

The reduction of the empty tomb to Markan creativity, whatever the redactional motive postulated, is not a compelling point of view. Not only does the independence or partial independence of John 20 remain a feasible option that commends itself to this writer at least,<sup>402</sup> but the case for the redactional origin of Mark 16:1–8 is unpersuasive, which is why so many Markan scholars, despite their differences on the details, see tradition here.<sup>403</sup> Surely it would be exceptional for Mark to compose

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400. Goulder, "Baseless Fabric," envisages something like this.

401. Collins, "Apotheosis," 93. Cf. already Neill Q. Hamilton, "Resurrection Tradition and the Composition of Mark," *JBL* 84 (1965): 414–21; and esp. Elias Bickermann, "Das leere Grab," *ZNW* 23 (1924): 281–92 (reprinted in Hoffmann, *Auferstehung*, 271–84). Criticism in Peter G. Bolt, "Mark 16:1–8: The Empty Tomb of a Hero?" *TynBul* 47 (1996): 27–38.

Given the good reasons for thinking that the Corinthians both accepted the resurrection of Jesus and at the same time preferred the immortality of the soul over resurrection of the body, one wonders if they were not simply good Hellenists who thought of Jesus' vindication as the bodily assumption of a hero (cf. Collins's view of Mark 16) and yet, since the fate of a hero was not the rule but the exception, expected for themselves only an immaterial immortality.

402. Despite the work of Frans Neirynck and like-minded others, one can hardly regard John's dependence upon the Synoptics as firmly established. See D. Moody Smith, *John among the Gospels: The Relationship in Twentieth-Century Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). Even if John knew one or more Synoptics, he did not copy from them at every turn; my own judgment is that John 20 cannot derive wholly from the Synoptics and Johannine redaction. For a few pertinent considerations, see Alsup, *Post-Appearance Stories*, 95–102; William L. Craig, "The Disciples' Inspection of the Empty Tomb (Lk 24,12.24; Jn 20,2–10)," in Denaux, *John and the Synoptics*, 614–19; and C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 140–42.

403. See, e.g., Catchpole, *Resurrection*, 4–9; and PHEME Perkins, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 115–24. My own guess is that Mark 16:1–8 probably derives from a pre-Markan passion narrative; see Édouard Dhanis, "L'ensevelissement de Jésus et la visite au tombeau dans l'évangile de saint Marc," *Greg* 39 (1958): 367–410; and Rudolf Pesch, "Der Schluß der vormarkinischen Passionsgeschichte und des Markusevangeliums," in *L'évangile selon Marc: Tradition et rédaction* (ed. M. Sabbe; BETL 34; Gembloux: Leuven University Press, 1974), 365–409. Contrast Ludgar Schenke, *Auferstehungsverkündigung und leeres Grab* (SBS 33; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969), 11–30. As for what is Markan and what pre-Markan, redaction-criticism has produced quite mixed results. The multitudinous proposals contradict

a key narrative *ex nihilo*, without some pre-Markan basis. The several hapax legomena are consistent with this supposition,<sup>404</sup> as is the tension between the story's setting — “when the sabbath was over” (16:1), “very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen” (v. 2) — and Mark's refrain that the resurrection should take place “*after* (μετά) three days” (8:31; 9:31; 10:34).

2. Mark's story of Jesus' burial and resurrection is, in the judgment of Randel Helms, a late fiction inspired by Dan 6.<sup>405</sup> The correlations may be set forth this way:

Common Element	Mark	Daniel
The law demands the death of God's chosen.	15:1–5	6:6–10
The ruler is reluctant to enforce the law but does so.	15:6–15	6:14–16
Late in the day a sympathetic leader puts the chosen one in a pit or cave and covers it with a stone.	15:42–46	6:17–18
Early in the morning those who care for God's chosen one approach the pit or cave.	16:2	6:19
There is angelic intervention.	16:5–7	6:22
The hero is not dead but lives.	16:1–8	6:19–23

To the extent that one finds these parallels persuasive, so that Mark 15–16 is regarded as a rewriting of Dan 6, to that extent one will be inclined to pigeonhole Mark 16:1–8 as haggadic fiction.

I confess myself unimpressed. There are some handy if rough criteria for determining when one text is using another,<sup>406</sup> and they are not well met in this particular instance. For example, commentators have regularly missed the parallels,<sup>407</sup> the shared vocabulary is minimal, and Dan 6 otherwise plays no role in Mark's Gospel. We should probably shelve Helms's thesis and judge the correlations between Dan 6 and Mark 16

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each other and may reveal mostly our inability to solve the problem; cf. C. W. Schnell, “Tendencies in the Synoptic Resurrection Tradition: Rudolf Bultmann's Legacy and an Important Christian Tradition,” *Neot* 23 (1989): 177–94.

404. In Mark 16:1–8: διαγίνομαι (v. 1), ἄρωμα (v. 1), ἀποκυλίω (vv. 3–4), σφόδρα (v. 4), τρόμος (v. 8).

405. Randel Helms, *Gospel Fictions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1988), 135–36.

406. Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Intertextual Jesus: Scripture in Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000), 9–14.

407. There are only occasional exceptions; see, e.g., Ephraem, *Comm. Diss.* 21.21 (ed. Leloir; SC 121:385). Even Albert the Great, who is so intertextually aware, misses this in his *Enarrationes in Marcus*.

to be partly or wholly the upshot of happenstance: it is not so hard to spot parallels between two unrelated texts.<sup>408</sup> It is telling that Michael Goulder can urge, with no more credibility than Helms, that Mark invented the story of Jesus' empty tomb not by rewriting Dan 6 but by mixing together ingredients from Josh 10 and other Scriptures.<sup>409</sup>

3. Mark ends the story of the empty tomb and indeed his entire Gospel with this enigmatic remark: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8). The words, "they said nothing to anyone," have been construed as a sign that the entire episode was invented at a late date. Mark was in effect saying: "You know what women are like, brethren: they were seized with panic and hysteria, and kept the whole thing quiet. That is why people have not heard all this before."<sup>410</sup>

This third attempted proof is, like the first two, feeble. If 16:8 were an explanation for why people had not previously heard about the empty tomb, presumably Mark would "have made the young man command the women to say that Jesus had been raised, that he was not in the tomb (cf. v. 6). Instead, the young man commanded them to say that Jesus was going ahead to Galilee, where the disciples would see him just as he had said."<sup>411</sup> In other words, "they said nothing to anyone" immediately trails not a command to proclaim the empty tomb but the angel's imperative to tell the disciples about Jesus going before them to Galilee; so the women's failure is more closely connected to the latter than to the former.

Beyond this oft-missed fact, the implications of "they said nothing to anyone" (οὐδενὶ οὐδὲν εἶπαν) — which can be understood as part of Mark's messianic secret<sup>412</sup> — are less than obvious.<sup>413</sup> Because of the

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408. A more plausible case can be made that Dan 6 has influenced Matthew's story; see Carrier, "Guarded Tomb," 314–17; Wright, *Resurrection*, 640.

409. Michael Goulder, "The Empty Tomb," *Theology* 79 (1976): 206–14 (crediting unpublished work of Austin Farrer). Goulder makes only a passing reference to Dan 6:17.

410. Goulder, "Baseless Fabric," 58. On the history of this hypothesis, see Frans Neirynck, "Marc 16,1–8: Tradition et redaction: Tombeau vide et angélophanie," in *Evangelica*, 247–51. It has remained popular for over a hundred years.

411. Gundry, *Mark*, 1013. For a survey of interpretations of 16:7, see Bode, *Easter Morning*, 39–44.

412. See Broer, "Seid stets bereit," 38–39.

413. Hengel, "Begräbnis," 181, observes the apparent consequence of a literal interpretation, that the author of Mark must have been one of the women at the tomb; otherwise, how could he know something they never communicated? While Hengel is being sarcastic,

prophecy in 14:28, readers surely assume that Jesus did in fact meet the disciples in Galilee. Near to hand, then, is the inference that the angel must after all have gotten his message through to the disciples via the women. One may compare Mark 1:44, where Jesus tells a leper whom he has healed, "Say nothing to anyone" (μηδενὶ μηδὲν εἶπης), and yet adds: "Go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded." Clearly, despite the order, "say nothing to anyone," the man, now returned to normal, will have to explain himself to the temple establishment. Bauckham, who cites this as a parallel to 16:7–8, wonders whether "the women take the words of the young man to be an apocalyptic secret that they are to communicate to Jesus' disciples but that is strictly not to be revealed to anyone else."<sup>414</sup> This is quite plausible. Just as 1:44 means "Say nothing to anyone (except the priest)," so 16:8 may well mean the women "said nothing to anyone (except his disciples)." In accord with this, Matthew clearly read Mark so that the message entrusted to the women gets to the men without noticeable delay (cf. 28:16 with 7 and 10).

Whatever interpretation one gives to the enigmatic 16:7, no other logion or story in the canonical Jesus tradition justifies its recent appearance by pretending that people kept quiet about it. Surely R. H. Fuller was right: "The silence of the women can hardly be explained as the Evangelist's device to account for the recent origin of the story [of the empty tomb]; that is altogether too modern and rationalistic an explanation, and assumes that the early Jesus movement was concerned, like the modern historical critics, with conflicting historical evidence. The early church expounded its traditions anew in new situations: it did not investigate them historically in order to discover their origins and Sitz im Leben."<sup>415</sup>

4. Although those who deny the historicity of the empty tomb do not always say this, surely one regular contributor to their doubt is the problem of the miraculous. The story, in its various canonical forms, is

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Gerd Lüdemann, *Jesus after Two Thousand Years: What He Really Said and Did* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2001), 114, identifies the youth of Mark 16:5 with the naked young man of 14:51–52 and suggests that Mark implies its author's identity with the one who spoke to the women. This explains his knowledge of the secret.

414. Bauckham, "Women," 289. Cf. Catchpole, *Resurrection*, 21–28.

415. Fuller, *Formation*, 53. See further Heinz Giesen, "Der Auferstandene und seine Gemeinde: Zum Inhalt und zur Funktion des ursprünglichen Markusschlusses (16,1–8)," *SNTU* 12 (1987): 119–30; and von Campenhausen, *Tradition*, 61–62.

fantastic. It features not only an angel or angels but a dead man coming back to life. Even in a time and place marked, in retrospect, by superstition, gullibility, and a deep longing for miracles, the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection created doubts (cf. Matt 28:17; Ps.-Mark 16:14; Luke 24:25; John 20:25). Long before Hume, Gregory of Nyssa observed that the natural habit of most people is "to judge the credibility of things said according to the measure of their own experience" (*Vita Macrinae* [ed. Maraval; SC 178:264]). Then as now, experience has taught that corpses do not exit tombs. Skepticism is even more at home in our own time and place, where modern science rules and critical historians have, ever since the Reformation, continually and persuasively converted miracle story after miracle story into unfounded legend. Under the scrutiny of serious historians, the number of purportedly miraculous events has shrunk dramatically or melted away altogether. This matters so much because "the more isolated a phenomenon" the resurrection of Jesus "is understood to be, the more difficult the process of establishing its truth becomes."<sup>416</sup>

All this, however, begs the question we are about, even for those who altogether disallow the possibility of miracles, for there are several non-miraculous explanations for the empty tomb. One does not, as even the New Testament reluctantly implies, have to call upon divine intervention in order to lose Jesus' body or get the stone rolled away (Matt 28:13; John 20:15). As for Mark's young man or angel and his kerygmatic announcement, they can easily enough, if one is so inclined, be judged legendary embellishment for theological edification.<sup>417</sup> As the rest of the Jesus tradition reveals, historical memories can be pressed down and shaken together with mythological motifs. So one may, as have many, regard Mark 16:1–8 as something other than history and still think of its as a Christian write-up and interpretation of the authentic memory that some women found Jesus' tomb opened and empty.<sup>418</sup>

5. While 1 Corinthians 15:4 speaks of Jesus' burial, it says nothing about Joseph of Arimathea, nor does Paul anywhere else refer to an empty tomb. Evidently, the argument runs, Paul did not know about Jesus' grave; and if he did not know about it, then surely no one else

416. Maurice Wiles, "A Naked Pillar of Rock," in Barton and Stanton, *Resurrection*, 121.

417. This is not necessarily a literary-critical judgment, for Mark 16:1–8 without the angel is problematic (see n. 542). Rather, facts can be embroidered from the beginning.

418. See esp. L. Schenke, *Auferstehungsverkündigung*, 93–103. The rolling away of the stone must belong to the first telling of the story, for without the tomb being opened, its emptiness could not be discerned.

before him did either. The story of the empty tomb must, it follows, have originated after Paul.<sup>419</sup>

This inference from 1 Cor 15:3–8 and Paul's disregard of the empty tomb is less than overwhelming.<sup>420</sup> It remains an argument from silence regarding a very compressed statement, one mostly bereft of details. Pilate, Jerusalem, and the crucifixion also go unmentioned. One could equally construct the following quite different argument from silence: Had those Corinthians whom Paul sought to correct known or imagined Jesus' corpse to be yet in his grave, then surely, given their rejection of a physical resurrection, they would have brought this forward as a point in their favor, and Paul would have been compelled to answer them. This he did not do.<sup>421</sup>

The apostle often surprises us by what he fails to refer to in the Jesus tradition, even when it would serve his purpose;<sup>422</sup> and certainly we do not, as a general rule, accept as historical only those parts of the Jesus tradition attested by Paul. The apostle's letters say almost nothing about his own encounter with the risen Jesus, even though it was his foundational religious experience, and the author of Acts, who clearly knew and valued the story of the empty tomb, fails in Acts to repeat that story (at best, Acts 2:29–31 and 13:34–37 imply an empty tomb). Our literature, often not abundant with details, does exhibit unexpected holes, and it can be hazardous to infer much from them. Who would deny that James had a post-Easter christophany even though the Gospels do not intimate such? The point is all the more pertinent in the present case as Paul and the old tradition behind 1 Cor 15:3–8 must have known well enough that there was more than one explanation for an empty tomb,

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419. Cf. Gardner-Smith, *Resurrection*, 12–13; Goulder, "Baseless Fabric," 56; Grass, *Oster-geschehen*, 146–73; Lampe, "Easter," 41–47; Lindars, "Resurrection," in Avis, *Resurrection*, 118, 128; Matti Myllykoski, "What Happened to the Body of Jesus?" in *Fair Play: Diversity and Conflicts in Early Christianity: Essays in Honour of Heikki Räisänen* (ed. Ismo Dunderberg, Christopher Tuckett, and Kari Syreeni; NovTSup 103; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 68; Norman Perrin, *The Resurrection according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 80; Pokorný, *Christology*, 152–53; Schmiedel, "Resurrection," 4066; 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: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 131; and many others. Kenneth Grayston, "The Empty Tomb," *ExpTim* 92 (1981): 254, even argues from Rom 6:4–6 that, for Paul, Jesus' "sinful flesh" was destroyed in the grave.

420. See further below, 314–16.

421. Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003), 161.

422. Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Jesus Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1997), 111–19.



which would thus not be a handsome piece of evidence — especially if it was remembered as deriving from the testimony of women.<sup>423</sup>

6. If some Christians had, through visionary encounters with a post-mortem Jesus, come to believe in his resurrection and exaltation, and if they had a physicalist view of resurrection, expecting that “the remains of the departed will . . . come to light out of the earth” (Ps.-Phoc. 103–104), they may well have inferred at some point that his body was in heaven and so his tomb empty.<sup>424</sup> H. J. Rose reconstructed their ratiocination as follows: “He was not dead, therefore he was not in the grave in which his body had been put; therefore the grave was empty, therefore someone must have found it empty, and also there had been a miracle, therefore a supernatural agency at work; and to people who had, *ex hypothesi*, no subordinate gods to postulate, the only possible mechanism was the presence of angels.”<sup>425</sup>

Christians might, one may suppose, have been able to reason like this without fear of contradiction if the location of Jesus’ burial or disposal were unknown, or if too much time had passed since his death. *y. Mo‘ed Qat.* 3:5 has the soul leaving the body after three days because by then the appearance of the corpse is already beginning to change. Furthermore, are not the fiction-creating capacities of the early Christians on display in Matt 27:51–53, in the tall tale about the tombs being opened and the bodies of saints exiting to promenade around Jerusalem?<sup>426</sup> Alfred Loisy argued: “The soldiers removed the body from the cross before dark and threw it in some common grave, where they cast the bodies of the criminals. . . . The conditions of the burial were such that at the end of a few days it would have been impossible to recognize the mortal remains of the saviour, had anyone been looking for them. . . . Nobody would contest that Jesus had died on the cross. Nobody could prove that he had not been resurrected.”<sup>427</sup>

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423. See further below, 326–31. According to Nauck, “Bedeutung,” 260, the empty tomb served not missionary preaching but belonged to discourse aimed at the faithful community. This, he affirms, explains its presence in the Gospels, written for the faithful, and its absence from the kerygma, intended for public consumption.

424. This is a very common judgment; e.g., see Lampe, “Easter,” 57–58; and above, 204–7.

425. Herbert Jennings Rose, “Herakles and the Gospels,” *HTR* 31 (1938): 140.

426. It is puzzling that Wright, *Resurrection*, 632–36, wants to leave the historicity of this episode open: “Some stories are so odd that they may just have happened. This may be one of them, but in historical terms there is no way of finding out” (636). Contrast Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 16–17.

427. Alfred Loisy, *Les évangiles synoptiques* (Ceffonds: Loisy, 1907), 1:223–24.

Unlike the first five arguments, this one has force, even if it is suggestive rather than demonstrative. We must, without doubt, give due credit to the human ability to create a religious fiction in face of the facts, and early Christian literature contains abundant illustration. Whether, however, the precise sequence of thought reconstructed by Rose, a sequence that fails to consider precisely why Jesus' survival of death was conceptualized as a bodily resurrection instead of an ascent or triumph of his soul, reveals the way in which early Christian minds moved, is an issue to which we must return below.<sup>428</sup>

7. One can compile a host of obviously legendary stories about empty tombs or disappearing bodies. Jewish and Christian legends tell us about Enoch's rapture (Gen 5:24; Heb 11:5), Moses' mysterious disappearance (Josephus, *Ant.* 9.28),<sup>429</sup> Elijah's ascent to heaven (2 Kgs 2:11–12, 15–18), the vain search for the remains of Job's children (*T. Job* 39:1–40:6), the assumptions of Ezra and Baruch (4 Ezra 14:48 Syr; 2 Bar. 76:1–5), the resurrection of the two witnesses in Rev 11, the failure to find the body of John the Baptist's father (*Prot. Jas.* 24:3), the disappearance of the corpse of the thief who asked Jesus to remember him in his kingdom (*Narratio Jos. Arim.* 4:1), the missing remains of John the Beloved (*Acts John* 115 Cod. R and V [ed. Bonnet; 215]), the bodily ascension of Mary the mother of Jesus,<sup>430</sup> the coming forth from their graves of the dead apostles so that they might travel by cloud to Jerusalem to witness Mary's departure,<sup>431</sup> the empty grave of Symeon of Salos (Leontius Neapolitanus, *Vit. Sym.* 11.62 [PG 93:1745A–B]), and the light-filled but otherwise vacant burial cave of Sabbatai Sevi and his occultation.<sup>432</sup> Graeco-Roman analogies, as Justin Martyr already recognized,<sup>433</sup> also exist: the missing bones of Heracles (Diodorus Siculus 4.38.4–5), the

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428. See below, 321–26.

429. On this see Christopher Begg, "Josephus's Portrayal of the Disappearance of Enoch, Elijah, and Moses": Some Observations," *JBL* 109 (1990): 691–93.

430. Simon Claude Mimouni, *Dormition et assomption de Marie: Histoire des traditions anciennes* (ThH 98; Paris: Beauchesne, 1995); Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

431. See, e.g., *Apocrypha Syriaca: The Protevangelium Jacobi and Transitus Mariae* (ed. and trans. Agnes Smith Lewis; StSin 11; London: C. J. Clay & Sons, 1902), 17–32: Andrew, Philip, Luke, and Simon the Zealot are raised.

432. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Bollingen Series 93; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 919–25. For additional, later Christian reports of resurrections, see Brewer, *Dictionary of Miracles*, 78–87.

433. Justin, *1 Apol.* 21.1 (ed. Marcovich; PTS 38:63); *Dial.* 69.1–3 (ed. Marcovich; PTS 47:189–90).

rapture of Troas lord of the Trojans (Homer, *Il.* 20.234–235), the failure to find Aeneas's body (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 1.64), the disappearance of Romulus (Ovid, *Metam.* 14.805–851; Plutarch, *Rom.* 27.7–28.3), the miraculous exit of Empedocles (Diogenes Laertius 8.67–69), the departure of Aristeas of Proconnesus (Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.14–15), the translation of Cleomedes of Astypalaea (Pausanias, *Descr.* 6.9.6–9), and the various rumors about Apollonius of Tyana (Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 8.30; cf. 8.31: no one can say where Apollonius is buried).<sup>434</sup> There were, as Plutarch said, “many such fables” (*Rom.* 28.6).<sup>435</sup> Faced with this certain fact, one recalls the forceful words of Celsus' Jew: “Do you think that the stories of these others are indeed legends, as they seem to be, and yet that the ending of your tragedy is to be regarded as noble and convincing?” (Origen, *Cels.* 2.55 [ed. Marcovich; 127]).

One might counter such a list by observing that several of these legends (e.g., those about the good thief and Mary's ascension) are clearly modeled upon Jesus' resurrection while some (e.g., those about Job's children, John the Beloved, and Aristeas) are dissimilar to the New Testament accounts in that they probably originated not decades but centuries after the supposed facts recorded. Still others concern those who never died and so had no grave (Enoch, Elijah, Cleomedes, Empedocles, Aristeas, Apollonius) or are about old mythological or legendary figures — Heracles, Romulus, Aeneas. I have, however, happened upon at least one old story about a missing corpse that is not based upon the story of Jesus and is not about someone from the distant past. Gregory the Great (540–604) tells the following tale:

There is another incident which took place here in Rome to which the dyers of the city will bear me witness. The most outstanding craftsman among them died, and his wife had him buried in the Church of St. Januarius the Martyr, near the gate of St. Lawrence. The next night the sacristan heard his spirit shouting from the

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434. For discussion and additional texts, see Collins, “Apotheosis,” 88–100; Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, 2:522–27; Arthur Stanley Pease, “Some Aspects of Invisibility,” *HSCP* 53 (1942): 1–36; and Daniel Alan Smith, “The Post-Mortem Vindication of Jesus in the Sayings Gospel Q” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2001), 85–174; also the survey and cautious conclusions of Alsup, *Post-Resurrection Stories*, 214–39.

435. Cf. Hyginus, *Fab.* 151, listing sixteen people “who, by permission of the Parcae, returned from the lower world.”

burial place, "I burn! I burn!" When the shouting continued, the sacristan informed the dead man's wife, who immediately sent fellow craftsmen to examine the grave and find out the reason for the shouting. On opening it, they found all his clothes there untouched (and they have been kept in the church ever since as a witness to this event), but there was no trace of his body. Seeing that not even his body was allowed to rest in church, we can judge to what punishment his soul was condemned.<sup>436</sup>

This account is so relevant because Gregory, a man of some education, presents this yarn as worthy of belief.<sup>437</sup> He knows people who will corroborate his testimony; he is absolutely concrete about the location of the events; and he indicates that there are relics from the event: anyone with sufficient curiosity can go and see the evidence. Clearly, it is possible to concoct a tale about the missing body of someone not long dead.

I have also run across a modern account in which a corpse miraculously disappears. A modern Tibetan tells this story:

We had been told the story of a very saintly man who had died there [Manikengo] the previous year [1953]. . . . Just before his death the old man said, "When I die you must not move my body for a week; this is all that I desire."

They wrapped his dead body in old clothes and called in lamas and monks to recite and chant. The body was carried into a small room, little bigger than a cupboard and it was noted that though the old man had been tall the body appeared to have become smaller; at the same time a rainbow was seen over the house. On the sixth day on looking into the room the family saw that it had grown still smaller. A funeral service was arranged for the morning of the eighth day and men came to take the body to the cemetery; when they undid the coverings there was nothing inside except nails and hair. The villagers were astounded, for it would have been impossible for anyone to have come into the room, the door was always kept locked and the window of the little resting place was much too small.

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436. Gregory the Great, *Dial.* 4.56 (ed. Vogüé and Antin; SC 265:182, 184).

437. We need not doubt that *Dial.* 4 comes from Gregory himself; see Paul Meyvaert, "The Enigma of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*: A Response to Francis Clark," *JEH* 39 (1988): 335–81.

The family reported the event to the authorities and also went to ask Chentze Rinpoche about the meaning of it. He told them that such a happening had been reported several times in the past and that the body of the saintly man had been absorbed into the Light. They showed me the nails and the hair and the small room where they had kept the body. We had heard of such things happening, but never at first hand, so we went round the village to ask for further information. Everyone had seen the rainbow and knew that the body had disappeared. This village was on the main route from China to Lhasa and the people told me that the previous year when the Chinese heard about it they were furious and said the story must not be talked about.<sup>438</sup>

I leave it to readers to make what they will of this story.<sup>439</sup>

Of the seven arguments just introduced, the first five are, like Jesus' tomb in the Gospels, empty. But the sixth cannot be dismissed without a guilty conscience: early Christians did have the imaginative ability to fabricate a fiction on the basis of theological convictions. Similarly, the final argument is formidable and should give its proponents some assurance: people have indeed constructed legends about missing bodies. This is an undeniable fact that merits much pondering. Its force is all the greater when we add that Christians were quite capable not just of making up stories about Jesus but also of making up stories about his resurrection. Surely, for instance, the guard of Matt 27:62–66 and the earthquake of Matt 28:2 are sheer fiction.<sup>440</sup>

But that is not the end of the matter. To show that there is nothing far-fetched about the followers of Jesus conjuring up the idea, against the facts, that his tomb was empty, is not the same as showing that this indeed happened; and there are certain considerations that, according to many,

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438. Chögyam Trungpa, *Born in Tibet* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), 95–96.

439. Gary R. Habermas, "Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions," *RelS* 25 (1989): 167–77, in discussing some of the parallels I have cited, argues that they are all poorly attested historically. He may well be right, yet one fails to see why this result favors his implicitly apologetical program; for all he has demonstrated if his conclusion is correct is that people can without justification make up stories about the dead overcoming death. One wants to ask: "If others, why not the early Christians?"

440. On the fictional nature of the guard, see already at great length (and for the first time?) Peter Annet, *The Resurrection of Jesus in Answer to the Tryal of the Witnesses* (London: M. Cooper, 1744), with arguments still mostly convincing. Contrast William L. Craig, "The Guard at the Tomb," *NTS* 30 (1984): 273–81; and the implied conviction of Wright, *Resurrection*, 636–40.

show us that Mark 16:1–8 and its parallels are not, after all, unadulterated legend. These considerations I now consider. I review them in their evidential pecking order, starting with the weakest and ending with the strongest.

1. According to Matt 28:11–15, the Jewish authorities put out the rumor that the disciples robbed the tomb.<sup>441</sup> From this we learn, or so it is often said, that anti-Christian propaganda concurred that the tomb was empty. The disagreement concerned only who or what emptied it.<sup>442</sup>

The problem with this pretended, oft-repeated proof is that the age of the refutation in Matt 28:11–15 is unknown. Some have, to be sure, surmised that the verses bear “the mark of fairly protracted controversy.”<sup>443</sup> Yet why this should be so escapes me, and the passage, which can hardly be history as it stands, is alone in the New Testament: nowhere else do we hear hostile Jews making the accusation that Jesus’ disciples stole his body. So we do not know when this polemic was first formulated, or where it was first formulated, or who first formulated it. Without such knowledge, we cannot safely move from Matt 28:11–15 to the very beginnings of Christianity in Jerusalem. Who can say what Caiaphas, for example, thought about Jesus’ empty tomb, if he knew or thought about it at all? For all we know, the view combated in Matt 28:11–15 arose sometime between Mark and Matthew, not in the days or weeks or months immediately after the crucifixion.<sup>444</sup>

2. According to Murray J. Harris, “In the light of Jewish veneration for the burial places of prophets and other holy persons such as

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441. Cf. Justin, *Dial.* 108.2 (ed. Marcovich; PTS 47:255); Gos. Nic. 1:13; Tatian, *Diatessaron* 53:28; Tertullian, *Spect.* 30 (ed. Reifferscheid and Wissowa; CSEL 20:29).

442. So William Lane Craig, “The Empty Tomb of Jesus,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (ed. R. T. France and David Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 2:193; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 836–37; Jacob Kremer, “Zur Diskussion über ‘das leere Grab,’” in *Resurrexit: Actes du Symposium international sur la résurrection de Jésus, Rome 1970* (ed. Édouard Dhanis; Vatican: Libreria editrice vaticana, 1974), 157; Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 94; Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 101; Kurt Schubert, “‘Auferstehung Jesu’ im Lichte der Religionsgeschichte des Judentums,” in Dhanis, *Resurrexit*, 218; Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 144–45; Winden, *Osterglauben*, 39–40; and many others. For the idiosyncratic view that Matt 28:15 is not aimed at real Jewish polemic but instead is a way for Matthew to articulate his own views, see Wim J. C. Weren, “‘His Disciples stole Him away’ (Mt 28,13): A Rival Interpretation of Jesus’ Resurrection,” in Bieringer, Koperski, and Lataire, *Resurrection*, 147–63.

443. E. L. Allen, “The Lost Kerygma,” *NTS* 3 (1957): 351. Cf. Hengel, “Begräbnis,” 179.

444. Contrast Raymund Schwager, “Die heutige Theologie und das leere Grab Jesu,” *ZKT* 115 (1993): 438, who thinks that later Jewish polemic, if independent of old anti-Christian tradition, would have preferred simply to deny that the tomb was empty. I do not see how we can be confident of this.

righteous martyrs (Matt. 23.29), it is remarkable that the early Christians gave no particular attention to the tomb of Jesus. Remarkable, that is, unless his tomb were empty.”<sup>445</sup> Several troubles beset this assertion, which others have forwarded from time to time.<sup>446</sup> While no one has proved that Christians from an early period conducted religious services involving Jesus’ grave, no one has proven that they did not, and a few scholars have found hints that they did.<sup>447</sup> While their conclusions admittedly remain speculative,<sup>448</sup> another possibility, equally at odds with Harris’s contention, has more support within the academy: there is a real chance that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre stands on the site of Jesus’ burial.<sup>449</sup> If that church does stand there, this implies a living memory, implies that Christians passed on knowledge of the site, which in turn makes one wonder about Harris’s assertion that “no particular attention” was paid to it. There is yet another difficulty. If Christians knew the location of Jesus’ tomb and yet, as Harris implies, did not venerate the place or conduct religious services there, the cause might simply have been because the setting was an unwholesome dump for criminals. Belief in Jesus’ resurrection is not the only imaginable reason people might have had for staying away.

The fragility of Harris’s logic appears from the circumstance that it can effortlessly be turned inside out. It is almost amusing that Lüdemann, starting from the same alleged fact as Harris — the failure to venerate Jesus’ tomb — comes to exactly the opposite conclusion: “Given the significance of the tombs of saints at the time of Jesus it can be presupposed that had Jesus’ tomb been known, the early Christians would have venerated it and traditions about it would have been preserved.”<sup>450</sup> Clearly

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445. Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 40.

446. Cf. Craig, *New Testament Evidence*, 372–73; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 837–38; and Rigaux, *Dieu l’a Ressuscité*, 301. Contrast Wedderburn, *Resurrection*, 63–65.

447. G. Schille, “Das Leiden des Herrn: Die evangelische Passionstradition und ihr Sitz im Leben,” *ZTK* 52 (1955): 161–205; Nauck, “Bedeutung,” 260–62; Delorme, “Résurrection,” 105–49; L. Schenke, *Auferstehungsverkündigung*.

448. Criticism in Bode, *Easter Morning*, 130–32.

449. See Joan E. Taylor, “Golgotha: A Reconsideration of the Evidence for the Sites of Jesus’ Crucifixion and Burial,” *NTS* 44 (1998): 180–203; and Rainer Riesner, “Auferstehung, Archäologie und Religionsgeschichte,” *TBei* 25 (1994): 319–26.

450. Lüdemann, *Resurrection*, 45. Martin Karrer, *Jesus Christus im Neuen Testament* (GNT 11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 44, can regard the story of the empty tomb as an etiology explaining the lack of a cult at Jesus’ tomb.

Harris's inference is not required; this is not a pillar of resurrection faith but rather a twig easily snapped.<sup>451</sup>

3. Paul's language in 1 Cor 15 may, some have urged, assume an empty tomb.<sup>452</sup> The sequence is burial followed by resurrection. If this creates any image in the mind's eye, surely it is of a tomb first being filled and then being emptied. It is indeed difficult to know what else one might envision. Resurrection immediately follows the burial, so it naturally includes the body — and all the more because, to judge from 1 Cor 6:12–20; 15:51–54; and 1 Thess 4:17, Paul believed in “some sort of continuity between the present physical body and the totally transformed resurrection body — in spite of all discontinuity.”<sup>453</sup> We would, furthermore, not expect anything less, for Paul's Jewish tradition knew not only of bodies being taken up into heaven (e.g., Enoch in Gen 5:24 and Elijah in 2 Kgs 2:11) but also included many texts regarding resurrection that typically make one think about bones and graves, dust and earth. Examples are Isa 26:19 (“Their corpses shall rise”); Ezek 37:5–6 (“Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: ‘... I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin’ ”); 37:13 (“When I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves”);<sup>454</sup> Dan 12:2 (“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake”); *Sib. Or.* 4:181–182 (“God himself will again fashion the bones and ashes of people and he will raise up mortals again as they were before”); Matt 27:53 (“They came out of the tombs”); 4 Ezra 7:32 (“The earth shall

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451. See further Jeffrey Jay Lowder, “Historical Evidence and the Empty Tomb Story: A Reply to William Lane Craig,” *Journal of Higher Criticism* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 288–89 (also online: [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/jeff\\_lowder/empty.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/jeff_lowder/empty.html)). Although I am unsure how this bears on the issue, it is perhaps worth noting that the particular places where the risen Jesus appeared do not seem to have generated much interest in early times. We have no ancient evidence of any place being venerated precisely because it was where a resurrection appearance was said to have taken place.

452. In addition to what follows, see Ronald J. Sider, “St. Paul's Understanding of the Nature and Significance of 1 Cor. XV 1–19,” *NovT* 19 (1977): 134–36; and esp. Craig, *New Testament Evidence*, 85–159, 358–60; idem, “The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (ed. R. T. France and David Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 1:47–74.

453. Peter Lampe, “Paul's Concept of a Spiritual Body,” in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* (ed. Ted Peters, Robert John Russell, and Michael Welker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 113. See further Ronald J. Sider, “The Pauline Conception of the Resurrection Body in 1 Corinthians XV. 35–54,” *NTS* 21 (1975): 428–39.

454. Whatever the original meaning of the text, later readers — Origen being the exception — took it to be a picture of the eschatological resurrection: 4Q385; Matt 27:51–53; *Liv. Pro.*, Ezek. 12; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.15.1 (ed. Rousseau; SC 153:196–202); Ambrose, *Exc.* 2.75 (ed. Faller; CSEL 73.7:290–91); the north wall of the Dura-Europos synagogue; etc.



give up those who are asleep in it"); 2 Bar. 50:2 ("The earth will surely give back the dead at that time; it receives them now in order to keep them, not changing anything in their form").

Here then it seems, at least initially, that the apologists have a point. Why did Paul say that Jesus was raised if he did not mean that he was raised? Why not just: "He was buried and he appeared to Cephas"? Robert Gundry, who reminds us that Paul was a Pharisee, and that Pharisees believed in physical resurrection,<sup>455</sup> has made the point well enough: "*Resurrection* means 'standing up' (*anastasis*) in consequence of being 'raised' (*egeirō* in the passive). Normally, dead bodies are buried in a supine position; so in conjunction with the mention of Jesus' burial the further mention of his having been raised must refer to the raising of a formerly supine corpse to the standing posture of a live body. . . . There was no need for Paul or the tradition he cites to mention the emptiness of Jesus' tomb. They were not narrating a story; they were listing events. It was enough to mention dying, being buried, being raised and being seen."<sup>456</sup>

One cannot object to this that Paul goes on, in 1 Corinthians, to promote belief in a spiritual body, as though this might have nothing to do with bones and tombs. The apostle, in Lake's words, believed "in a kind of transubstantiation of the body from flesh and blood into spirit, and in this sense he not merely held the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, as distinguished from the resurrection of the flesh, but in so far as the flesh was changed into spirit, he may even be said to have held the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh, if 'resurrection' be taken to include this process of change."<sup>457</sup> While it may go too far to say that Paul believed that the physical bodies of the saints would be "used up in

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455. Robert H. Gundry, "The Essential Physicality of Jesus' Resurrection according to the New Testament," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 206–7, observes that, according to Josephus, *J.W.* 2.163, the Pharisees held that a good soul will pass into another body, from which Gundry infers: "The Pharisees . . . must have held to physical resurrection for him to have attributed to them a Hellenistically phrased position that ran counter to his purpose in writing."

456. Robert H. Gundry, "Trimming the Debate," in Copan and Tacelli, *Jesus' Resurrection*, 118. Cf. Jindřich Mánek, "The Apostle Paul and the Empty Tomb," *NovT* 2 (1958): 276–80. Contrast Marxsen, *Resurrection*, 70: For Paul "the empty tomb would even be an inconvenience."

457. Lake, *Resurrection*, 21. Cf. 129: "It is almost as certain as anything can be that St. Paul's doctrine of the transubstantiation of flesh and spirit implied a belief in an empty tomb."

the resurrection,"<sup>458</sup> it would be even more misleading to assert that the resurrection would not, for him, involve a transformation of corpses.

Yet, having conceded all this, it is not clear exactly how much if anything follows for our purposes. Paul could have believed in an empty tomb without knowing a tradition about its discovery.<sup>459</sup> The fact remains that the apostle, even if his words assume that Jesus' tomb was empty, fails to say so. So what if anything he knew about Jesus' tomb remains forever beyond recovery. The prudent verdict, then, is that while Paul should not be considered a witness against the tradition of an empty tomb as found in the Gospels, he equally cannot be called upon to support any of the narrative specifics of that tradition or even its pre-Markan existence.

4. Many have insisted that the early Christians could not have preached Jesus' resurrection in Jerusalem unless his tomb were known to be opened and empty.<sup>460</sup> Would opponents have let the troublesome sectarians get away with their outrageous and offensive claim, a claim that had God overturning the verdict of the religious authorities, if it could readily have been falsified? Surely enemies of the faith would have displayed the body if it could have been found.<sup>461</sup> This is exactly what later Jewish polemic makes them do in the *Toledot Jesu*.<sup>462</sup> Paul Althaus insisted that the resurrection was proclaimed "soon after Jesus' death in Jerusalem, in the place where he was executed and buried.... This proclamation signified for all, for those who preached and for all who

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458. The phrase is from C. F. D. Moule, "St. Paul and Dualism: The Pauline Concept of Resurrection," *NTS* 13 (1965–66): 122n1.

459. See esp. Lorenz Oberlinner, "Die Verkündigung der Auferweckung Jesu im geöffneten und leeren Grab: Zu einem vernachlässigten Aspekt in der Diskussion um das Grab Jesu," *ZNW* 73 (1982): 163–68. Cf. Lüdemann, *Resurrection*, 46: "On the one hand Paul knows no witness to the empty tomb, but on the other he imagines the resurrection of Jesus in bodily form, which seems to require the emergence of the body of Jesus from the empty tomb."

460. See, e.g., Bode, *Easter Morning*, 162–63; Craig, "Empty Tomb," 193–94; Michael Dummett, "Biblical Exegesis and the Resurrection," *NBf* 58 (1977): 66–68; Hengel, "Begräbnis," 180–81; Jacob Kremer, "Die Auferstehung Jesu Christi," in *Handbuch der Fundamental-Theologie*, vol. 2, *Traktat Offenbarung* (ed. Walter Kern et al.; Freiburg: Herder, 1985), 188; Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 38–39; Lohfink, "Auferstehung," 44–45; Nauck, "Bedeutung," 264; Robert H. Stein, "Was the Tomb Really Empty?" *JETS* 20 (1977): 23–29. Over the years Pannenberg has consistently made this point in defending the resurrection; e.g., see *Jesu*, 100. Paley, *Evidences*, 378–79, already laid great weight upon this argument.

461. So George Cook, *An Illustration of the Gospel Evidence Establishing the Reality of Christ's Resurrection* (Edinburgh: Peter Hill, 1808), 15; Cranfield, "Resurrection," 170; Morris, "Resurrection," 319–21; James Orr, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, [1909?]), 213–14; and many others.

462. Schlichting, *Ein jüdisches Leben Jesu*, 154–62.

heard, that the grave was empty. This could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned. . . . In Jerusalem, one could not think of the grave as empty without being certain, without there being testimony, that it had been found empty.”<sup>463</sup>

To this one might retort that people just did not know where the body was, as must have happened often with treasonous criminals, who customarily endured the final act of disgrace by being thrown into piles as food for carrion.<sup>464</sup> This possibility requires that the burial by Joseph of Arimathea (Matt 27:57–61; Mark 15:42–47; Luke 23:50–56; John 19:38–42) be a legend. As argued at length in “Excursus 2: Joseph of Arimathea” (below), however, it is likely enough that a member of the Sanhedrin buried Jesus, and that the location was known to any party interested in knowing.

Another way around the inference from the proclamation of the resurrection in Jerusalem is to posit that the earliest Christians did not believe in a physical resurrection of Jesus’ body, that they held a more spiritual view of resurrection, akin to what Paul allegedly develops in 1 Cor 15. On such a view, if the location of Jesus’ tomb was known, it was irrelevant.<sup>465</sup> The problem with this response is that, despite some scholarly opinion to the contrary, there is just no good evidence for belief in a non-physical resurrection in Paul, much less within the primitive Jerusalem community.<sup>466</sup> As urged above, even Paul, in 1 Cor 15, when defending the notion of a “spiritual body,” teaches — like 2 Bar. 51:10 — the transformation of corpses, not their abandonment.<sup>467</sup>

There is yet another retort, also less than persuasive: Even if Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus, it is conceivable that, by the time interested individuals got around to caring and so investigating the spot, it was too late. Any body would have undergone decomposition between Passover and Pentecost, or whenever Christians first began publicly proclaiming

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463. Paul Althaus, *Die Wahrheit des kirchlichen Osterglaubens: Einspruch gegen Emanuel Hirsch* (BFCT 42.2; Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1940), 22–23; cf. 25.

464. See John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 160–77.

465. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 105, implies this possibility.

466. Cf. Gundry, “Essential Physicality,” 204–19.

467. See above, 314–16. This is sometimes denied; e.g., see William R. Farmer, “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ,” *Religion in Life* 39 (1970): 365–70; and S. MacLean Gilmour, “The Evidence for Easter,” *ANQ* 5 (1965): 12–13: “Even if Paul had heard the story of the empty tomb, I do not believe he could have accepted it.”

the resurrection. If Peter and his fellow believers did not become active missionaries until several weeks after the crucifixion, maybe empirical inquiry would by then have been unprofitable. In Lake's words, "The emptiness of the grave only became a matter of controversy at a period when investigation could not have been decisive."<sup>468</sup>

This is not the potent argument that it at first appears to be. On the one hand, if Jesus was, as the Gospels have it, buried alone, then all that would have mattered was the place. One could have checked the cave for its one corpse no matter what the condition of that corpse. On the other hand, if Jesus was buried with others, *m. Sanh.* 6:5–6 is evidence that his body would still have been identifiable. The rabbinic text presupposes that, even if a criminal had been buried dishonorably, it was yet possible for relatives to claim the skeleton after some time had passed: "When the flesh had wasted away they gathered together the bones and buried them in their own place." If relatives could collect the bones of an executed criminal after the flesh had fallen off, then those bones were not in a jumbled pile of corpses but must have been deposited in such a way as to allow for later identification. Now, because burial customs tend to be conserved over long stretches of time, it is reasonable to suppose that, already in Jesus' day, the corpses of criminals buried by Jews were somehow separated and identifiable. Even if it were sometimes otherwise, in the case of Jesus probably "all that would have been necessary would have been for Joseph [of Arimathea] or his assistant to say, 'We put the body there, and a body is still there.'"<sup>469</sup>

There remain, however, other defeaters of inferring an empty tomb from the preaching of the resurrection in Jerusalem, and these are harder to nullify. Maybe the first Christians were so convinced of their own beliefs that they never bothered to visit the gravesite. After all, most historians have the disciples, without knowledge of the empty tomb, coming to faith because of resurrection appearances in Galilee; so if they had come to believe without such knowledge, why did they need it

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468. Lake, *Resurrection*, 196. Cf. Keim, *Jesus*, 6:299; Lowder, "Empty Tomb," 283–84; Macan, *Resurrection*, 106; Strauss, *Jesus*, 743; Thrall, "Resurrection Traditions," 201. It remains theoretically possible that Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus but kept the fact to himself for some time. Cf. Robert H. Gundry, "Trimming the Debate," 108: "To the extent that in burying Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea acted on his own, or only in partnership with Nicodemus, Lüdemann might say that the rest of the council did not know who had buried Jesus or where he had been buried, and that Joseph feared to incur their wrath by telling them of his service to Jesus' corpse."

469. Morris, "Resurrection," 321.

when they returned to Jerusalem? Perhaps, contrary to the impression that Luke 24:12 and John 20:3–9 leave, their religious enthusiasm was greater than their investigative impulses or their native curiosity. Perhaps their assumption that Jesus was gone to heaven canceled the common human sentiment to visit a loved-one's grave, or perhaps they did visit and the stone was still in place and they saw no compelling reason to move it.<sup>470</sup> Stranger things have happened, and what we would have done as a matter of course is no sure indicator of what early Christians really did as a matter of course. Guignebert remarked, "The very idea of verifying presupposes doubt, and there is no ordinary connexion between the exaltation of the vision and the uninspired business of verification."<sup>471</sup> The Vatican does not appear to have been in any hurry to subject the Shroud of Turin to carbon dating, and surely early Christian converts accepted the proclamation of the resurrection, like the reports of Jesus' miracles, without seeking out and interviewing the principal witnesses or otherwise playing detective. Do we know that the first disciples were of a wholly different character?

What then of the Jewish authorities? Would they not have conducted an inspection? Maybe not. Maybe the focus of the first Christian proclamation was not the resurrection but the Parousia.<sup>472</sup> Or maybe the authorities just did not care because they did not take the business very seriously or regarded it as nothing more than a minor, transient nuisance.<sup>473</sup> Or maybe opponents accepted the testimony of the disciples and did not bother because they knew that more than one explanation would be possible for whatever they found, so what would be the point of on-site research?

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470. Lindars, "Resurrection," 128–29, argues that the first Christians "were able to get reliable information from friends in Jerusalem about the burial-place, including perhaps the part played by Joseph, but visits to the tomb did not entail removing the stone and looking inside"; it "would be exceptional to open up a tomb unless there were very special circumstances."

471. Guignebert, *Jesus*, 518. Cf. Grass, *Osterbericht*, 184.

472. Cf. Pesch, "Entstehung," 207. Pesch finds support in Q, which has no Easter kerygma but much to say about the returning Son of Man.

473. Cf. Lowder, "Empty Tomb," 282; Oberlinner, "Auferweckung Jesu," 169–75. There is also the possibility that Joseph buried Jesus but that the Christians did not know where; cf. Wolfgang Reinbold, *Der älteste Bericht über den Tod Jesu: Literarische Analyse und historische Kritik der Passionsdarstellungen der Evangelien* (BZNW 69; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 279–80. This supposition must reckon as secondary the watching of the women (in Mark 15:47 the women see not how Jesus is buried but where, ποῦ). Contrast Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History, History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 73–82, who regards the women as genuine eyewitnesses known to the Christian community. Cf. L. Schenke, *Auferstehungsverkündigung*, 98.

It is all but impossible to rate the probability of the various proposals in the previous two paragraphs. None of them, however, begs belief. In fact, one might imagine them strengthened by the fact, not often remarked upon, that early Christian tradition nowhere records that Jewish leaders went out to the tomb and found it empty. If such a thing did happen, the story, one imagines, would have been told with relish, at least if it became known.<sup>474</sup> So maybe it did not happen. My judgment, then, is that, even though I reckon the burial by Joseph of Arimathea to be historical, I greatly hesitate to conclude from this and from the early proclamation of Jesus' resurrection in Jerusalem that the tomb was certainly known to be vacant rather than being presumed or hoped to be vacant. Here is a case in which the arguments yea are fairly well met by the arguments nay.

5. Leslie Houlden has written, "We can analyse the [resurrection] narratives in the Gospels, pointing to theological features and literary connections, and the more they strike us, the less assurance we are likely to have that they represent history directly."<sup>475</sup> This seems to be acceptable common sense. What then are we to make of W. Nauck's observation that Mark 16:1–8 betrays little if any scriptural intertextuality (a fact all the more striking considering how heavily the preceding passion narrative alludes to the Bible);<sup>476</sup> that the narrative fails to remark on Jesus' resurrection being the dawning of a new age or inaugurating the general resurrection; that it says nothing at all about Jesus' descent to the underworld or his ascent to heaven; that it fails to recount the resurrection itself or inform us about the nature of Jesus' risen body; and that the narrative lacks christological titles and themes? Jesus is not here said to be Lord or Messiah or Son of Man or Son of God. According to Nauck, the only christological motif is that the crucified is risen.<sup>477</sup>

Mark 16:1–8, which Bultmann called "extremely reserved,"<sup>478</sup> is quiescent in a number of surprising ways, and it does not offer us clear theological reflections on the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>479</sup> It also does not

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474. Contrast Morris, "Resurrection," 321: "It is as certain as anything of this sort can be that an investigation *was* made, and that the preaching of the Resurrection was not discredited simply because the tomb was found empty."

475. Houlden, *Connections*, 143.

476. Wright, *Resurrection*, 599–602, makes much of this.

477. Nauck, "Bedeutung," 249–50, 263.

478. Bultmann, *History*, 286.

479. Cf. Kremer, "Leere Grab," 153: "Every theological reflection concerning the meaning of the resurrection fails."

explicitly defend itself: apologetical interests, if present, remain undisclosed. Mark addresses none of the questions that later defenders of the faith sought to answer. Why were there no eyewitnesses to the resurrection itself? Why were the only eyewitnesses to the opened tomb biased and so not wholly credible? Why were there no spectacular or miraculous demonstrations? Matthew, Luke, John, and the Gospel of Peter, by contrast, are more theological and more apologetically conscious. This does not imply that Mark's narrative lacks its own literary or theological artistry. Still, returning to Houlden, one wonders whether his comment should be turned upside down. Maybe the odd paucity of clear theological and apologetical features in Mark's text is a hint — not strong evidence but a hint, a fragment of a clue — that there is some history behind it, that it was not simply the product of the Christian imagination. "It might be reasonable to expect that in a freely composed mythical narrative the church would maximize the theological depth structure of the tradition."<sup>480</sup> But Mark 16:1–8 is not so maximized. Rather, in the canonical Gospels "it is typical that the discovery of the empty grave remains practically without effect. The report of it only subsequently wins importance as an indication of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus when the resurrection is proven by the appearances."<sup>481</sup>

6. Tom Wright has written: "Neither the empty tomb by itself . . . nor the appearances by themselves, could have generated the early Christian belief. The empty tomb alone would be a puzzle and a tragedy. Sightings of an apparently alive Jesus, by themselves, would have been classified as visions or hallucinations, which were well enough known in the ancient world."<sup>482</sup>

It is easy to think that these words misread the facts. "Sightings of an apparently alive Jesus" were, even without the empty tomb, never "by themselves." Rather did they come to people whose religious convictions had been thoroughly molded by Jesus over the course of his public ministry, and that means molded by certain concrete eschatological

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480. Barry W. Henaut, "Empty Tomb or Empty Argument: A Failure of Nerve in Recent Studies of Mark 16?" *SR* 15 (1986): 181. Cf. Rigaux, *Dieu l'a Ressuscité*, 300. Henaut seeks to drain his own statement of force but without good argument.

481. Gustav Stählin, "'On the Third Day': The Easter Traditions of the Primitive Church," *Int* 10 (1956): 286.

482. Wright, *Resurrection*, 686. See also his article, "Jesus and Resurrection," in *Jesus Then and Now: Images in History and Christology* (ed. Marvin Meyer and Charles Hughes; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001), 54–71. Cf. Seeberg, *Dogmatik*, 2:209.

expectations. Jesus himself had spoken of the new age with its prefatory resurrection as near, and how could this fact not have contributed to, or even been decisive in, the interpretation of reputed postmortem encounters with Jesus?<sup>483</sup> Even when expectations do not match the facts, religious enthusiasm can absorb the shocks of external reality, carry on, and reinterpret its language in creative ways, so that the formerly literal now gives way to the nonliteral. Illustrations of “secondary exegesis”<sup>484</sup> in the face of cognitive dissonance<sup>485</sup> are abundant.<sup>486</sup>

Given that the creative revision of eschatological belief is well known to students of millenarian movements, one might think it no stretch to envision some followers of Jesus, under the spell of his eschatological expectations, coming to belief in his resurrection, even if the whereabouts of his body were unknown.<sup>487</sup> If they were expecting the eschatological consummation, as Luke 19:11 has it, and if, after Jesus’ death, they saw him alive again, might they not have put two and two together?

But here is the problem, and the reason why Wright is probably, despite what I have just said, on to something.<sup>488</sup> Reinterpretation of eschatological expectations stems from dissonance bred by the distance

483. John Muddimann, “I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body,” in Barton and Stanton, *Resurrection*, 133–34, recognizes that the disciples started from some experience which they then interpreted “in the light of Jewish apocalyptic and perhaps also Jesus’ own teaching about the death and resurrection of the Son of Man, and then in turn started to reinterpret the eschatology in the light of their experience.” “Perhaps” should be dropped from this sentence. Similarly, although Bockmuehl, “Resurrection,” 118, rightly speaks of the proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection as “rooted in his own teaching,” earlier, on 112–13, he focuses instead on the setting within Judaism in general: resurrection “in the context of first-century Pharisaic and apocalyptic Judaism” was “the only suitable terminology to name an astonishing reality.” Yet surely our focus should be on the particular beliefs of the pre-Easter Jesus movement, not the general eschatological beliefs of Palestinian Jews. Despite my disagreement with Ulrich B. Müller, *Die Entstehung des Glaubens an die Auferstehung Jesu: Historische Aspekte und Bedingungen* (SBS 172; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1998), about many things, there is much to commend in his attempt, following Pesch and others, to understand the proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection against the background of Jesus’ teaching and expectation.

484. The phrase is that of Yonina Talmon, “Pursuit of the Millennium: The Relation between Religious and Social Change,” *Archives européennes de sociologie* 3 (1962): 133.

485. The classic work on cognitive dissonance within a millenarian group is Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); see esp. the introduction on 3–32. Although Wright, *Resurrection*, 697–701, scores some points against Festinger, it remains true that the Millerites and Jehovah’s Witnesses clearly reveal how eschatological expectation can overwhelm and rewrite historical experience.

486. Allison, *End of the Ages*, 142–46; idem, *Jesus*, 167–69.

487. See esp. Müller, *Entstehung*, one of the more interesting and important of the recent books on the resurrection.

488. What follows repeats points I made earlier in *End of the Ages*, 164–65. Wright’s argument at this juncture goes another way.



between prophecy and event, and — despite widespread scholarly assumption to the contrary — before belief in Jesus' resurrection, no such cause for dissonance existed.<sup>489</sup> The disciples had, it appears, unaccountably suffered a moral collapse, for they scattered when their master was arrested: surely there is memory behind Mark 14:27, 50 and John 16:32. And Peter, although he had dared to follow the crowd that had taken Jesus, did not have the courage to confess his allegiance to the Nazarene (Mark 14:54–72; John 18:15–18, 25–27). And yet the disciples' demoralization and their teacher's heinous execution did not directly confute the eschatological teachings of Jesus; for he had foreseen, for himself and for others, suffering and perhaps even death in the eschatological tribulation, understood as near.<sup>490</sup> So when he met his end, the disciples would have been down but not out — that is, emotionally down but not theologically out.<sup>491</sup>

Social psychology leads us to expect that those followers of Jesus who felt obliged to continue the cause despite the crucifixion and despite their failings and initial leaderless confusion would likely have done their best to match event to expectation. That would have meant (a) interpreting his death as part of the end-time chaos; (b) anticipating for themselves suffering and violent ends in the near future; and (c) keeping their hopes firmly fixed upon the coming consummation, when the dead, including Jesus, would be resurrected. There was nothing in the crucifixion itself to undo the basic structure of anybody's eschatological expectations, nothing to extinguish hope, which after all can survive despair. From what we can tell, a martyr's fate agreed nicely with what Jesus had predicted. Deuteronomy 21:23 would not, admittedly, have made things easy, but Gal 3:13, where Paul puts Deut 21:23 to good use, reminds us that one can always do what one wills with Scripture. That is especially so in this

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489. Hugh Jackson, "The Resurrection Belief of the Earliest Church: A Response to the Failure of Prophecy?" *JR* 55 (1975): 415–25, is flawed precisely in that it turns the crucifixion itself into a cause of theological dissonance.

490. Allison, *End of the Ages*, 115–41; idem, *Jesus*, 145–47; idem, "Q 12:51–53 and Mk 9:11–13 and the Messianic Woes," in *Authenticating the Words of Jesus* (ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans; NTTS 28.1; Leiden: Brill), 289–310. See also now Brant Pitre, "The Historical Jesus, the Great Tribulation, and the End of the Exile: Restoration Eschatology and the Origin of the Atonement" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2004).

491. See further Müller, *Entstehung*, esp. 7–11; also Weiss, *Earliest Christianity*, 1:19–23. Contrast Zorab, *Opstandingsverhaal*, 73–90, and the many who have argued that the disciples were so emotionally distraught and empty after Easter that only a miracle could explain the continuance of Jesus' cause.

case, for the faithful certainly believed that Jesus had suffered a miscarriage of justice, not a divine curse, and Jews knew of unjust crucifixions (Philo, *Flacc.* 83; *T. Mos.* 6:9; 8:1).<sup>492</sup> Christianity soon enough turned the scandal, shame, and horror of crucifixion into a badge of honor. One recalls that Sabbatai Sevi's apostasy to Islam did not utterly destroy his movement.<sup>493</sup>

Unlike Jesus' martyrdom, the resurrection did not conform to anyone's expectations. Not only did the resurrection stand in tension with the collective character of both Jewish expectations and Jesus' prophecies, but it implied two acts of vindication — the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Son of Man — and thereby split into two the one eschatological act of redemption that Jesus' words had held together.<sup>494</sup> However surprising the result, it was belief in the resurrection of Jesus, not knowledge of his crucifixion, that would have forced the disciples to reinterpret their expectations in drastic fashion. Far from being the straightforward product of dissonance, then, Easter faith must have been, if anything, the cause of dissonance.<sup>495</sup> Perhaps, after all, the notices of doubt in Matt 28:17; Ps.-Mark 16:14; Luke 24:25, 38; and John 20:24–25 are more than a literary motif.<sup>496</sup>

What does all this have to do with the empty tomb? Simply this: Jesus' expectation of resurrection, and so the expectation of his disciples, was, in accord with the belief abroad in their day, of solid bodies coming back to life (cf. Matt 27:51–53; John 5:28–29; Acts 2:31).<sup>497</sup> And if there was no reason to believe that his solid body had returned to life,

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492. Cf. Müller, *Entstehung*, 10–11.

493. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 687–929.

494. See further Allison, *End of Ages*, 160–62. Although his understanding of Jesus' eschatology is quite different from mine, in this particular I concur with the reconstruction of C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (rev. ed.; New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1961), 73–77.

495. Cf. Gerd Theissen, *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 333: "Dissonance was further heightened by the Easter experiences."

496. Those who think that the motif is not purely literary but reflects a memory include Guignebert, *Jesus*, 511; MacGregor, "Growth," 282; and Howard M. Teeple, "The Historical Evidence of the Resurrection Faith," in *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honor of Allen Wikgren* (ed. David Edward Aune; Leiden: Brill, 1972), 113.

497. On Jewish expectations see Hengel, "Begräbnis," 150–72; Wright, *Resurrection*. Goulder, "Baseless Fabric," 56, is plainly wrong in holding that "the norm" among Jews was a "spiritual resurrection" rather than a "physical resurrection." Within Judaism was a variety of eschatological beliefs and so no "norm"; but when Jews in the Holy Land spoke of resurrection, they were, from everything we know, thinking about corpses and bones, graves and ossuaries; cf. 314–15 above. I also beg to differ with Elliott, "First Easter," 219, who asserts

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. For there was more than one way for Jews to speak about postmortem vindication and to interpret the presence of one dead. Given the widespread dualism of the time,<sup>498</sup> we would expect Jesus' disciples to think in terms of the triumph of his soul or spirit and to imagine his resurrection, like that of everyone else dead and buried, as still belonging to the immediate future.<sup>499</sup>

The ascent of a soul to heaven and its vindication were not the same as resurrection from the dead.<sup>500</sup> As already observed, the *Testament of Job* relates that its hero's soul was taken to heaven immediately after his death, while his body was being prepared for burial (52:10–12). The story of Moses' end in *Deut. Rab.* 11:10 is similar,<sup>501</sup> and in later church history we find that when people see the souls of saints, they speak of ascension, not resurrection.<sup>502</sup> The first Christians, to the contrary, did something else. They proclaimed that an individual had already been raised from the dead, that the general resurrection had begun (1 Cor 15:23). Why? One good answer to the riddle is that they believed his tomb was empty. If there is another good answer, I have yet to stumble across it. We seem then to be stuck with the view, associated in recent times especially with von Campenhausen, that before the disciples

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that "resurrection was the natural first century Jewish way of describing" an individual's continuing influence. I know of no evidence for this point of view, and Elliott fails to provide any beyond his own assertion.

498. Robert H. Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology, with Emphasis upon Pauline Anthropology* (SBLMS 29; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

499. Cf. Brown, *Virginal Conception*, 75–76; Catchpole, *Resurrection*, 195, 209; Gundry, *Mark*, 994; Lohfink, "Auferstehung," 49–50. See further Gerhard Friedrich, "Die Auferweckung Jesu, eine Tat Gottes oder ein Interpretament der Jünger?" *KD* 17 (1971): 153–87, who shows how strange it was, given the religious world in which they lived, that many Christians from the beginning used the language of resurrection for Jesus' vindication. Friedrich concurs that visions of Jesus after his death would not in themselves have led anyone to think him resurrected. Müller, *Entstehung*, 30–35, is aware of the issue, but he suggests, without sufficient warrant, that Christians, in Jesus' case, combined the traditional notion of the heavenly vindication of the suffering righteous one with eschatological resurrection.

500. *Jub.* 23:30–31, if it speaks of souls being exalted to heaven as a rising up (interpretation of the text is uncertain and cannot be resolved), would be the only exception known to me.

501. Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.15.132 (ed. Descourtieux; SC 446:322–24).

502. E.g., Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 60 (ed. Bartelink; SC 400:294–98); and Jerome, *Vit. Paul.* 14 (PL 23:27A).

encountered the postmortem Jesus in Galilee or at least before they declared him risen from the dead, they already knew about the empty tomb. Otherwise, they would probably have offered a different interpretation of their experiences.

One possible retort to this conclusion is that, according to Mark 6:14–16, some said that John the Baptist had risen from the dead, and yet we have no evidence of belief in his empty tomb.<sup>503</sup> But this objection will not do. Apart from the fact that we have no evidence one way or the other about what the few purveyors of this ill-informed piece of superstition thought about John's tomb, if anything,<sup>504</sup> the decisive point is this. If some really did regard Jesus of Nazareth as John risen from the dead, then they were identifying the Baptist with a body that was out and about in the real world: the wonder-working Jesus was not a disembodied spirit. The risen John, identified with Jesus, was walking flesh and bones, and precisely that circumstance may have encouraged the terminology of resurrection.

7. Again and again scholars have observed that the discovery of the empty tomb is, in the canonical Gospels, made by women.<sup>505</sup> This, they claim, is not “the kind of detail anyone would have thought or wished to invent.” “That it should be these devoted but humble and relatively insignificant followers who are given the credit for the discovery in every gospel is historically impressive.”<sup>506</sup> This is perhaps the most popular

503. Cf. Macan, *Resurrection*, 106. See also Mark 8:27–30, and the observation of C. A. Evans, *Ossuaries*, 13–14, that if Mark's story is true, John's head was still in the possession of Herod's family!

504. Catchpole, *Resurrection*, 189–90, regards the relevant texts as Markan redaction, so on his view there were no such purveyors at all. Contrast Müller, *Entstehung*, 52–53; and Knut Backhaus, *Die “Jüngerkreise” des Täufers Johannes: Eine Studie zu den religionsgeschichtlichen Ursprüngen des Christentums* (Paderborner Theologische Studien 19; Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1991), 89–95.

505. Matt 28:1: Mary Magdalene, “the other Mary”

Mark 16:1: Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, Salome

Luke 24:10: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary mother of James, other women

John 20:1–2: Mary Magdalene alone, yet using first-person plural (“we”)

506. Baker, *Foolishness of God*, 261. Cf. Catchpole, *Resurrection*, 199–202; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 832–34; Birger Gerhardsson, “Mark and the Female Witnesses,” in *Dummu-e2-dub-ba-A: Studies in Honor of Åke W. Sjöberg* (ed. Hermann Behrens, Darlene Loding, and Martha T. Roth; Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 11; Philadelphia: University Museum, 1989), 217–26; Lohfink, “Auferstehung,” 45; C. F. D. Moule, “Introduction” to *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ* (ed. C. F. D. Moule; SBT 2.8; London: SCM, 1968), 9; von Campenhausen, *Tradition*, 75–76; Wright, *Resurrection*, 607–8; etc. Contrast Lowder, “Empty Tomb,” 274–77. Note the confession of Placher, *Jesus*, 169: “For a good many years, I thought the whole empty tomb tradition was just a story that had grown up later among Christians.... If someone had invented the

argument for the empty tomb in recent decades. (Who first formulated it I do not know, but it may well have been a relatively modern scholar or apologist, for I do not recall finding this line of reasoning in works written before the last century or so.)

There are actually three issues here. The first concerns the three women named in Mark 16:1: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome. Why are precisely these individuals named? One is fairly confident that they were real people, like Simon of Cyrene<sup>507</sup> and most if not all of Mark's named characters.<sup>508</sup> But why is a story built around them in particular? Why name them at all? Setting aside later legend, we know next to nothing about any of these women. One might then contend that memory has here played its part.

Although one sees the point, it really cannot be given much weight, for historical names can be used in unhistorical ways. One recalls that later Christian apocrypha are full of obscure, named people and places with little if any attachment to historical reality. So while the names of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome may well be — I myself think they are — reminiscence, other considerations will have to establish the origin of the story in which they appear.

The second issue regarding the women is the question of potential embarrassment. Celsus was able to turn their role in the story into ridicule. According to Origen, *Cels.* 2.59 (ed. Marcovich; 131), the pagan polemicist derided the testimony to the empty tomb as deriving from “a half-frantic woman.” Even Luke 24:22–23 (“Some women of our group astounded us. . . . When they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive”) reflects the reluctance to believe the testimony of women. Nothing similar is said about refusal to believe what the male disciples say, although it is no less unbelievable.<sup>509</sup> Perhaps this explains the

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story, however, I can think of no reason why women would have been cited as the witnesses. As a result I've come to think that there probably was an empty tomb.”

507. Mark 15:21 speaks of Simon of Cyrene, father of Alexander and Rufus, and an ossuary from the Kidron Valley, discovered in 1941, may have contained Alexander's remains; see C. A. Evans, *Ossuaries*, 94–96.

508. See further Bauckham, “Women,” 257–310, and L. Schenke, *Auferstehungsverkündigung*, 94–98. Bauckham is particularly helpful regarding the reasons why the names undergo some change in Matthew and Luke.

509. See further Richard Bauckham, “Woman,” 268–77. At 276n40 he cites the parallel in *Gos. Mary* 17:16–22 (cf. n. 214, above). Also helpful here is Claudia Setzer, “Excellent Women: Female Witness to the Resurrection,” *JBL* 116 (1997): 259–72. For modern examples

women's absence from the old formula in 1 Cor 15:3–8.<sup>510</sup> The text comes from a world in which, sadly, Christian writers could confidently speak of “old wives’ tales” (1 Tim 4:7) and “silly women, overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires, who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 3:6–7). So, the reasoning runs, it is precisely the testimony of women, once suspect, that for us confirms the truth of the story.

Lüdemann rejects this argument. Like some before him, he asserts: “There is no universal ancient view that women are incompetent witnesses. (That women were not allowed to give testimony was the case only in ancient Judaism).”<sup>511</sup> This misses the mark. Surely the story of the empty tomb arose in Jewish-Christian circles. Mark 16:1–8 speaks of the Sabbath and alludes to the Decalogue’s injunction against doing business then (vv. 1–2). It seems to refer to the sort of round stone used to close some tombs around Jerusalem (vv. 3–4; see n. 641). It reflects the Jewish tradition of imagining angels to be young (v. 5; see n. 540). It designates Jesus as “the Nazarene” (Ναζαρηνόν, v. 6). It shows an interest in Galilee (v. 7). And it uses the language of resurrection for his vindication: “He is risen” (ἡγέρθη, v. 6).

Given all this, it is specifically the status of women within Judaism that is the relevant point, and this in turn means that we must come to terms with Josephus, *Ant.* 4.219: “From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex.”<sup>512</sup> Although Josephus’s comment is about the court room, the implications are broader, for the justification for the ruling — women are victims of levity and temerity — expresses an attitude many first-century Jewish males presumably held (cf. Philo, *QG* 4.15). It is instructive that, as Richard Bauckham has observed, Luke 24:22–23 has parallels in the first-century *LAB* 9:10 (“When Miriam reported her dream, her parents did not believe her”)

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of the prejudice against women, which would no longer be politically correct, compare Woolston, *Sixth Discourse*, 30 (“womanish Fables”); Anonymous, *Ecce Homo!* 266 (Jesus appeared to women who had “weak minds and ardent imaginations, disposed to form phantoms and chimeras”); and Sherlock, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 81 (we can believe in the resurrection despite the “silly” women: “the Evidence of the Men surely is not the worse because some Women happen’d to see the same thing which they saw”). The same prejudice has often made itself felt in the critical evaluation of female Catholic visionaries; cf. William Christian Jr., *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 197–99.

510. So many, including Hengel, “Begräbnis,” 135.

511. Lüdemann, *Resurrection*, 158.

512. Cf. *m. Šebu.* 4.1; *m. Roš. Haš.* 1.8; *b. B. Qam.* 88a; *b. Šabb.* 30a; also 2 Tim 3:6–7.

and 42:5 (“Manoah did not believe his wife”). In both cases a woman’s testimony to divine revelation is doubted.<sup>513</sup> Surely adherents of Jesus were not helping themselves when they admitted that women were the only firsthand human witnesses to some of the events of Easter morning. When Christian storytellers did get around to buoying their apologetics, they constructed narratives featuring male disciples. In Wilckens’s words: “Later tradition shows a clear tendency to have the disciples at least confirm the women’s discovery afterwards (Luke 24:12, 24; John 20:2f.), and later tradition also has the disciples present on Easter Day in Jerusalem (Luke and John [20] as compared with Matthew and John 21). Accordingly, it must be accepted that the core of the narrative is indeed that the women found Jesus’s tomb empty in the early morning of the first day of the week.”<sup>514</sup> I agree.

The third issue involving the women is that their appearance coincides with the disappearance of the male disciples, who are otherwise major actors in the drama of Jesus.<sup>515</sup> Why is it not Peter and his male companions who are at the tomb first thing Easter morning?

Many have argued that the unexpected presence of women does not tell in favor of a historical genesis because “the flight of the male disciples was an established fact.”<sup>516</sup> In other words, the tradition held that the disciples had fled when Jesus was arrested and so had not witnessed the crucifixion and burial, at which only some female followers were present. When time came to make up the story of the empty tomb, the only characters at hand were the women.

This response is inadequate. It is the hallmark of legends to sin against established facts. Why should Mark 16:1–8 be more conscientious? That

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513. Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 271–75.

514. Cf. Wilckens, *Resurrection*, 116–17.

515. Cf. Charles Masson, “Le tombeau vide: Essai sur la formation d’une tradition,” *RTP* 32 (1944): 166–69, 173. For patristic texts that view the discovery by women instead of apostles as a problem or topic for discussion, see Rosemarie Nüremberg, “Apostolae Apostolorum: Die Frauen am Grab als erste Zeuginnen der Auferstehung in der Väterexegese,” in *Stimuli: Exegese und ihre Hermeneutik in Antike und Christentum: Festschrift für Ernst Dassmann* (ed. Georg Schöllgen and Clemens Scholten; JAC 23; Münster: Aschendorff, 1996), 228–42.

516. Lüdemann, *Resurrection*, 118. Bultmann, *History*, 274, already suggested this. Cf. John Barclay, “The Resurrection in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship,” in d’Costa, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 23: “If Mark was working from a source which had only women as witnesses of the burial of Jesus, only they could be responsible for discovering the empty tomb.” Müller, *Entstehung*, 45, offers this argument as well as another possibility: the women are there because it was, in Judaism, the custom of women to visit the tombs of the newly deceased in order to check for premature burial.

is, why not bring Peter and the others onstage despite what really happened? Luke and John reveal that Christian tradition did not need to interpret the flight of the disciples as an immediate exit from Jerusalem which excluded their participation in the discovery of the empty tomb. Indeed, Luke 23:49 (“All his acquaintances . . . stood at a distance”) and John 19:26–27 (“the disciple whom he [Jesus] loved standing beside her”) place disciples at the crucifixion. And even if pre-Markan tradition believed that the disciples were not around on Easter morn, one fails to see why Christian legend would have created a story with Mary Magdalene at the tomb instead of a story in which the disciples, if gone to Galilee, immediately return, perhaps right after the appearance to Peter, to find the tomb empty in Jerusalem. Or why not a story in which Joseph of Arimathea or, as the *Gospel of Peter* (10:38–11:45) has it, important Jewish officials return to the tomb or see Jesus and so learn the truth?<sup>517</sup>

Aside from all this, the idea that the male disciples fled to Galilee before Easter Sunday and had been there “between Good Friday and the beginning of their activity in Jerusalem,”<sup>518</sup> although commonly asserted, is a feeble construct, a pure postulate without basis in the evidence.<sup>519</sup> Luke and John explicitly assert that the disciples were still in the capital after the crucifixion (so too *Gos. Pet.* 14:58–59), while Mark 16:7 (“Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee”) and its parallels in Matt 28:7 and 10 presume the same circumstance, that Jesus’ companions have yet to leave the neighborhood and go north: otherwise, the women, who are in Jerusalem, could not communicate with them before they set out for Galilee.<sup>520</sup> In other words, all four canonical Gospels as well as the *Gospel of Peter* have the disciples in Jerusalem on Sunday. What is more, Gardner-Smith observed that the Gospels say only

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517. Cf. *Acts Pil.* 15:6 and the Georgian apocryphon on Joseph of Arimathea discussed by Adolf Harnack, “Ein in georgischer Sprache überliefertes Apokryphon des Joseph von Arimathia,” *SPAW* 39 (1901): 920–31.

518. So Schweizer, “Resurrection,” 148.

519. Cf. von Campenhausen, *Tradition*, 78–79; Wedderburn, *Resurrection*, 53–57, 59–60.

520. Cf. the sequence in the *Gospel of Peter*. Matt 28:11–15 might also be thought relevant: the accusation that the disciples stole the body assumes their presence in Jerusalem. As an aside one wonders whether the disciples would in fact have abandoned the women who had gone to Jerusalem with them. Would they, even if afraid, have left them without escort?



that the disciples deserted Jesus and scattered among the crowds in Jerusalem. On the day before the feast the most conspicuous thing they could have done would have been to leave Jerusalem, and journey in a direction opposite to the stream of traffic. Probably travelling sixty miles during the feast would have been a difficult if not an impossible undertaking. Why should they try it? A man who wishes to hide himself generally chooses a crowded city, and it must have been easy for a dozen Galileans to escape notice among the enormous population of Jerusalem at the Passover season.<sup>521</sup>

Although there is every reason to believe that the first appearances to Peter and the Twelve took place in Galilee, there is no cause at all to suppose that Jesus' closest followers sped for home directly after the arrest or traveled on a Sabbath.<sup>522</sup> (Incidentally, those who imagine differently will need to wonder how Jesus' followers came to learn that his arrest led to his execution.<sup>523</sup>) Their absence from Mark 16:1–8, then, remains a decent argument for some real memory here — especially when one keeps in mind that “the resurrection narrative is the only place in the whole Bible where women are sent by the angels of Yahweh to pronounce his message to men.”<sup>524</sup>



Looking back over the debate regarding the empty tomb, there is no iron logic on either side. There is a decent case for it, and there is a respectable case against it. Both sides, moreover, have their faults and suffer from a scarcity of proof: neither exorcizes all our doubts. I am nonetheless not moved to declare a stalemate, for pro and con are not quite here equal. Rather, of our two options — that a tomb was in fact unoccupied or that belief in the resurrection imagined it unoccupied —

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521. Gardner-Smith, *Resurrection*, 144. Cf. Wedderburn, *Resurrection*, 54.

522. See further Wedderburn, *Resurrection*, 58–60. Contrast Herman Hendrickx, *The Resurrection Narratives of the Synoptic Gospels* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978), 15: “The men left for Galilee after the tragedy of the day of Preparation, and there is no indication that they left with any knowledge of an empty tomb.” Although this is a common judgment, my own conclusions call it into question. We must reckon with the possibility that if some women thought they had discovered an empty tomb, they may well have shared their story with Peter and his companions while they were all returning together to Galilee.

523. Cf. Arthur S. Peake, *Christianity: Its Nature and Its Truth* (New York: George H. Doran, 1908), 201.

524. Tibor Horvath, “The Early Markan Resurrection Tradition (Mark 16,1–8),” *RUO* 43 (1973): 446.

the former, as I read the evidence, is the slightly stronger possibility, the latter the slightly weaker. The best two arguments against the tradition — the ability of early Christians to create fictions and the existence of numerous legends about missing bodies — while certainly weighty, remain nonetheless hypothetical and suggestive, whereas the best two arguments for the tradition are concrete and evidential: (a) Visions of Jesus, without belief in his empty tomb, would probably have led only to faith in Jesus' vindication and assumption to heaven, not to belief in his resurrection from the dead. (b) The discovery of the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene and other women commends itself as likely nonfiction. I agree, then, with Jacques Schlosser: "Indications are not lacking which permit the historian to conclude that the tradition of the discovery of the open and empty tomb is historically likely, but one will do so with great hesitation."<sup>525</sup> "Indications are not lacking" and "with great hesitation" seem to me to be just right. A judgment in favor of the empty tomb, which will forever be haunted by legendary stories of disappearing and raised bodies, must remain, if accepted, tentative.

Even so, and although Mark 16:1–8 is undoubtedly stylized drama in the service of Christian theology, that drama and that theology can in my judgment enshrine a real event. "Even narratives of faith contain historical elements."<sup>526</sup> Just as the Romans crucified Jesus and Christian haggadah embroidered the fact, so too was Jesus probably laid in a tomb, which some of his female followers later found empty, a fact that Christian imagination put into a narrative and elaborated.

The details may remain foggy, but my own conjectures come to this. While death in all societies summons certain fixed, ritualistic responses involving corpses and graves, the dedicated followers of Jesus still in Jerusalem after his crucifixion would have been unable to engage in their tradition's ritualistic responses on either Friday afternoon or on the Sabbath. Further, public acts of mourning for a convicted criminal may well have been forbidden altogether.<sup>527</sup> But personal, private lamentation was

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525. Jacques Schlosser, *Jésus de Nazareth* (Paris: Agnès Viénot Éditions, 1999), 331.

526. Lüdemann, *Resurrection*, 23.

527. Cf. the ruling in *Sem.* 2:6: "For those executed by the court, no rites whatsoever should be observed. Their brothers and relatives should come and greet the witnesses and the judges, as if to say, We bear you no ill will, for you have rendered a true judgment." Perhaps this ruling or the custom behind it was already known and heeded in Jesus' day; see the texts in the next note.

inevitable.<sup>528</sup> And it would have been wholly natural for Jesus' followers to indulge their grief close to the corpse — near which the soul was thought to remain for several days<sup>529</sup> — as soon as there was opportunity, which would have been late Saturday evening or early Sunday morning.<sup>530</sup> It is human nature not to let go of the dead.<sup>531</sup>

Given then that certain women went up to Jerusalem with Jesus, and given further, to quote Kathleen Corley, “the tenacity of women’s lament traditions, as well as the overall interest in family retrieval of executed family members, we can at the least assume that the women, and perhaps even some of the men, would have tried to watch the crucifixion proceedings, and would have tried to find Jesus’ body after he died in spite of the risks that would entail.”<sup>532</sup> Corley goes on to judge that those who sought Jesus’ grave did not find it. I am rather inclined to think, in light of the preceding pages, that the evidence nudges us to the contrary conclusion.<sup>533</sup>

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528. Cf. *Sem.* 2:6 again: “They may not mourn but may grieve, the latter signifying grieving in silence.” Similar is *m. Sanh.* 6:6: “They used not to make [public] lamentation but they went mourning, for mourning has place in the heart alone.” See further Josef Blinzler, “Die Grablegung Jesu in historischer Sicht,” in Dhanis, *Resurrexit*, 100–101; also Josephus, *Ant.* 17.206; *J. W.* 4.331–32; and Suetonius, *Tib.* 61.

529. Cf. Saul Lieberman, “Some Aspects of After Life in Early Rabbinic Literature,” in *Harry Austryn Wolfson Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday* (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1965), 2:506. For communicating with the dead near their tombs, see *b. Ber.* 18b. The desire to be physically near the dead lives on in our society with visits to cemeteries and requests to be buried next to loved ones.

530. My best guess is that the tradition was of a discovery on Sunday morning; I am aware, however, of the problem that Matt 28:1 presents to this view; see Daniel Boyarin, “‘After the Sabbath’ (Matt. 28:1) — Once More into the Crux,” *JTS* 52 (1901): 678–88; and J. Michael Winger, “When Did the Women Visit the Tomb? Sources for Some Temporal Clauses in the Synoptic Gospels,” *NTS* 40 (1994): 284–88.

531. Cf. *Ep. Apos.* 9–10; and Schwager, “Heutige Theologie,” 437, 449, who sees no reason to think that the interest in the empty tomb shown by the four canonical evangelists and later Christians would have been foreign to the people who themselves knew Jesus. On Mark’s remark that the women went to perfume the body, see n. 533. Perhaps there was more than one motive. *Sem.* 8:1 v. l. records the habit of visiting graves “until the third day” in order to prevent premature burial. We should also not forget that people soon after a death often wish simply to be near the buried loved one. No one thinks Jesus’ desire to visit Lazarus out of the ordinary until he asks for the stone to be removed from the cave mouth.

532. Kathleen E. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2002), 138. The entire chapter on 107–39 is quite instructive and justifies the words I have quoted.

533. Many are confident that, because of rapid putrefaction, Mark must be wrong in saying that the women sought to anoint on early Sunday morning a body buried on late Friday evening. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 105, thought this “utterly inconceivable.” Cf. Elliott, “First Easter,” 211–12. Although the motive imparted to the women may well be Mark’s guesswork (Matthew offers different motives for the visit), so that it does not necessarily bear on the origin of the story, one wonders whether the usual objection is decisive. See Gundry, *Mark*, 997. To his observations I add two. (1) *T. Job.* 53:5–7 and *T. Abr.* (rec. long) 20:11 have people remaining

The judgment that some women found a vacated tomb does not, it hardly needs underlining, tell us why this happened. We have here rather an historical dead end. It is always possible to imagine that someone, for reasons unknown, removed the body, as Mary Magdalene first supposes in John 20:13–15.<sup>534</sup> Perhaps the Jewish authorities filched it to prevent veneration of Jesus' remains, and things soon got out of hand. Having dumped the body unceremoniously, they were unable or unmotivated to recover it later. Or maybe Mary went to the wrong tomb and the rumors started. Or maybe necromancers wanted the powerful corpse of an executed holy man.<sup>535</sup> Or maybe Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus in a temporary tomb<sup>536</sup> — perhaps the permanent grave for Jewish criminals where Jesus ended up was not near the Roman site of the crucifixion — and after the Sabbath, this representative of the Sanhedrin moved the corpse to its final resting place. Having done this, perhaps Joseph died soon thereafter and so never told anyone, or maybe he kept quiet for reasons we can never guess; or perhaps he did speak out, Christians disbelieved him, and the sources understandably preferred to forget his protest. Or perhaps Joseph, knowing the truth, yet was nonetheless happy to see the cause of Jesus continue.

We have no reason to endorse any of these speculations, for which there is not a shred of evidence. They must all be deemed unlikely. Yet they are not impossible. How for instance could one ever demonstrate that Joseph, whatever his motivations, did not move the body before the women showed up?<sup>537</sup> So, given that the return to life of a man truly dead must also be deemed, in the abstract, even more unlikely than Joseph moving Jesus' body, it is not immediately apparent why the traditional Christian interpretation should be, as it is for so many, instinctively

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around dead bodies for three days. (2) According to *m. Šabb.* 23.5, which surely enshrines old practice (cf. John 5:10), one cannot move a body for burial on the Sabbath. So if a person died right before a Sabbath, the body would have to sit around for a day before burial, even if it was the middle of summer. Assuming for the sake of argument and in accord with Mark that (a) Jesus died in the late afternoon, (b) he was buried soon thereafter, (c) his burial place was in a cave (caves tend to be cool), and (d) it was not summer (John 18:18 has people warming themselves around a fire), then the time between his placement in a cool tomb and the women's visit would have been only twelve hours or so more than the time between the death of someone who died right before the Sabbath and was not placed in a tomb until twenty-four hours or more later.

534. See esp. Carrier, "Guarded Tomb."

535. See above, 202–3. Craig, *New Testament Evidence*, 376–77, fails to rebut this possibility. How could one ever do so?

536. References to such appear in *Sem.* 10:8 and 13:5.

537. See further Lowder, "Empty Tomb," 259–64.

deemed more plausible than a conjecture involving wholly mundane postulates.<sup>538</sup> Many others, understandably, “are prepared to admit almost any conceivable concurrence of natural improbabilities rather than resort to the hypothesis of supernatural interference.”<sup>539</sup>

Before passing on to the next stage of the argument, I should like to make one final observation about the empty tomb, or rather the story about it. There is an angel in Mark 16:5<sup>540</sup> and Matt 28:2, and there are two angels in Luke 24:4 and John 20:12. Modern scholars typically affirm that these angels are purely literary constructs. This is Raymond Brown: “Christian readers of the Bible have understood too literally much of biblical angelology. . . . Most angelic interpreters were no more than mouthpieces for revelation, without any personality. If we pay attention to the freedom with which the evangelists handled the details of the angelic appearance at the empty tomb (especially as to the number and position of the angels), we recognize their awareness that here they were not dealing with controllable historical facts but with imaginative descriptions.”<sup>541</sup>

My bet is that Brown is right: his view fits my supposition that Mark’s angelophany is a transmuted christophany. Further, John 20:1–10 might reflect a tradition about Jesus’ tomb that lacked an angelic interpreter.<sup>542</sup>

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538. Or more plausible than seeking refuge in ignorance; cf. Shelley’s take on the resurrection in his *Notes to Queen Mab*: “All that we have a right to infer from our ignorance of the cause of any event is that we do not know it” (*The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* [ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck; London: Ernest Benn, 1927], 155).

539. William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of Rationalism in Europe* (London: Longmans, Green, 1910), 1:144. Cf. Annet, *Resurrection*, 75–77; and see further Michael Martin, “Why the Resurrection Is Initially Improbable,” *Philo* 1 (1998): 63–73.

540. The young man of Mark 16:5 is clearly “an angel in human guise” (Gundry, “Trimming the Debate,” 106). Cf. Bode, *Easter Morning*, 26–27. Not only is this how Matthew and Luke (see 24:23) interpret the text, but angels were thought of as young (as always on later icons): Tob 5:5–10 v. 1.; 2 Macc 3:26, 33; Acts 1:10; Josephus, *Ant.* 5.277; *Gos. Pet.* 13.55; *Herm. Vis.* 3.1.6, 8; 3.2.5; 3.4.1; etc. Later texts call Metatron “the youth” (3 *En.* 2:1–2; 3:2; 4:1, 10; *b. Yebam.* 16b). Because in *T. Abr.* (rec. long) 2:5 the archangel Michael is young, it may be of interest that *Ascen. Isa.* 3:15–16 identifies Michael as one of the two angels who appeared at Jesus’ tomb. Also favoring the identification of Mark’s “young man” with an angel is his white robe; that angels are bright or white is a commonplace; see Dan 10:6; 4Q547 frg. 1.5; 2 Macc 11:8; *LAE* 9:1; Acts 1:10; 2 Cor 11:14; Rev 4:4; 19:14; *Liv. Pro.*, *Elijah* 2; *Gos. Pet.* 9:36; *Pap. Chester Beatty XVI* 25a v.; *Sepher Ha-Razim* 2.93; etc.

541. Brown, *Virginal Conception*, 122–23. Cf. Bode, *Easter Morning*, 166. L. Schenke, *Auferstehungsverkündigung*, 86, thinks that the appearance of the angel is sufficient reason to label the story a legend. There are many concurring voices; but see Craig, *New Testament Evidence*, 222–30.

542. Behind John one might divine a tradition or memory in which the empty tomb brought only panic, and one could find something closely related to this behind Mark 16:1–5a + 8.

Yet I confess to having a slight qualm that is perhaps worth recording. The immediate appeal of Brown's words is that so many of us in the contemporary academy do not believe overmuch if at all in angels. One needs to remember, however, that firsthand reports of visions of otherworldly beings, often luminous or dressed in white, are a dime a dozen throughout world religious literature and indeed are commonly reported in our own contemporary world.<sup>543</sup> Whatever one makes of this fact, it is a fact: people have sincerely reported seeing such beings, and in Jewish and Christian tradition they have called them angels. So although I reject the historicity of the content of the angel's message because it "reflects the kerygmatic preaching of resurrection and thus requires an understanding of the significance of the empty tomb gained from the appearance tradition,"<sup>544</sup> it escapes me why the report of a vision of angels should be doubted, as it is by some, for no other reason than that it is the report of a vision of angels. It certainly makes no sense, for example, to assert bluntly: "If angels do not exist, then the Markan story of the angelic appearance at the tomb cannot be historical."<sup>545</sup> Even if the premise is sound, the conclusion does not follow: people can and do see things that do not exist. One might as well vainly urge that, because Mary the mother of Jesus died long ago, accounts claiming that many have seen her since then must be wholly fictitious, which is nonsense. Whatever the explanation, some people have experiences that they interpret as encounters with Mary. Likewise, some people have experiences that they interpret as encounters with angels.

Brown's reading is not found in the commentaries written before modern times, which might make one wonder about the sophistication, if that is the right word, he attributes to the Gospel writers. Perhaps we are dealing here with a modern prejudice, rooted in our reluctance to acknowledge the phenomenology of human religious experience when it is foreign to us. This is not to say that I believe Mary had an angelic vision near Jesus' tomb. I am simply unable to share the self-assurance

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Subtracting the angel from Mark's story admittedly leaves a less than meaningful story (cf. C. F. Evans, *Resurrection*, 76–77; Fischer, *Ostergeschehen*, 59); perhaps then Mark 16:5b–7 has displaced earlier matter.

543. Cf. the argument in Origen, *Cels.* 5.57 (ed. Marcovich; 368–69). The angel books so popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s in North America are full of firsthand accounts of sightings of angelic-like beings.

544. Perkins, *Resurrection*, 94. Cf. Bode, *Easter Morning*, 127–30.

545. Lowder, "Empty Tomb," 273.

with which so many commentators assume, without argument, that she did not. Why do so many find it easier to believe that the disciples had visionary experiences that they construed as appearances of the risen Jesus than that the women had a visionary experience that they construed as an angelic revelation?

## PROBLEMS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS

Having now canvassed the evidence, if only in a perfunctory way, where does it lead? While we should not say with Henry Ford that history is bunk, I think we should say that, for better or for worse, history does not give some of us what we want or think we need. We ask, but we often do not receive; we knock, but the door is not always opened. History keeps its secrets better than many historians care to admit. Most of the past — surely far more than 99 percent, if we could quantify it — is irretrievably lost; it cannot be recovered. This should instill some modesty in us.

Consider the weeks following the crucifixion. We have only minuscule fragments of what actually transpired. What, for instance, do we really know about the resurrection experience of James? First Corinthians 15:7 says that he saw the risen Jesus. And that is it. What Jesus looked like, what he said, if anything, where the encounter took place, when precisely it happened, how James responded, what state of mind he was in, how the experience began, how it ended — all of this has failed to enter the record. Almost every question that we might ask goes unanswered.

It is not really different with events for which we ostensibly have something more than just passing allusion. Matthew ends by telling us that the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to a mountain “to which Jesus had directed them,” and that they saw him there and worshipped him, although some doubted (28:16–17). These dramatic and unforgettable sentences follow: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:16–20). One could, if so inclined, pose a dozen questions to this brief narrative. How many doubted? What were their names? Why did they doubt? Was their doubt ever resolved? If so, when and why? Upon what particular mountain did this episode transpire? Do we have here all that Jesus said upon that

occasion, or did he impart more? And did the disciples say anything in reply? What did they say to themselves afterward? Did Jesus, at some point, just blink out and disappear, or did he, as in Acts 1:9, ascend into heaven?

I personally reckon these to be bad questions, theologically and exegetically, and attempting to answer them would, even if one wrongly took Matt 28:16–20 to be sober, rock-solid history, issue only in wearisome and idle speculation. Yet they are the sorts of questions historians often ask of old texts. The fact that we cannot begin to answer them shows how emaciated historically — as opposed to theologically — the Gospel narratives really are.<sup>546</sup> Even if we naively think them to be historically accurate down to the minutest detail, we are still left with precious little. The accounts of the resurrection, like the past in general, come to us as phantoms. Most of the reality is gone.<sup>547</sup>

It is the fragmentary and imperfect nature of the evidence as well as the limitations of our historical-critical tools that move us to confess, if we are conscientious, how hard it is to recover the past. That something happened does not entail our ability to show that it happened,<sup>548</sup> and that something did not happen does not entail our ability to show that it did not happen. I emphasize this assertion, obvious and trite, because both skeptical New Testament scholars and their conservative counterparts often have too much faith in their own abilities. Too infrequently do they confess, “This may or may not have happened,” or “That is plausible but uncertain,” or “That is unlikely but still possible,” or “We just do not know.” Sometimes, when ruminating on my own area of study, I recall what Mark Twain said about another discipline: “One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact.”

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546. As explanation for this unwelcome circumstance, Gerhardsson, “Evidence,” 91, regards the Gospel stories as being, no less than 1 Cor 15:3–8, “substratum texts, textual undergarments so to speak: passages with a fundamental content but from the very beginning presupposing exposition, elucidation, and complement.” While this makes some sense, and while it may well be true, it hardly helps us, for the exposition, elucidation, and complement have fallen into the cracks of history.

547. For the interesting theological argument that the silence and gaps in the Matthean and Markan narratives belong necessarily to the resurrection as a mysterious, unimaginable divine act that cannot be narrated, see Francis Watson, “‘He is not here’: Towards a Theology of the Empty Tomb,” in Barton and Stanton, *Resurrection*, 95–107. For a similar view, although it comes with explicit belief in an empty tomb, see Rowan Williams, *Christian Theology* (London: Blackwell, 2000), 183–96. Williams suggestively sets the image of Jesus’ empty tomb beside the emptiness of the space between the cherubim in the holy of holies.

548. Gorham, *First Easter*, xii, commented on the Easter narratives: “True they may be; verifiable they are not.”



Detractors of the faith, such as Anthony Flew, are often motivated to deny the resurrection. They confidently bend the flexible indicia and then instruct us that there was no empty tomb, the visions were subjective or legendary, and the resurrection stories and the faith behind them are unfounded fantasies. Apologists, of whom Gary Habermas is a good representative, strive vigorously, to the contrary, to verify their faith, and they convince themselves that robust probability is indeed on their side.<sup>549</sup> Both those actuated by dogmatic doubt and those commending orthodoxy to reason go through the motions and then announce, “I told you so!” They thus validate each other with their common presupposition that proof one way or the other should be in the offing — although one wonders how often they in fact make converts.

Contrary to the gung-ho apologist, it is possible in theory that Jesus awakened from death, that the tomb was empty, that he appeared to some of his followers, and that historians cannot prove any of this to anyone. And contrary to the evangelistic skeptic, it is equally possible, again in theory, that when Jesus died he died for good, that the appearances were altogether illusory, that his tomb remained forever full, and that historians cannot establish any of this.

Even if history served us much better than it does, it would still not take us to the promised land of theological certainty. Let us say, although it cannot be done, that someone has somehow convinced us, beyond all doubt, that the tomb was empty and that people saw Jesus because he indeed came to life again. Even this would not of itself prove that God raised him from the dead.<sup>550</sup> One can draw any number of curves through a finite set of points to create a thousand different pictures.<sup>551</sup> Likewise, and as we often learn at murder trials, one can more often than not offer competing narratives for the same facts. It is not different with the resurrection of Jesus. Someone could, if so inclined, conjecture that aliens, ever since discovering our planet long ago, have followed our play of hopes and fears with great curiosity. Intrigued by human psychology, and

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549. For the views of Flew and Habermas, see the record of their debate: *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (ed. Terry L. Miethe; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

550. Here I endorse Wright, *Resurrection*, 720–23, who observes that one can interpret the literal resurrection of Jesus from several points of view: “There seems to be no necessary compulsion, either for those who believe in Jesus’ resurrection or for those who disbelieve it, to interpret it within the framework of thought employed by the early Christians themselves.”

551. Cf. Quine’s famous reflections on the underdetermination of theories.

learning, in 30 CE or thereabouts, of an extraordinary character, Jesus of Nazareth, and of the religious expectations surrounding him, they then designed an experiment. Upon his death, they reanimated his corpse or transplanted his brain into a new and better body (which would explain why Mary Magdalene and others had trouble recognizing him). Then they convinced him that he had conquered death by divine intervention, set him before the disciples, and sat back to take notes.

While there is not a sliver of evidence for such a fantastic state of affairs, it cannot be dismissed as inconceivable, only wholly unlikely for utter lack of evidence (although one can find reconstructions like it in the offbeat literature<sup>552</sup>). The hypothetical scenario goes to show that proof of the Christian confession can never be achieved because possible alternatives can always be imagined. It also raises the question, which must be faced in all seriousness, of how Christians have come to the view that invoking space aliens beggars belief whereas crediting God with a resurrection is sensible.<sup>553</sup> Science fiction — Philip José Farmer's well-known *Riverworld* series comes to mind — has certainly not hesitated to give aliens the power to raise human beings from the dead, so at least we find the notion intelligible.

We inevitably evaluate matters by means of our presuppositions. If one approaches the New Testament with the sure and certain conviction that there is no God, or that the Creator has an inviolate respect for the regularities of nature or for some other reason is not in the business of old-fashioned miracles, then surely, even if one is not a devotee of Erich von Däniken and his ilk, intervention by space aliens will seem more plausible than the divinely wrought resurrection as traditionally understood.<sup>554</sup> Probability is in the eye of the beholder. It depends upon one's worldview, into which the resurrection fits or, alternatively, does not fit.

Arguments about Jesus' literal resurrection cannot establish one's *Weltanschauung*. While orthodox Christians may regard the resurrection as the historical and theological foundation of their faith, it cannot

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552. For example, R. L. Dione, *God Drives a Flying Saucer* (New York: Bantam, 1973).

553. See further Robert Greg Cavin, "Is There Sufficient Historical Evidence to Establish the Resurrection of Jesus?" *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 361–79.

554. Cf. the candid statement of Goulder, "Baseless Fabric," 48: "We will follow the general principle that it has proved sensible to trust this-worldly explanations rather than ones with ghosts, demons, etc." Again, on 52 is this: "Even if speculative, a natural explanation is to be preferred." This, given Goulder's worldview, makes perfect sense.

be their epistemological foundation. The resurrection of Jesus instead belongs to the Christian web of belief, within which alone it has its sensible place.<sup>555</sup> Outside that web, it must be rejected or radically reinterpreted. This is why, as B. H. Streeter remarked, “The possibility of a naturalistic explanation of some kind or other would doubtless be assumed as a matter of course were the story [of the resurrection] told of any ordinary person.”<sup>556</sup> In like fashion, I understand why Richard Swinburne, in his recent defense of the resurrection, commences by first seeking to establish the existence of a certain sort of God and the likelihood of such a God communicating with and redeeming the human race.<sup>557</sup> “Modern logic,” in the words of F. C. S. Schiller, “has made it plain that single facts can never be ‘proved’ except by their coherence in a system.”<sup>558</sup> It accords with this that evaluation of the resurrection cannot be isolated from one’s other fundamental beliefs, including what Swinburne calls “background evidence.”<sup>559</sup> Such evaluation is rather what has been termed a configural judgment, where the interpretation of one item depends upon the interpretation of others. That is, the resurrection is a part that cannot be evaluated apart from the whole to which it belongs. Alvin Plantinga, an orthodox Christian, can admit that, “on sheerly historical grounds,” the resurrection seems less than likely, or that its probability, “given all the controversy among the experts,” must be reckoned “inscrutable.”<sup>560</sup> Obviously, if Plantinga did not have more than “sheerly

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555. See further A. E. Taylor, *Does God Exist?* (London: Macmillan, 1948), 123–60; also Francis Watson, “‘Historical Evidence’ and the Resurrection of Jesus,” *Theology* 90 (1987): 372.

556. B. H. Streeter, “The Historic Christ,” in *Foundations: A Statement of Christian Belief in Terms of Modern Thought: By Seven Oxford Men*, by B. H. Streeter et al. (London: Macmillan, 1913), 134.

557. Swinburne, *Resurrection*. Cf. Catchpole, *Resurrection*, 187–88; and Sherlock, *Tryal of the Witnesses*, 59: “To what Purpose is it to vindicate the particular Evidence of the Resurrection of Christ, so long as this general Prejudice, that a Resurrection is incapable of being prov’d, remains unremov’d?” Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:56; 2:351, 362, concedes that his case for the resurrection presupposes the twin possibilities of an active God and resurrection — hardly universal presuppositions. Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), regards his defense of the resurrection as “soft apologetics” because he recognizes that nothing he says could convert a “naturalist.” Cf. his article, which is more levelheaded than most rationalistic *apologia* for the resurrection: “Is It Possible to Know That Jesus Was Raised from the Dead?” *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984): 147–59.

558. F. C. S. Schiller, in *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 18 (1891): 419.

559. See further Paul Gwynne, “Why Some Still Doubt That Jesus’ Body Was Raised,” in Kendall and Davis, *Convergence*, 355–67.

560. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 276. Cf. Placher, *Jesus*, 170: “We do not have enough evidence for a confident answer of

historical grounds” for his beliefs, he would not have his beliefs. But he thinks, and I agree with him, that he does have more. Religious or theological warrant need not be empirical warrant or strictly historical warrant.<sup>561</sup> Kant claimed God to be a postulate of practical as opposed to pure or theoretical reason. Analogously, pure historical reasoning is not going to show us that God raised Jesus from the dead. That conviction is rather a postulate of what one might call practical Christian reasoning.

The resurrection is not a topic unto itself, and we cannot evaluate it independently of our evaluation of Christianity and the nature of the world. Easter faith sits in the middle of “a controversy concerning the nature of reality at large.”<sup>562</sup> As William James said in another connection, “The juices of metaphysical assumptions leak in at every joint.” Just as a particular moral judgment cannot be made without reference to a larger moral vision, so a verdict about the resurrection of Jesus cannot be made without reference to a larger theological vision or lack thereof. When we look, our eyes are somewhere.

It is our worldview that interprets the textual data, not the textual data that determines our worldview. One who disbelieves in all so-called miracles can, with good conscience, remain disbelieving in the literal resurrection of Jesus after an examination of the evidence,<sup>563</sup> just as a traditional Christian can, without intellectual guilt, retain belief after surveying the pertinent particulars. No doubt both things have happened. One can hardly fault the judgment that “the evidence really is inconclusive.”<sup>564</sup> As Bonhoeffer put it, when writing on the historical questions

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any kind based purely on historical evidence. . . . Looking at these matters in terms of historical evidence generates only agnosticism.”

561. Cf. Philip D. Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 259: “If a theological belief involves claims that never could be empirically tested, then we cannot fault the belief for not providing empirical warrant.”

562. Wolfhart Pannenberg, “History and the Reality of the Resurrection,” in D’Costa, *Resurrection*, 64. From an agnostic point of view but here in agreement with Pannenberg, compare Donald Wayne Viney, “Grave Doubts about the Resurrection,” *Enc* 50 (1989): 125–40.

563. Cf. Watson, “‘He is not here,’” 105: “The Christian proclamation of the risen Lord is . . . open to the possibility of a disbelief that can justify itself in terms that are entirely reasonable within their own frame of reference.”

564. Donald Wayne Viney, review of Davis, *Risen Indeed*, in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995): 122. Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (1956), 4/1:341. This has been recognized for a long time; cf. Lake, *Resurrection*, 253; and already Weisse, *Geschichte*, 2:426–38: historical criticism cannot judge the extraordinary experiences of the disciples to be true or false, or attribute them either to the Spirit of God or to psychology. Weisse therefore goes on to speak of faith and to discuss its nature. See also the minimalistic conclusions of Vögtle, “Wie kam es zum Osterglauben?” 127–31.

surrounding Jesus' empty tomb: "Even as the Risen One, he does not break through his incognito."<sup>565</sup> The historical data are, at least regarding the present issue, sufficiently pliable, sufficiently submissive to our wills, to be construed in more than one way. It is not just that, if we want, we can torture the data until they confess what we want to hear: it is that even if we try to be impartial and listen, we may be unsure of what they are saying.

The facts in this matter are exceedingly hard for the careful historian to work out. There is certainly no evidence so overwhelming that we are compelled, against our interests, whatever they may be, to accept it.<sup>566</sup> Typically, and even when we seek to be as conscientious as possible, we often no doubt end up seeing what we want and expect to see. Maybe we suffer something analogous to the conflict of interest on display when scientists who are funded by the tobacco industry discover that smoking is less harmful than formerly supposed. My guess is that, as a matter of psychological fact, investigation of the primary texts and relevant secondary literature has less often led to conversions than it has either strengthened an already-existing disbelief or confirmed an already-existing faith. So it is not merely a question of what the historical arguments are, but of what beliefs and predispositions we bring to those arguments. The truth one discerns behind the texts is largely determined by desires, expectations, and religious and philosophical convictions already to hand. We cannot eschew ourselves.

If this is the right conclusion, then we need to scrutinize not just the texts but also ourselves. When I do this, I find that I am neither an atheist nor an agnostic. I do not share the modern fashion of disbelief but rather have a strong distrust of secular pieties. I indeed believe, as best I can, in the God of Western theism, or rather, in the God of Israel. I also believe that materialistic explanations and this-worldly causalities encompass only part of reality, that death is not extinction, and that the dead sometimes communicate with the living. So my view of things allows me to believe that the crucified Jesus triumphed over death and made this known to his followers, and my personal religious history and

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565. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology* (London: Collins, 1966), 117.

566. Contrast Samuel McComb, *The Future Life in the Light of Modern Inquiry* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1919), 123: "Any open and candid mind, prepossessed with no dogmatic assumptions against the survival of the soul after death, can convince itself that Christ emerged from the realm of the dead, and manifested Himself on the material plane to certain witnesses." This is just inane.

current social location — I am a mainstream Protestant who teaches at a Presbyterian seminary — make such a belief congenial. As for the story of the empty tomb, I remain theologically in permanent irresolution. Although I think it more likely to be history than legend, that remains a tentative judgment. Further, although its truth would be, for reasons recounted earlier, welcome, my personal philosophy, rightly or wrongly, has no pressing need for an empty tomb. 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?<sup>567</sup> I share neither the philosophic materialism of the naturalist nor the eschatological materialism of many of my fellow Christians.<sup>568</sup>

## THE MOST REASONABLE EXPLANATION?

There was a time when an educated Christian apologist could in all solemnity write:

We hold, then, without the slightest hesitation, that the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, the great central fact of Christianity, is established beyond the possibility of a reasonable doubt. No man who believes that human testimony can establish any fact at all, is at liberty to cast doubt or discredit on that fact, without at the same time, and far more reasonably, doubting every fact that history has ever recorded, — nay, every fact that he himself has not witnessed, — and limiting his belief within the very narrow boundaries of his own sentient perceptions. Can he stop there? No; for the scepticism which has deprived him of the evidence of testimony, will not long leave him in possession of the evidence of his bodily senses.<sup>569</sup>

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567. For additional discussion of this matter, see esp. Ingolf U. Dalferth, "Volles Grab, leerer Glaube? Zum Streit um die Auferweckung des Gekreuzigten," *ZTK* 95 (1998): 379–409.

568. It is precisely because, unlike me, he finds existence apart from a material body "impossible" that Pannenberg has so much invested in the empty tomb; cf. his *Jesus*, 87.

569. William M. Hetherington, *The Apologetics of the Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1867), 312. From an earlier time, compare Humphry Ditton, *A Discourse concerning the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (London: T. Cox, 1740), 321: "There is such an evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, as actually induces an obligation in all men, to whom that evidence is fairly proposed, and who are capable of arguing upon it after a due and regular manner, to give their assent to it as a certain truth"; 322: the evidence lays "an indispensable obligation on rational Creatures to give their assent to it [the resurrection] as real truth."