Was the Tomb Empty?

Stephen T. Davis

The accounts of the empty grave, of which Paul still knows nothing, are legends.

—Rudolf Bultmann

Today however historical criticism has made the empty tomb a dubious factor and the conclusions of natural science have rendered it suspect.

—Hans Küng

I

Traditional Christian belief about the resurrection of Jesus includes the claim that the tomb in which he was buried was empty on Easter morning. Despite differences in the details of their accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb, all four Gospels agree that it was empty. “He is not here; for he has risen,” says the angel to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary in Matthew’s Gospel (28:2). Similar notions are expressed in the other Gospels (Mk 16:6; Lk 24:5; Jn 20:2).

Despite this, the tradition of the empty tomb is frequently criticized. It is natural to expect those who doubt that Jesus was raised from the dead to deny that the tomb was empty. But what is interesting about the contemporary theological scene is that some theologians who want to affirm, in some sense or other, that Jesus was raised, either deny or struggle mightily to de-emphasize the empty tomb.
Why is this? Why does the tradition of the empty tomb come in for so much criticism? The reasons are complex and fascinating. What I hope to do in this paper is take a hard look at the arguments that are given for and against the empty tomb. Let me reveal here that I am one who wants to affirm the empty tomb; accordingly, I will try to reply to the objections that are typically raised against it. All of the objections that I will discuss are interesting and thoughtful arguments; some are powerful; but in the end I will argue that they are not convincing. My conclusion will be that for both historical and theological reasons, Christians ought to continue to hold that Jesus’ tomb was empty.

It is important to stress the narrowness of the scope of the paper. It is concerned only with arguments for and against the claim of the four evangelists that Jesus’ tomb was found empty on Easter morning. It is clear that the empty tomb and the concept of bodily resurrection, for example, are strongly logically connected; they are usually affirmed or denied together. But having discussed bodily resurrection elsewhere, I will not do so here. I shall assume that the empty tomb, if it occurred, was a historical event in every relevant sense of the word and can be investigated historically. But since the empty tomb by itself does not entail the resurrection of Jesus, I will say little here (except for a few comments at the conclusion of the paper) on the complex matter of linking historical judgments to theological affirmations or to Christian faith.

II

There are five major arguments that are typically given against the empty tomb. First let me state them as fairly and strongly as I can; then I will reply to them. Some of them are closely related; the distinctions I make among them (especially the second, third, and fourth arguments) are in places somewhat artificial. Furthermore, the arguments aim in different directions—some, for example, attempt to show that the purported event of the empty tomb did not in fact occur; others attempt to show that even if it did, the empty tomb did not and should not play any important role in Christian faith or proclamation.

1. The empty tomb tradition is unreliable because the four Gospels, which are our only sources of the tradition, give contradictory reports about it. In order to explore this argument, let us take a thorough and rather ruthless look at the apparent discrepancies. First, the Gospels do not agree on the people who visited the tomb. Matthew mentions only Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary”; Mark mentions Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome; Luke mentions Mary Magdalene (although the “we” in 20:2 can sensibly be taken to imply that others were present). Second, the Gospels do not agree on the time of the visit. All agree that it occurred on the first day of the week; Matthew elaborates by saying it was after (or late on) the Sabbath toward dawn; Mark says that it was very early on the day after the Sabbath and that the sun had risen; Luke says that it was early and at first dawn; and John says that it was early and still dark.

Third, the Gospels do not agree on the purpose of the women’s visit. Matthew says that it was merely to see the tomb; spices are not mentioned (perhaps given the stone and the guards, the women knew they would not be able to embalm the body); Mark says it was to anoint the body with aromatic spices bought the day after the Sabbath (16:1); Luke implies it was to anoint the body with spices and ointments the women had prepared before the Sabbath (23:55; 24:1); and John mentions no reason for the visit at all (perhaps because Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are said to have anointed the body before the burial). Fourth, the Gospels do not agree on the location of the stone when the women arrived. Matthew seems to imply that it was in place when they arrived but that the angel rolled it away in their presence; while Mark, Luke, and John say that the women arrived to discover the stone already rolled away. Fifth, the Gospels do not agree on whether there was a guard at the tomb—Matthew states that there was such a guard, while the other Gospels mention no such thing.

Sixth, the Gospels do not agree on the personages the women saw, or on their location. Matthew mentions an angel of the Lord who sat on the stone outside the tomb; Mark mentions a young man in a white robe who was inside the tomb sitting on the right; Luke mentions two men in dazzling apparel who were standing inside the tomb; and John (a bit later in the story—20:12)
mentions two angels who were sitting outside the tomb. Seventh, the Gospels do not agree on what the personages said to the women; the Synoptic Gospels basically agree (with a few minor, but interesting, differences) while the message delivered by the two angels in the fourth Gospel is quite different.

Finally, the Gospels do not agree in the reaction of the women. Matthew says they went away quickly with fear and great joy to tell the disciples; Mark says they fled trembling and astonished and told no one about what they had seen; Luke says the women left and told the disciples (who did not believe them); John says that Mary Magdalene ran to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple that the body was missing.

2. The story of the empty tomb is a late development in the pre-Gospel period, and so is probably unreliable. This claim is actually the fountainhead of most contemporary criticism of the tradition of the empty tomb. There are several reasons for regarding it as late. First, the story of the empty tomb is not so much as mentioned in Paul’s writings, which are our earliest record of Christian belief about the resurrection of Jesus. (I will treat the absence of any mention of the empty tomb in Paul’s epistles as a separate argument to be considered below.) Second, the empty tomb is not mentioned in the speeches Luke attributes to Peter, Stephen, and Paul in Acts. While not considered by most scholars an early document, the book of Acts, and in particular the sermons attributed by Luke to the apostles, may well give vital clues to the earliest Christian beliefs about the resurrection, and the empty tomb is not mentioned.

Third, the crucial text for the empty tomb is obviously Mark 16:1–8. (According to the vast majority of scholars, Mark was the first of the four canonical Gospels to be written, and had a major influence on both the other Synoptic Gospels, apparently including what they say about the empty tomb.) And at least some scholars, e.g., Bultmann, believe that Mark 16:1–8 was formulated long after the events themselves, does not fit with what precedes it, and played a secondary and quite subordinate role in the apostolic kerygma. Furthermore, some scholars are troubled by what look like internal inconsistencies or at least improbabilities in Mark’s account, e.g., the plan of the women (in hot Palestine) to anoint a body that had already been dead for three days; and their thoughtlessness in never considering, prior to their arrival at the tomb, how they could possibly enter a tomb blocked by a large stone.

A slightly different version of this second argument against the empty tomb runs as follows: the empty tomb tradition was not originally meant as history, i.e., it was not meant to state facts about the tomb in which Jesus was buried. It was instead a way of elaborating, explaining, or announcing the affirmation that “Jesus is risen” that arose in the Christian community in the period prior to the writing of Mark’s Gospel. The empty tomb, then, is best seen not as a report of a fact but as a product of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, as a legendary elaboration of the appearances that grew up long afterward. The body of Jesus was probably just somehow lost—burned, thrown into a common grave, or the tomb in which it was buried forgotten.

3. Closely related to the above argument is this one: The story of the empty tomb is a legendary addition to the earliest Christian proclamation of the resurrection, invented for apologetic purposes. Several factors support this claim. First, as we have seen, the Gospels deviate sharply from each other to a surprising degree on the details of the empty tomb story, and there is evidence of the tradition developing and expanding in the later Gospels (e.g., the guards at the tomb in Matthew; Peter running to the tomb in John; Jesus’ appearance to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary or to Mary Magdalene alone in Matthew and John; Joseph of Arimathea described as a follower of Jesus in Matthew and John; the disciples being increasingly involved in the story of the empty tomb). Second, the empty tomb is clearly the sort of story we might expect the early Christians to have seized upon because of its obvious apologetic value. As all scholars grant, the resurrection was crucial to early Christian proclamation, a proclamation which was subject to severe criticism by those who rejected it. Thus it is not difficult to imagine the origin of the story of the empty tomb because of its obvious apologetic value—“If Jesus was not raised from the dead, then where is his body?” Christians could have asked their enemies. Third, in Mark’s Gospel (written at a time when the story of the empty tomb was perhaps not yet widely known) the empty tomb is reported as known only by a few women who keep silent about what they have seen (16:8).
But in Matthew, written perhaps a generation later when (perhaps because of the influence of Mark's Gospel) the empty tomb story was widely known, the women are reported as immediately hurrying to tell the disciples the news (28:8). This, too, is witness to the late and legendary character of the tradition.  

4. The second and third argument are supported by the fourth—the case for the reliability of the empty tomb tradition is seriously weakened by the fact that Paul, the earliest and therefore most reliable of our sources about the resurrection of Jesus, does not mention it. The closest Paul comes to mentioning the empty tomb in any of his extant writings is the brief phrase “he was buried” in 1 Corinthians 15:4 (a phrase which is meant—so critics of the empty tomb say—only to emphasize the reality of Jesus’ death and not to testify to a separate event). Since this epistle is our earliest record of the resurrection (most scholars date it at ca. 54 A.D., or about twenty-four years after the events), this too supports the notion that the empty tomb is a later development, unheard of in the early days. For it seems Paul would hardly have omitted reference to something so crucial to the case for the resurrection of Jesus, a case he tries hard to make in 1 Corinthians, had he known about it. (Or, alternately, perhaps Paul knew of the empty tomb reports but rejected them because they seemed to support a crudely physicalist conception of the resurrected body of Jesus, in contrast to his own more nuanced notion of a “spiritual body.”) At any rate, Paul probably believed that Jesus’ “old body” remained decomposing in the tomb.

5. The final argument tries to deemphasize rather than disprove the empty tomb; its main point is that the empty tomb played no significant role in the faith of the earliest believers and should play no significant role in ours either. Even from the Gospels themselves it seems clear that the faith of the disciples in the resurrection of their Lord was originally based not on the empty tomb but on what they took to be his appearances to them. And the stories of the appearances contrast rather sharply with those of the empty tomb. Hans Künig points this out:

The stories of the tomb are concerned originally only with the women and not with the disciples, the appearance statements with the latter and not the former. The stories of the tomb describe appearances of angels and not of Christ, the appearance statements

again the opposite. The stories of the tomb are narratives (artistically elaborated to some degree) about astonished listeners and were perhaps used in the readings at the eucharist; the appearance statements in their oldest versions are summaries in catechism form for teaching the heart (probably in catechetical use).

Reginald Fuller argues that the disciples came to believe that Jesus was risen on the basis of appearances to them in Galilee. They then returned to Jerusalem and for the first time heard the women’s story about the empty tomb. Naturally, they welcomed it as consistent with their own new belief, and presumably incorporated it into their preaching. Fuller goes on to say of the empty tomb:

The disciples were apparently not interested in it as a historical fact and so we hear nothing of their having checked it. They were interested only in using it as a vehicle for the proclamation of the resurrection. For the disciples, faith in the resurrection did not rest upon the empty tomb, but upon their revelatory encounters with the Risen One.

Furthermore, Gordon Kaufman argues that if we take the appearance stories as primary, we can easily account for the growth of the empty tomb tradition. Unsophisticated early Christians, especially those to whom Paul’s concept of a “spiritual body” was incomprehensible, would accept the story of the empty tomb as something naturally entailed by their belief that Jesus had risen.

III

Let me now try to respond to the above arguments.

(1) As to the first, I believe that many of the discrepancies between the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb do not present serious problems; plausible harmonizations (i.e., ones that do not involve special pleading) can be suggested without great difficulty. For example, the term “young man” in Mark and Luke was a conventional way to refer to an angel (Luke himself makes this identification in 24:23). For another example, perhaps the women arose and left for the tomb while it was still dark and arrived after sunrise. However, I also believe that some of the discrepancies are difficult if not impossible sensibly to harmonize,
e.g., the location of the stone when the women arrived (here Matthew differs from the other Gospels) and the reaction of the women (where Mark, alone among the evangelists, has the women keeping silent).\textsuperscript{14}

But the main point I wish to make is this: despite differences in details, the four evangelists agree to an amazing degree on what we might call the basic facts. All unite in proclaiming that early on the first day of the week certain women, among them Mary Magdalene, went to the tomb; they found it empty; they met an angel or angels; and they were either told or else discovered (Mary Magdalene in the fourth Gospel) that Jesus was alive. There is also striking agreement between John and at least one of the Synoptics on each of these points: The women informed Peter and/or other disciples of their discovery; Peter went to the tomb and found it empty; the risen Jesus appeared to the women; and he gave them instructions for the disciples. Furthermore, it may be that the discrepancies themselves lend credence to the basic facts, showing as they do that a variety of Christian interpretations of the empty tomb, obviously at many points quite independent of each other, all agree on these central points.\textsuperscript{15}

(2) Is the empty tomb a late tradition? I find the argument unconvincing. For one thing, exactly how do critics of the empty tomb go about deciding that a given document or passage is “late”? There are doubtless provable cases of literary dependence where a convincing case can be made that one document is later than another. But when it comes to dating various strata, pericopes, or traditions in the gospels (e.g., deciding that a given text in a “late” Gospel reflects an “early” tradition, or the like), at least some of the conclusions of which critics are so confident seem tenuous.\textsuperscript{16} Though some are based on carefully crafted linguistic arguments, others seem based on \textit{a priori} notions about what sorts of things might have been expressed by “early” believers, and what could only have been expressed by “later” believers. Notice the circular argument in the following imagined but perhaps not unrecognizable dialogue between a critic and a defender of the empty tomb:

\textbf{Defender:} The empty tomb is taught in this text.

\textbf{Critic:} That text is a late text, and can therefore be discounted.

\textbf{Defender:} How do you know it is a late text?

\textbf{Critic:} Well, it presupposes a late theology, e.g., a physical view of the resurrection.

\textbf{Defender:} How do you know physical views of the resurrection weren’t taught in early texts?

\textbf{Critic:} Well, because they just aren’t. Among the New Testament texts that talk about the resurrection, only the later ones push physical views of the resurrection.

\textbf{Defender:} But how do you know they are the later ones?

\textbf{Critic:} Obviously, because they are the ones that push conceptions, like physical views of the resurrection, that only developed later.

But far more importantly, if the empty tomb is a late tradition, we are entitled to wonder why early Jewish criticism of the resurrection of Jesus never disputed it (a point I will discuss below). If the tradition had developed late, it would seem that critics of the resurrection would have disputed the claim; that they did not do so argues that the empty tomb was a fact agreed upon by all parties early in the game.

Also, it has been convincingly argued that the empty tomb stories have linguistic features indicative of early tradition.\textsuperscript{17} Various Semitic expressions and customs are used or referred to which may suggest an early Palestinian setting for the stories—e.g., “on the first day of the week” (Mk 16:2), “angel of the Lord” (Mt 28:2), “Miriam” (as opposed to “Mary”) (Mt 28:1), “[answering] said” (Mt 28:5), and “bowed their faces to the ground” (Lk 24:5). I do not wish to place great emphasis on this point; it is, after all, hard to prove that such expressions could not or would not have been used in, say, a late first-century Diaspora text. Still, the existence of Semitisms in the empty tomb stories is worth noting.

Furthermore, why is it that the empty tomb is not referred to in the speeches Luke attributes to the apostles in Acts? There is, I believe, an available explanation that is more plausible than the idea that the empty tomb was not known in the early period. To the extent that the speeches in Acts accurately reflect the earliest period of Christian proclamation, it may be that the empty tomb was not mentioned because it did not have to be mentioned, i.e., it
was a widely known fact, undisputed by all parties. The question for the people of that period was not, "Is the tomb empty?" but rather, "Why is the tomb empty?" Furthermore, though the empty tomb is not explicitly mentioned, it seems clearly presupposed in Peter's sermon in Acts 2. See especially verses 27–29, where Jesus, who because of his resurrection "was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption," is contrasted to King David, whose tomb "is with us to this day." The implication seems to be that Jesus' tomb is empty while David's is not. (See also Paul's sermon in Acts 13:29–37, where precisely the same point is made.)

Finally, what about the theory that the empty tomb stories in the Gospels are legendary products, written much later, of the earlier appearance stories? The problem with this claim is that there are many differences between the appearance stories and the empty tomb stories and the connections between them are tenuous. Accordingly, most interpreters believe that the two traditions have independent origins, i.e., that the one did not cause the other. First Corinthians 15:3–8, the earliest appearance text, contains several themes not found in Mark 16:1–8, the earliest empty tomb text (e.g., explicit citation of tradition, the appeal to the Scriptures, the death of Christ "for our sins," the title "Christ" as a proper name, and the list of six appearances). Likewise Mark 16:1–8 contains themes not mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:1–8 (e.g., the purpose of the women's visit to the tomb, their discovery of the empty tomb, the angel and its message, and the promised appearance to the disciples in Galilee). About the only point of connection between the two texts is their common affirmation of Jesus' resurrection.

(3) Is the empty tomb an apologetic legend? Again I am doubtful. The empty tomb tradition just does not have the characteristics we would expect it to have if it were an invented apologetic device, designed to convince readers that Jesus really rose. For one thing, the empty tomb does not play an apologetic role in the New Testament (though I have little doubt that early Christians used it apologetically). Far from being pushed as an irrefutable argument for the resurrection, the empty tomb is rather depicted as an enigma, a puzzling fact that no one at first is able to account for. (Notice Lk 24:22–23—"Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body. . . ." Cf. also John 20:1–2, 13.) With the possible exception of the Beloved Disciple in the fourth Gospel (see Jn 20:8), nobody in the New Testament comes to believe in the resurrection of Jesus solely on the basis of the empty tomb—not Peter, not Mary Magdalene, not any of the other women. Only the appearances of Jesus himself moved these people to believe that he was alive. In other words, the fact that the empty tomb stories in the Gospels produce only puzzlement and ambiguity rather than proof attests to the primitive and non-apologetic character of the tradition.

The second reason for doubting that the story of the empty tomb is an apologetic legend is that it is bad apologetics. If the story is an apologetic legend invented by later Christians, why is it that the story is made to hang so crucially on the testimony of women, whose evidence was not legally admissible in Jewish proceedings? (This must have constituted something of an embarrassment to those men in Jesus' party who were later to become leaders of the church—while they were hiding, it was the women who found that Jesus was risen.) If the story is an apologetic legend invented by later Christians, why does it (in Mark's original version) lead only to fear, flight, and silence on the part of the women? If the story is an apologetic legend invented by later Christians, why is it so openly admitted that some of Jesus' followers were suspiciously in the vicinity of the tomb early on the morning of the discovery of the empty tomb? And why is there no mention made of any thorough investigation of the tomb or its environs, or of some verifying word from Joseph of Arimathea? As an apologetic argument, this one seems weak.

The third reason for denying that the story of the empty tomb is an apologetic legend is, as noted above, that the emptiness of the tomb seems to have been conceded by all parties, friend and foe alike. I frankly suspect that the tomb was checked; the disciples themselves would surely have rushed there to verify or falsify the women's story (again, see Lk 24:24); and later the enemies of the incipient Christian movement would doubtless have searched thoroughly in their effort to disprove the claims of the early Christians. There is no record in any early anti-Christian polemic of anyone's suggesting that the tomb was not
empty; what critics tried to do is argue that the disciples stole the body. It should be noted that I am presupposing here my earlier argument against the claim that the empty tomb tradition is late. Naturally, the above points will not be convincing to those who believe the tradition was, for example, invented by Mark and that his Gospel was written outside Palestine during or after the Jewish war. By that time the location of the tomb could have been forgotten and verification would have been difficult. The crucial point here is that the Gospels all claim that the location of Jesus’ tomb was known to the women and to the disciples (Mk 15:47; Mt 27:61; Lk 23:55; Jn 20:1). This claim should be rejected—or so I would argue—only for very cogent reasons indeed.

To put it radically, it may be that the claim that the empty tomb is an apologetic legend is itself an apologetic legend—a legend suggested in defense of the view that Jesus was not really raised or was raised in some non-bodily sense. It is true that Christian apologists have used the story of the empty tomb in support of the claim that Jesus was bodily raised. But that does not make the story legendary. To show that a given story does or can play an apologetic role in somebody’s belief system says nothing about its historical accuracy.

In this regard, note Matthew’s story of the guard at the tomb (Mt 27:62–66; 28:4). This story does seem to play an apologetic role in Matthew’s Gospel, but that fact by itself does nothing to discredit it. Is the story a “legendary accretion”? I do not know. I have always thought that one point in its favor is, oddly, its own improbability; for the story would seem to have been apologetically useless to the writer of the first Gospel unless it were either widely known to be true or else completely uncheckable. But if the story is an apologetic legend, that will have to be shown on other grounds than the mere fact that the story answers certain objections (e.g., the slander that the disciples stole the body) that might be raised against the claim that the tomb was empty. Furthermore, in a similarly curious way, the story of the guard at the tomb—whether it actually occurred or is an apologetic invention of the later church—constitutes a powerful argument for the reliability of the empty tomb tradition. For the telling of the story of the guard at the tomb is quite senseless unless the tomb of Jesus really was empty. Those who denied the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead were evidently not able to deny that the tomb was empty.

(4) What about Paul’s purported ignorance of the empty tomb? It is quite correct that the apostle does not mention the empty tomb per se; not even his words, “he was buried” (1 Cor 15:4), explicitly refer to it. However, it does not follow from this that Paul had never heard of the empty tomb, or that he disagreed with the empty tomb stories, or that he nowhere implicitly referred to the empty tomb, or even that the empty tomb was not part of early Christian proclamation. Some critics seem to come dangerously close to espousing the following obviously invalid inference:

(1) Paul, the earliest New Testament author who proclaimed the resurrection, did not mention the empty tomb;

(2) Therefore, the empty tomb was not part of the earliest Christian proclamation of the resurrection.

Why is it, then, that Paul does not explicitly refer to the empty tomb? Are there other, better, explanations available than the one which says either he had never heard of it or else he disagreed with it? Certainly. In general I imagine Paul did not discuss the empty tomb because, given his audience in Corinth, he did not find it necessary or helpful to do so. Here are several possible explanations. (1) Perhaps Paul, always at pains to prove he was a true apostle and equal with Peter, James, et al., was reluctant to mention an aspect of the resurrection story in which he had had no part (unlike the appearances of Jesus, with one of which Paul was honored—1 Cor 15:8). (2) Perhaps Paul knew the Corinthians already knew about the empty tomb and understood its importance, and so the story did not need to be repeated. (3) Perhaps Paul knew the Corinthians had never heard of the empty tomb, and he chose not to refer to it because the evidence for it, being based on the testimony of obscure women hundreds of miles away in Palestine, was unavailable to the Corinthians. (4) Perhaps Paul believed the empty tomb, by itself, could be explained (theft etc.), and that it was the appearances that were crucial. It does seem that anyone like Paul to whom the risen Jesus had personally appeared would naturally stress the appearances over the empty tomb as evidence of the resurrection. Any one of
these explanations—some of which can be combined with each other—seems to me more plausible than the highly improbable claim that Paul either had never heard of the empty tomb or else disagreed with it.

But does Paul implicitly refer to the empty tomb in 1 Corinthians 15:4, where he mentions Jesus’ burial? I believe it is quite probable that he does. Paul’s own view of the nature of the resurrection, in my opinion, requires that the tomb be empty (which is the reverse of what is sometimes claimed). This is because his simile of the plant growing from the seed (1 Cor 15:35-43) entails material continuity between the one and the other. That is, on Paul’s view Jesus’ body could not still be decomposing in the tomb because it was transformed into, i.e., it became, Jesus’ resurrection body (just as the seed becomes the plant).

Furthermore, that the tomb was empty seems clearly entailed by the claims (explicitly made by Paul) that Jesus died, was buried, and was raised from the dead. It is possible, of course, to imagine survival-of-death theories that involve death, burial, and life again with the corpse still in the grave. But such theories would not agree with most Hebraic notions of resurrection, nor with Paul’s. (There were, of course, Jewish theories of survival of death that did not involve bodily resurrection, e.g., Enoch’s or Elijah’s translation to heaven, or the immortality of the soul doctrine of the Wisdom of Solomon. But these are not theories of resurrection, as Paul’s explicitly is.) There is little evidence, for example, in favor of the claim that Paul had in mind some non-bodily notion of resurrection (like the concept of “spiritual resurrection” some contemporary Christian scholars prefer) that did not require an empty tomb. So Paul’s own belief that Jesus was raised from the dead, if it is correct, entails that the tomb was empty. Perhaps he did not mention the empty tomb because for him resurrection implies empty tomb as a matter of course.

My own view, then, is this: If it is true (1) that first-century Jews would naturally have believed that resurrection means bodily resurrection (and scholars do agree with this), and (2) that there is no convincing reason to believe that Paul had in mind some non-bodily theory, and (3) that the claim that Jesus was bodily raised entails the claim that the tomb was empty, and (4) that Paul was clever enough to recognize this entailment, then, I say, probably Paul’s reference to the burial of Jesus did indeed reveal knowledge of and commitment to the tradition of the empty tomb. Thus I conclude that the fact that Paul nowhere explicitly refers to or discusses the empty tomb is not a compelling argument against it.

(5) I have no quarrel with much of the fifth argument. As already noted, I happily agree that the faith of the earliest believers was based on the appearances rather than the empty tomb. But surely the first question we want to ask is not, “Should the empty tomb be emphasized as part of Christian faith today?” but rather, “Is there good reason to believe that Jesus’ tomb was empty?” Once we answer the second question we can perhaps go on to the first. (I believe the empty tomb does have certain theological implications, an issue I will discuss briefly below. But to me it is curious indeed why anybody who believes that the tomb was empty should try to belittle it or suggest it has no place in contemporary Christian teaching.)

Another thing I find curious is the question which, so to speak, should take priority, the stories of the appearances or the story of the empty tomb. Kaufman23 claims that if we regard the appearances as taking priority we can explain the growth of the empty tomb tradition, but that it is much harder to explain the appearance stories by the empty tomb tradition. Perhaps Kaufmann is correct here. But why do we have to choose between the appearances and the empty tomb? Why should one or the other be regarded as “primary” (whatever that means)? Why not accept both that the tomb was empty and that there were resurrection appearances?

Finally, Fuller’s claim that the disciples were not interested in the empty tomb as a historical fact but only as a vehicle for proclamation seems almost ridiculous. The statement certainly has rather startling implications. The major one is that the disciples were slightly obtuse. Imagine, say, Peter in part basing what he took to be the crucial item of Christian proclamation (i.e., the resurrection of Jesus) on a historical claim (the empty tomb) whose truth value he did not care about. Even if he thought he had another, irrefutable, proof of the claim (i.e., the appearances), this would be a foolish procedure indeed. How absurd to suggest that the disciples, preaching the resurrection in an environment
hostile to their message, had no interest in the truth of the claim that Jesus' tomb was empty.

IV

There are also two robust arguments in favor of the empty tomb that have not, to my mind, been refuted. Let me now briefly explain them. Both are implicit in much that I have already said.

1. The first is the fact that the tradition of the empty tomb enjoys very broad support in the New Testament. As we have seen, it is found in all four Gospels (note especially that both the Synoptics and John stress it), with possible indirect references in Acts and 1 Corinthians. Furthermore, the fact that it is found in both Mark, John, and in Matthew's special source (i.e., material Matthew did not gain from Mark or Q) demonstrates the broad support the empty tomb receives from independent traditions. And the discrepancies between the accounts in the Gospels (discussed above) argue against the claim that the other evangelists, or even the other synoptic evangelists, wrote about the empty tomb merely under the influence of Mark.

As noted above, I believe that those New Testament scholars who argue that the empty tomb is a late tradition have not succeeded in making their case. They have not succeeded in pinpointing a period, let alone a document, in which Christians believed in the resurrection but not the empty tomb. And if it were true that the empty tomb was a late addition to Christian proclamation, this ought to be evident in the New Testament. But all the relevant sources either affirm or presuppose the empty tomb.

A good example of what I am talking about is the association of Joseph of Arimathea with the tomb in which Jesus was buried. It is significant that this figure, who so far as we know held no position and played no role in the early Christian movement, figures so prominently in all four Gospels. No critic has been able to show that this Joseph was a late apologetic invention of the church—certainly what is said about him and his actions has the ring of truth (see Mk 15:43–46; Mt 27:57–60; Lk 23:50–53; Jn 19:33–42). As Stein argues, "the historicity of the empty tomb is supported by the fact that a specific tomb, which was known in Jerusalem as Joseph of Arimathea's tomb, was associated with the burial of Jesus."

2. The second argument is even more compelling, and is often cited. It is that early Christian proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem would have been psychologically and apologetically impossible without safe evidence of an empty tomb. The psychological point is that the earliest disciples, good Jews and believers in bodily resurrection as they undoubtedly were, would have found it psychologically impossible to preach that Jesus had been raised from the dead and was alive had they had to contend with the presence of his corpse. Or, if this were possible, then as Craig argues, early Christian preaching about the resurrection would have taken on an entirely different character than it in fact did.27 The apologetic point is that the apostles would have been quite unable to convince anyone that Jesus was alive, indeed we can imagine the laughably ridiculous figure they would have cut, had the body been available.

The counter-argument that Jews had a taboo-like fear of contact with cadavers, and that this would have prevented anybody's checking the tomb,28 is feeble. A few weeks after the crucifixion, Jerusalem was apparently seething with reports of Jesus' resurrection. The Jewish authorities, who wanted at all costs to stamp out the growing Christian movement, would have wasted no time checking the tomb, taboo or not. If worse came to worse they could have convinced Gentile allies to do the job. Perhaps they would not even have had to exhume the corpse—simply pointing to the location of the tomb would have sufficed. (The Jewish polemic against the resurrection shows they could do neither, however.)

In other words, without safe and agreed-upon evidence of an empty tomb, the apostles' claims would have been subject to massive falsification by the simple presentation of the body. As argued above, there is no convincing evidence that by the term "resurrection" the early Christians meant something akin to modern "spiritual" notions of resurrection that allow the continued presence of the corpse. We can infer, then, that the apostles' proclamation of the resurrection was successful precisely because (among other things) nobody was able to produce the corpse. The tomb was empty and the body nowhere to be found.
Of course it is possible to imagine scenarios which account for the inability to produce the body. Perhaps Jesus was buried in an unmarked or even mass grave by a Roman functionary and two underlings who three days later, without having told anyone how they had disposed of the body, were transferred back to Rome. Or, to turn to a scenario that has actually been suggested, here is a comment from Hans Küng:

The disciples (returned from Galilee?), numbering no more than a hundred and twenty even according to Luke's possibly exaggerated and idealized estimate, did not start at once to proclaim the risen Christ, but only several weeks after Jesus' death (the Lukean date for Pentecost assumes fifty days). All this made verification difficult, particularly since the proclamation can scarcely have created much of a stir at the beginning or called for public control in a city of perhaps twenty-five to thirty thousand inhabitants. The story of the empty tomb therefore must not be seen as the recognition of a fact.29

The suggestion, then, is that contrary to the impression one receives in the early chapters of Acts, the Christian claim that Jesus had been raised did not become a matter of public controversy until perhaps years after the events immediately following the crucifixion, and that by then the tomb in which Jesus was buried had been forgotten. Thus G. W. H. Lampe says: "Even assuming that Jesus' grave was known, which is by no means certain, it seems very possible that neither party was interested in it, or regarded the truth of Easter as dependent on it, until long after the event: until the period of the controversies reflected in Matthew, which would not arise until the empty tomb had become important in Christian thought about the resurrection."30

The argument is often combined with the theory mentioned above that the disciples fled to Galilee immediately after the crucifixion and did not return to Jerusalem till later, perhaps much later. The empty tomb story arose (so Barnabas Lindars speculates)31 in connection with the unsuccessful attempt to locate the body of Jesus when, much later, the disciples returned to Jerusalem.

But the flight-to-Galilee aspect of this argument has been thoroughly discredited, as we saw earlier. And the story of Joseph of Arimathea's involvement in the burial of Jesus seems so strongly supported and inherently trustworthy, as we have seen, that it renders the argument we are considering implausible. And that story entails that the location of Jesus' tomb was known. Further, the early church's claim that Jesus' tomb was empty seems to be pointless if it was only made years after the events themselves. Such a claim would have been apologetically valueless by then; opponents could always object that the tomb was simply lost. So the Church's affirmation that Jesus' tomb was empty has the earmarks of a claim made very early indeed. As to Küng's suggestion, it too presupposes the flight to Galilee immediately after the crucifixion. But it seems clear that the location of the tomb was established before the return to Galilee. Furthermore, a sensible reaction to Küng's scenario is to admit that the location of an important person's tomb might be lost in fifty years—but in fifty days? And if Luke is correct (why doubt him?), the apostles' preaching did create a public stir, and the authorities became involved, almost immediately. (It is hard to give a precise number of days or weeks because Acts 2:43–47, which forms a bridge between the events on the day of Pentecost and the activity of Peter and John in chapter 3 that provoked the authorities, is vague on the question of how much time has passed.)

At any rate, the moral is that such scenarios, while possible, are highly improbable. There is little evidence for them. The available evidence (e.g., Joseph of Arimathea, the testimony of the women, the presupposition of the empty tomb in early anti-Christian polemic) supports the claim that the location of Jesus' tomb was known. And if it was known, then given the evident success of the apostolic preaching, it must have been empty.

V

Is it important for Christians to affirm that Jesus' tomb was empty? Fuller thinks not. What is crucial, he says, is the affirmation, "He is not here; God has raised him," not the empty tomb: "Whether the women's story was based on fact, or was the result of mistake or illusion, is in the last resort a matter of indifference."32 I do not agree with Fuller at this point; it is time for me to make the remarks I promised earlier about the theological implications of the empty tomb.
The empty tomb tradition, in my opinion, has three important theological ramifications for Christians. The first is that it rules out all reductive theories of the resurrection, i.e., theories which explain the meaning of the Christian affirmation that “Jesus is risen” in terms that do not involve a dead man living again. The New Testament tradition of the empty tomb, in short, entails that resurrection is something that happened to Jesus rather than a convoluted way of describing things that happened to the disciples.

The second theological point is that the empty tomb makes it clear that the person who was raised was the same person as the person who died. I do not claim that such an identification logically requires the empty tomb, for I disagree with those philosophers who hold that personal identity always requires bodily continuity. Still, it was the fact that Jesus was bodily raised, a truth underscored by the empty tomb, that made possible his recognition (usually with some difficulty) by the disciples. This was a virtual sine qua non of the Christian message in order to rule out misidentifications of the Risen One—that he was an angel, or some new divine being, or just a “subjective vision.” The person who was raised had to be the same beloved Lord who had died.

The third theological point is that the empty tomb distinguishes the Christian view of resurrection from dualist, spiritualist theories of the immortality of the soul. To put the point emphatically, the Christian resurrection claim is an empirical claim—it entails the life after death of living bodies that can be seen and touched (although of a transformed sort). The raised will be living bodies that are materially related to their old bodies (just as, in Paul’s simile, the seed is materially related to the plant that it produces). Christian resurrection is not a docetic or Platonic “escape” from bodily life. The resurrection does not mean that, much to our pleasant surprise, we human beings turn out to have an indestructible aspect which survives death. It means rather that death has been defeated by a miraculous and decisive intervention by God.

An even larger point follows: on the Christian view the whole of creation is to be redeemed in Christ, not just its spiritual or “higher” aspects (cf. Rom 8:19–23). Christianity is not a form of Greek or Oriental dualism whereby the divine cannot come into relation with concrete corporeal reality. All creaturely existence is to be reconciled to God—even corruptible physical bodies. Christianity says a decisive no to religions and philosophies that aim to liberate our true spiritual essence from its fleshly prison.

VI

The proper conclusion, then, is that Jesus’ tomb was empty. The arguments against it are not convincing, and the strongest of the arguments for it have not been successfully answered. The traditional Christian belief with which we began, that the tomb of Jesus was discovered empty on Easter morning, is one which Christians ought to continue to affirm. As Karl Barth wisely put it, “Christians do not believe in the empty tomb but in the living Christ,” but that does not imply “that we can believe in the living Christ without believing in the empty tomb.”

Does this mean that we have proved the resurrection? Is there now no room for faith? Of course not. The empty tomb, by itself, does not prove the resurrection. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the bodily resurrection of Jesus—if the tomb was not empty Jesus was not bodily raised; but the empty tomb itself does not prove that Jesus was bodily raised. As in the days after Pentecost, the crucial question today is: Why was the tomb empty? Perhaps after all the tomb was empty because of quite natural circumstances that are now unknown. That option is always available to the skeptic. My own view is that the tomb was empty because God miraculously raised its occupant from the dead.

NOTES

3. Some recent scholars separate them, however. Barnabas Lindars, for example, affirms bodily resurrection but denies the empty tomb. See


7. Walter Kasper, for example, mentions these points and then concludes: "We must assume therefore that we are faced not with historical details but with stylistic devices intended to attract the attention and raise excitement in the minds of those listening" (*Jesus The Christ* [London: Burns and Oates, 1976], 127).


11. Reginald Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 171. (In the light of Lk 24:24, it is hard to credit Fuller's claim that "we hear nothing of their having checked it").

12. There are other and in my opinion less impressive arguments against the empty tomb. (1) Some claim for theological reasons that our resurrection must be like Christ's; since the tombs of Christians who have died are not empty (despite the fact that they will some day be resurrected), Jesus' resurrection must not have involved an empty tomb either. But in reply, two questions need simply be asked: first, is it an acceptable procedure to deduce a historical fact from a theological point, especially a controversial one? Second, why must Jesus' resurrection be like ours in every respect? New Testament writers do take Jesus' resurrection as a promise and model of ours, but nowhere suggest they must be alike in all respects. (2) Hans Grass suggests, following a vague reference in a speech Luke attributes to Paul (Acts 13:27-29), that Jesus' body was buried by his enemies. He accordingly dismisses as legendary the burial by Joseph of Arimathea and the empty tomb. But in reply to this argument, it need only be asked whether it is proper to base such a bold theory on such a vague reference, itself subject to a variety of interpretations. The grounds for Grass's theory seem flimsy indeed. (See Gerald O'Collins, S.J., *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1973), 39, 90-91, 96, for a good discussion of these arguments.)

13. See also 2 Maccabees 3:26, 33; Josephus, *Antiquities*, V, viii, 2; Gospel of Peter 9.

14. See Eleonore Stump's article, "Visits To the Sepulcher and Biblical Exegesis," *Faith and Philosophy* 6, no. 4 (October 1989): 353-377, for a balanced and sensible critique of the approach some biblical scholars take to the discrepancies in the empty tomb accounts.


16. See Pheme Perkins, *Resurrection* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), 169: "But frequently the judgment about which form a story is likely to be older is difficult to make." See also p. 196.


19. See Perkins, *Resurrection*, 123: "The restraint of the Markan story makes it evident that the empty tomb itself is ambiguous and that it is not immediately viewed as evidence for the Resurrection."

20. The theory that the disciples had fled to Galilee and so were not around to check has been shown to be utterly implausible. Hans Von Campenhausen dismisses it as "a legend of the critics." See his *Tradition and Life in the Church*, trans. A. V. Littledale (London: William Collins and Sons, 1968), 79.


23. See the article referred to in footnote 4 for a more thorough discussion of these matters.
24. On these matters, see Brown, *Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection*, 70; Fuller, *Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, 73; and Craig, "Historicity of the Empty Tomb," 40–42.


26. Stein, "Was the Tomb Really Empty," 11. See also Grant, *Jesus: An Historian’s Review*, 175. Speaking of the accounts of the work of Joseph of Arimathea, Stein says: "This story is likely to be true since the absence, which it records, of any participation by Jesus’ followers was too unfortunate, indeed disgraceful, to have been voluntarily invented by the evangelists at a later date."


34. This fact is grasped more clearly than anyone by Thomas Torrance. See *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1976). See especially page 141. "It is the empty tomb that constitutes the essential empirical correlate in statements about the resurrection of Christ."

35. See *ibid.*, 81.


37. I would like to thank Professor Adela Yarbro Collins, whose views on the empty tomb are quite different from mine, for several helpful criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper.

The Heart of the Gospel: Comments on the Paper of Stephen T. Davis

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

In his clear, thoughtful, and well-argued essay Professor Davis contemplates a contemporary oddity, namely, that a number of theologians who affirm Jesus’ resurrection combine this affirmation with a denial of the empty tomb or with indifference toward it. Davis rightly finds this combination extraordinary. Suppose, by way of parallel, that somebody were to acknowledge that George Bush had graduated from Yale University in 1948. Suppose this same person were then to reserve judgment on the question whether Bush is still a sophomore at Yale, insisting that this question and that of his graduation were mutually independent. Such insistence would naturally put us in the interrogative mood.

Though Davis is convinced that the concept of resurrection biblically and logically includes the concept of an empty tomb, he does not direct his efforts mainly at convincing us of such inclusion. Instead, he isolates the empty tomb claim, considers five objections to it, refutes them, and then closes with three positive theological implications of the empty tomb.

Davis first considers the objection that the empty tomb tradition is unreliable because the Gospels contradict each other in presenting it. In turning back this objection Davis observes that while some details of the Gospel reports cannot easily be harmonized, the Gospels largely agree: they agree that early on Sunday certain women including Mary Magdalene went to the
tomb, found it empty, and either discovered or were told that Jesus was alive. In other words, the narrative weave of the Gospels is tight at its center even if ragged at the edges.

According to a second objection, the empty tomb is a late and therefore unreliable accretion to the traditions of Jesus' appearances. Or, more strongly put, the empty tomb tradition is a late and oblique way of accounting for Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. Here Davis properly raises important doubts both about the lateness thesis itself and also about the suggestion that the empty tomb theory depends on and seeks to explain the appearances.

But we can go further. Suppose the lateness claim could be supported. Suppose someone could establish that the empty tomb reports are later than the appearances reports. Davis is right in questioning a conclusion that is then sometimes drawn, namely, that the later tradition must be an ad hoc explanation of the earlier appearance tradition.

But surely we ought to challenge as well any inevitable link between the lateness claim and the unreliability claim. While contemporary biblical scholars sometimes appear to assume that, where biblical traditions are concerned, the later they are, the falser they are, this assumption seems merely arbitrary. One could just as well imagine grounds for its opposite, namely, that the later a tradition, the truer. After all, a later version of some event has the advantage of longer, and maybe wider, perspective. Its author can hold the relevant event at arm's length. She can sift and compare seemingly rival versions of it in order to form, at the end of the day, a really balanced and mature account of this event. Take, for example, Robert François Damiens's 1757 assassination attempt on Louis XV of France. Early reports of this event assumed both that Damiens deliberately meant to kill the King and that, in this project, he had accomplices. Responsible contemporary historians doubt the former and deny the latter. Early reports and interpretations of events may or may not be more plausible than later ones.

Third, Davis takes on the assertion that the empty tomb story is a legend invented for the apologetic purpose of shoring up the claim that Jesus was raised. To this he replies that, if so, its inventors were wonderfully clumsy and ineffectual. For one thing, the empty tomb stories never do function apologetically in the New Testament. For another, even if they had, these stories would have been bad apologetics in their culture since they offer women as witnesses to their main event in a culture where women were legal non-entities. Moreover, in Luke's account the women struggle to get their amazing news through the thick skulls of male apostles—the more natural witnesses in case the empty tomb reports had been crafted as apologetic legend.

Still further, an apologetic use of the empty tomb tradition when no one disputes it appears otiose. After all, as Davis observes, the only—surely the main—issue in the neighborhood of the empty tomb is not whether the tomb is empty, but rather why it is empty.

Fourth, Davis considers a routine objection to the reliability of the empty tomb tradition, namely, that Paul never mentions it. Here Davis questions the assumption that Paul's silence implies either his ignorance of the empty tomb assertion or his rejection of it. It implies neither one. There are other perfectly possible explanations for Paul's silence and Davis suggests some plausible ones.

Fifth, Davis rightly rejects the suggestion that the empty tomb reports are largely irrelevant to Christian faith and theology. For even if the empty tomb reports are not highlighted in the New Testament as part of the core of faith, they enjoy wide support there and, in any case, seem apologetically and psychologically requisite for honest and convincing testimony to the resurrection.

In this quintet of refutations Davis is, in my opinion, wise, fair, and right.

But surely one question that persists is why all this is necessary. Why are scholars and others so wary of the empty tomb? Why all this speculative effort spent on the pursuit of dubious alternatives? Why are such alternatives even minimally appealing? Possibly because the alternatives are less novel, less scandalous, less threatening to our comfortable assurance that we know pretty much where the lines of reality are drawn.

According to Matthew, on the Sabbath immediately following the crucifixion of Jesus,

the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive,
'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first.' Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.' (27:62-66)

Why is Pilate's suggestion so attractive to certain contemporary Christians, including certain contemporary scholars?

In one of his sermons Frederick Buechner comments memorably on this fatal attraction. The fear within Pilate's visitors, unspoken and maybe even unfaced, may have included the fear...that the body that now lay dead in its tomb, disfigured by the mutilations of the Cross, that this body or some new and terrible version of it would start to breathe again, stand up in its grave clothes and move toward them with unspeakable power. To the extent that deep within themselves the Jewish elders feared this as a real possibility, their being told by Pilate to make things as secure as they could was to have the very earth pulled out from under them. How does an old man keep the sun from rising? How do soldiers secure the world against miracle? ("The End is Life," in The Magnificent Defeat [New York: Seabury Press, 1979], 76-77)

Buechner goes on to suggest that actually quite a lot can be done to secure the world against miracle. We can domesticate and spiritualize miracles. We can turn wine into water. We can convert the miracle of the resurrection-cum-empty tomb into the miracle of the living spirit of Jesus which, after two thousand years, still broods over the face of human life as Lincoln's spirit broods over Gettysburg. We can center our Easter celebrations on the immortality of Jesus' teachings, or on the ageless poetry of life, death, and rebirth—especially the rebirth of hope in the despairing human soul. Any of us not addicted to crisp thought or prose can contemplate Paul Van Buren's description of the Easter miracle: the disciples "experienced a discernment situation."

But none of this preserves the heart of the Gospel and the heart of the Christian religion. For that we need a resurrection in the usual sense, namely one that, as Davis finally puts it, "entails that the tomb was empty."

Here Davis's three concluding theological implications of the empty tomb assume high profile. The third is especially neglected by proponents of full tomb—or possibly full tomb—theories. As Davis says, "on the Christian view the whole of creation is to be redeemed in Christ, not just its spiritual or 'higher' aspects."

Creation includes bodies. That is why the classic Christian understanding of Jesus' resurrection goes beyond survival theories. The Resurrection is not merely a counterexample to the claim that death is equivalent to annihilation, but merely a piece of evidence for the immortality of the soul.

Nor, on the other hand, is it a Lazarus-like revival. Creation includes bodies; redemption includes transformation of these bodies. The particular novelty of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is that in it he is a pioneer, he is "first fruits" of a whole new situation in history in which God's creation is both vindicated and transformed. As C. S. Lewis once put it, Jesus "forced open a door that had been locked since the death of the first man." It is not as if Jesus bails out of creation, leaving the chrysalis of his body behind him. Jesus' resurrection rather corroborates and exceeds the traditional Jewish expectations of bodily resurrection in the Day of the Lord, as the Incarnation itself corroborates and exceeds Messianic expectations. Jesus' body is both raised and transformed. It is the first fruits of a general harvest of resurrections in which our glorified bodies shall be like his (Phil 3:21).

In his essay, Stephen Davis nicely blends biblical insight, philosophical rigor, and theological sensitivity in a successful attempt to defend a non-negotiable item of Christian belief.
The Empty Tomb in the Gospel According to Mark

Adela Yarbro Collins

The narrative concerning the empty tomb in the Gospel of Mark is related to the phenomenon we call "the resurrection of Jesus." The interpretation of this phenomenon is a good topic for a volume such as this, since it is a philosophical issue. Like other questions that border on mystery, it evokes one's fundamental view of reality. A number of interpretations of the resurrection of Jesus have been articulated, each based on a different set of fundamental presuppositions.

Perspectives on the Resurrection of Jesus

Some Christians argue, "Since the resurrection of Jesus is the heart of Christian faith, if he was not raised, Christian faith is a delusion." This argument is a restatement of 1 Corinthians 15:12–19. Others assert, "What is impossible with humankind is possible with God." This is a reformulation of a widespread ancient idea that appears in the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane according to Mark (14:36).\(^1\) This approach to the resurrection of Jesus is based on the authority of individual passages of Scripture that function as principles. For some, such a principle solves everything as far as the Resurrection is concerned. With regard to the first example, one could dispute that the restatement accurately reflects Paul's argument. Or one could dispute that the resurrection of Jesus is the heart of Christian faith. On the latter point, one could show
that there are entire books of the New Testament that do not use resurrection language. The problem with the second example—that all things are possible for God—is that it does not help us much in most of the rest of life—getting a car to run, dealing with snow, solving family problems.

Another approach is what we might call the canonical perspective. The underlying argument is basically, "The New Testament says that Jesus was raised, therefore he was." At present, this perspective is growing in the number of adherents. A sophisticated version of it implies that we cannot know for certain whether Jesus was raised, or prove that he was, but the New Testament provides the language or the symbol system of Christian belief. To be Christian means to experience oneself and one's world in its terms. The problem with this approach becomes apparent as soon as one recalls that the New Testament also says that slavery is to be accepted as part of Christian life. It could be objected that the resurrection of Jesus is foundational to Christianity, whereas acceptance of slavery is not. Such an objection, however, changes the rules of the game. The canonical perspective should take the entire canon into account, at least the entire New Testament. If one is to pick and choose, then criteria must be articulated for determining what is foundational and what is not.

A kind of pastoral perspective is often expressed, "People need assurance about life after death; therefore, I will tell them that the resurrection of Jesus gives them such assurance." It may well be that human beings need to believe in life beyond the grave. But most of us, except perhaps in foxholes and their equivalents, want to know that our beliefs are reliable. Some, even among the terminally ill, when presented with this argument will respond, "If that is all you can say, call the nurse."

Many of the more reflective approaches, that we may call philosophical, share as a starting point the profound idea that death is not the end. Various formulations have been proposed. One posits individual, conscious afterlife in some form. Another affirms immortality through one's chemical remains and the effects of one's deeds on society.

Another type of approach reflects the apparent importance of the natural sciences for thinking about the resurrection of Jesus. One point of view says that resurrection is physically impossible. No corpse could be resuscitated. Those who take this point of view reason from an alleged general law of nature to a specific historical situation. The position taken by Rudolf Bultmann is an example of this point of view, one that has been enormously influential in New Testament studies and theology in the twentieth century. This position is not based on the actual results of research in any one of the special sciences. It is rather the product of a general worldview in which the natural scientific focus on the empirical has been made absolute and functions as a secular myth.

Another perspective of this general type interprets the resurrection as the transformation of matter from one form into another. Jesus' physical body was transformed into a spiritual state as water becomes steam.

Whereas Bultmann assumed that historical inquiry must work within the limits set by the natural sciences, another position is that the point of view of the historian need not be determined by the natural sciences. A historical event is always particular; all the elements of one event will never be repeated exactly. Richard R. Niebuhr, for example, asks whether it is not within the realm of historical probability that the elements of the resurrection of Jesus were present only once.

Recently there has been more interest in the implications of the social sciences for understanding the resurrection of Jesus than the natural sciences. A sociological perspective begins with the function of the resurrection of Jesus for the group of his disciples. An old and negative form of this approach is the theory that the disciples consciously and deliberately fabricated the story of the resurrection to cope with the death of Jesus and continue his work. A more psychological approach has been taken by those who argue that the appearances of the risen Jesus were individual and, in some cases, collective visionary or hallucinatory experiences.

A social-psychological theory of cognitive dissonance is very persuasive for some today. Cognitive dissonance may be defined
as conflict between one's view of reality or one's expectations of the future and what seems on the surface to be the case. In more technical terms, it consists of dissonant or inconsistent relations among cognitive elements.6 Dissonance or tension among perceptions or beliefs creates pressure to resolve or reduce that tension. The means of reducing the tension include changes in behavior, changes in cognition, and the seeking out of new information. This theory was applied first to apocalyptic expectations in the United States in the mid-twentieth century.7 Before long, it was used to explain phenomena in the ancient world, including the resurrection of Jesus.8 This theory could provide a psychological explanation for the appearances of the risen Jesus: they were visions produced unconsciously in order to resolve the tension created by the death of Jesus. The arrest and crucifixion of Jesus seemed to be disconfirming events of his disciples' belief that he was the definitive agent of God. Most applications of the theory to biblical literature, however, have focused on changes in behavior, such as increased missionary activity, and changes in beliefs attested by hermeneutical activity.9

There are two final perspectives that should be mentioned: the historical and the literary. The historical approach is the attempt to determine what probably took place; not possibly. Anything conceivable is possible, for example, that Jesus rode out of the tomb on a purple toad. The historian asks the question, "What can we construct from the evidence?" The best discussion of the resurrection of Jesus from this point of view is that by Van Harvey in his book The Historian and the Believer.10 The literary perspective has come into its own most recently.11 When the debate seems to be fruitless, the participants finally ask, "What are we doing here?" The literary approach raises the question of the form and the nature of the claims being made in the sources. Are they scientific, mythological, historical, metaphorical, psychological or what?

New Testament scholarship begins with the historical and literary approaches for several reasons:

1. The resurrection of Jesus is said to have taken place in the first century. Only those who debate this claim can avoid the historical approach.

2. The evidence about the resurrection is found in literary texts.
3. Christianity has always claimed to be a historical religion. It is not founded on timeless insight or deep experience in the Jungian sense. It is founded on events among people. Therefore, the literary and historical approaches are essential.
4. All the other approaches depend on these two.

The Oldest Text: 1 Corinthians 15

In taking a historical and literary approach to the resurrection of Jesus, it is most appropriate to begin with the oldest text that refers to it in some detail, namely, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. This letter was written in the early 50s of the first century. Very few New Testament scholars today would date the earliest Gospel before 66 C.E. In chapter 15, beginning in verse 3, Paul cites pre-gospel tradition about the resurrection of Jesus. The terms "received" and "handed over" in verses 1 and 3 are technical terms that show he is reporting tradition.12 The use of non-Pauline words and phrases in verses 3-5 support the conclusion that we have tradition here.13 Paul has clearly elaborated this tradition at least by adding comments about his own experience in verses 8-11. Whether he added comments to the tradition preserved in verses 3-7 is debated.14

First Corinthians 15 is an important historical source, not only because it is early, but also because it is written by a participant in the phenomenon under discussion. Paul's language clearly shows that he considered his experience of the risen Lord to be of the same nature as those of Peter and the rest of the Twelve: "He appeared to [or was seen by] Peter . . . he appeared also to [or was seen also by] me"(vv. 5, 8).15 Further, in this passage Paul does not simply repeat the tradition and state his experience. He goes to considerable lengths to explain how the notion of resurrection is to be understood (vv. 35-50).

Paul's understanding of the resurrection of Jesus does not involve the revival of his corpse. The resurrected person has a "spiritual body" (v. 44) that is not a slightly modified form of the physical body. The spiritual body is as different from the physical body as the plant is from the seed (vv. 36-37). The
physical body is terrestrial, whereas the spiritual body is celestial (vv. 40–41). Figurative use of language about seeds and plants was very common in the ancient world. To understand Paul's intention in using this figurative language, we must look very closely at his argument. The most important thing to notice is that Paul emphasizes the discontinuity between the seed and the plant: "what you sow is not the body which is to be... But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body" (1 Cor 15:37–38). In other words, for Paul, the seed "dies" and God creates a plant in its place. Paul seems to have in mind here the phenomenon whereby the sprout of a new plant springs forth from that which is planted, such as a bean or a potato, and the "seed" itself shrivels and eventually decomposes. There is of course, for Paul, continuity between the dead person buried and the person who is raised. This is not, however, primarily material continuity in the sense of a relatively slight transformation of the body. It is rather the continuity of the personhood.

According to this interpretation, the phrase "that which you sow" in verse 36 figuratively refers to the whole (dead) person who is buried. It is the whole person who "is not made alive unless one dies." In verse 37, the referent of "that which you sow" has shifted a bit. Such a shift is not uncommon elsewhere in Paul's letters. In verse 37 "that which you sow" figuratively refers to the physical, earthly body. It is not the same as "the body that will come into being," i.e., the spiritual, resurrected body. The physical, earthly body is like a grain, bean, or potato that is used as a seed, out of which the plant comes, but that itself shrivels and decays. In verses 42–44 there is a series of verbs, all of which are in the third person singular. The implied subject of these verbs needs to be expressed in an English translation. The range of possibilities includes "he," "she," "one," and "it." The Greek is somewhat ambiguous. The antecedent of the implied subject could be the "seed" ( kokkon) mentioned in verse 37 or "that which you sow" (ho speireis) mentioned in verses 36 and 37. Both of these are rather distant from the series of verbs that begins in verse 42. Since verse 42 begins with the statement "So also [is] the resurrection of the dead (plural)," the most appropriate subject to supply is "one of the dead." Thus, the following statements should be translated, "One is sown in corruption, one is raised in corruption; one is sown in dishonor, one is raised in glory; one is sown in weakness, one is raised in power; one is sown as a body characterized by the principle of earthly life (sôma psychikon), one is raised as a body characterized by spirit (sôma pneumatikon). The translation "one is sown as a body" seems odd only if one is unaware that Paul sometimes used the word "body" (sôma) to characterize the whole human person, albeit from a specific point of view (Phil 1:20; 1 Cor 6:15 [cf. 1 Cor 12:27], 7:4, 9:27, 13:3; 2 Cor 10:10; Rom 6:12, 12:1).16

Paul's understanding of resurrection is like that of Daniel 12. Most English translations of verse 2 are misleading. The Revised Standard Version, for example, refers to "those who sleep in the dust of the earth." This translation is supported by the versions, but not by the Masoretic Text. The Hebrew phrase is best translated "those who sleep in a land of dust." This expression is not an allusion to bodies in graves. "The land of dust" is a description of Sheol or Hades where the shades of the dead are confined.17 Those who "awake" are not reunited with their physical bodies, but "shine like the brightness of the firmament," "like stars" (v. 3). In other words, they are given celestial bodies, like those of the heavenly beings. That Paul's understanding of resurrection was similar to that expressed in Daniel 12 is supported by Paul's comparison of resurrection bodies to the sun, moon, and stars in 1 Corinthians 15:40–41. Both Daniel 12 and 1 Corinthians 15 express the notion of resurrection in terms of astral immortality.18 Neither the book of Daniel nor Paul shows any interest in what happens to the physical body. Presumably it decays and has no importance for the resurrected person. This interpretation of Daniel 12 is supported by the description of personal afterlife for the righteous in the book of Jubilees, "And their bones shall rest in the earth, and their spirits shall have much joy" (Jub 23:22). It is important to note that both Daniel 12 and the book of Jubilees are of Palestinian provenance.19

In Paul's understanding, Jesus was transformed into a completely different kind of existence. The remark in verse 50, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable," implies that the resurrection "body" is not material in the same way that the earthly body is. This interpretation is confirmed by the contrast in 2 Corinthians 5
between the earthly body as a "tent" that is to be folded up or destroyed and the heavenly "body" as an eternal "building" waiting for us in the heavens.20 Thus, for Paul, and presumably for many other early Christians, the resurrection of Jesus did not imply that his tomb was empty.

Appearances and Empty Tomb

Thus it is not surprising, although noteworthy, that the tradition cited by Paul does not mention the empty tomb. In his own elaboration and discussion of the theme, Paul also does not mention the empty tomb. The summaries of the Gospel in the book of Acts also fail to mention the empty tomb.21 The fact that Paul, especially, does not mention it has led some scholars to argue that the tradition about the empty tomb was an apologetic invention intended to support the early Christian proclamation about the resurrection.22 There are several problems with this theory. If such were the origin of the tradition, it is odd that it is not used apologetically in the book of Acts. Further, if the empty tomb story was invented to "prove" the resurrection of Jesus, it is odd that the only witnesses to the emptiness of the tomb, at least in Matthew and Mark, are women.23 The status of women in the ancient world was such that a story fabricated as proof or apology would probably not be based on the testimony of women.

The empty tomb story is difficult for everyone, regardless of perspective. There is a major textual problem regarding what the original ending of Mark was. Text-critical principles and linguistic studies indicate that the original ending was verse 8.24 The list of women varies among the Gospels; some argue that it varies even within Mark. The status of the stone varies among the Gospels. Within Mark, why do the women go without having a plan for moving the stone? Whether Jesus was anointed before burial varies among the Gospels. Within Mark, why do the women intend to anoint Jesus on the second day after his death? Assuming that Mark ended with 16:8, the women are told to tell but they do not. Why not? Was the empty tomb tradition new with Mark? Is their silence meant to explain why the tradition about the empty tomb was not known before Mark was written?

The Empty Tomb in the Gospel According to Mark

Another problem is who really buried Jesus. According to Acts 13:29, it was his enemies. According to the Synoptics, it was Joseph of Arimathea. It is quite credible that Acts 13:29 is as precise a historical report of the burial of Jesus as can be reconstructed. The Joseph story may be an apologetic legend; at least it seems to grow into one, as is evident from a comparison of the four canonical Gospels.

Some argue that the very fact that the empty tomb tradition is only loosely related to the tradition of appearances of the risen Jesus is evidence that the empty tomb tradition is equally old.25 Most New Testament scholars at present accept the argument that the Gospel of Mark is the oldest gospel. In the opinion of this majority, Mark 16:1–8 is, therefore, the oldest attestation of the tradition that the tomb was empty.26 One's judgment about the age of the empty tomb tradition will depend on the literary question regarding the origin of this passage.27 The options are: (1) it is based on a pre-Markan passion narrative; (2) it is based on another source, oral or written, adapted by the author of Mark; and (3) it was composed by the author of Mark.

The Literary History of Mark 16:1–8

Those who assume that there was a pre-Markan passion narrative explain the agreements and continuities between chapters 15 and 16 as evidence for the use of the same source for the two chapters. Those who dispute the existence of such a source, or who think it ended with the burial of Jesus, explain the elements of continuity as the result of composition or editing by the author of Mark. Whether or not there was a pre-Markan passion narrative is disputed. The older form-critical view is that there was. This view was articulated by Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann.28 The newer form-critical view is that the hypothesis of a pre-Markan connected passion narrative is untenable; the elements that connect the separate pericopes are editorial additions of the author of Mark. This view was argued in detail by Eta Linnemann.29 For decades many scholars accepted the existence of a pre-Markan passion narrative on the basis of the authority and arguments of Dibelius and Bultmann. Although Linnemann
has not persuaded everyone, her book at least has shown that
the existence of such a document is not an assured result of
New Testament scholarship. Detailed redaction critical analyses
of Mark 14–15 have also called into question the existence of a
pre-Markan passion narrative. One may not, then, begin on the
basis of such an assumption.

Several types of arguments are brought forward as evidence
that the author of Mark made use of a briefer source in composing
16:1–8. The burial scene at the end of chapter 15 and the empty
tomb story are said not to “match.” The names of the women
are said to differ in the two chapters. The burial described in
15:46 is said not to be incomplete. Thus there is tension between
the account of the burial and the motivation for the women’s
visit to the tomb. It is also claimed that, from the point of view
of the author of Mark, Jesus was already anointed for burial by
the anonymous woman in the anecdote recounted in 14:3–9. The
passage about the woman anointing Jesus was seen by the early
form critics as an insertion by the author of Mark into the pre-
Markan passion narrative.

The names of the women are given for the first time in 15:40
as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and
Joses, and Salome. Here they are presented as witnesses to the
crucifixion. Two of these women are mentioned again in 15:47 as
Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses. In this context
they are presented as witnesses to the burial of Jesus by Joseph
of Arimathea. In the beginning of the empty tomb story, three
women are introduced as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother
of James, and Salome. There is no compelling reason to think
that the three women referred to in 16:1 are not the same three
mentioned in 15:40. It is true that the references to them are not
verbally identical. But the differences may be explained perfectly
well as stylistic variations that avoid monotonous repetition. It is
the wording of the reference to the second woman that varies. In
the second two instances, the reference is shortened, first in one
way, then in another. Such shortening is understandable, given
the lengthiness of the full reference in the first instance (15:40).
Thus these differences are not evidence for the use of a source
in 16:1–8.

The Empty Tomb in the Gospel According to Mark

The account of the burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea in
chapter 15 does not mention anointing of the body with aromatic
spices. Raymond Brown has made a credible case recently that,
from the point of view of the author of Mark, this burial is a
dishonorable burial, the type afforded a criminal. He argues
that Joseph performs it, not out of reverence for Jesus, but in
order to observe the commandment of Deuteronomy 21:22–23,
“And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and
he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall
not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the
same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God; you shall not
defile your land which the Lord your God gives you for an
inheritance.” The relevance of this commandment, or one like it, is
implied in Mark 15:42–43, “And when evening had come, since
it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath,
Joseph of Arimathea a respected member of the Council . . . went
to Pilate. . . .” The reference to sunset supplies the motivation
for Joseph’s request that Pilate allow him to bury the body. In
the case of a dishonorable burial, anointing was not necessarily
customary and should not be supplied by the modern reader. If
this is an accurate reading of the burial story in its historical and
literary context, this burial would have seemed incomplete to the
disciples of Jesus. Thus, within the narrative of Mark, the coming
of the women to the tomb to anoint the body would be motivated
and would “fit” with the previous narrative.

The argument that Mark would not have composed a narra-
tive involving women going to the tomb to anoint Jesus because
he had already been anointed by the anonymous woman is not
strong. The relationship between the two passages may be under-
stood in terms of Markan compositional technique. In the first
place, the intention of the women is ironic: there will be no body
to anoint, since Jesus has not remained in the grave. Secondly,
the appearance of the motif of anointing in chapter 16 reminds
the reader of the earlier passage and encourages reflection on its
significance.

Another argument brought to bear is that certain verses in
this passage are “overloaded” with particular kinds of markers.
The point is that the source had its markers and the author of
Mark added his own. For example, 16:2 is said to “pile up” temporal indicators.\(^36\) The first such indicator is “very early.” Since a similar Greek phrase appears also in 1:35, its use here is attributed to the author of Mark.\(^37\) The second is “on the first day of the week” or “on the first day after the Sabbath.” It has been argued that this temporal expression is a Semitic phrase that Mark has retained from his source.\(^38\) If this is a Semitic expression obscure enough to warrant the conclusion of the use of a source here, it is odd that the author of Luke preserves it without correction in the parallel to this passage (Luke 24:1) and also uses it in Acts 20:7, when, presumably, composing freely.\(^39\) “After the sun had risen” is the third indicator. A “double step” compositional technique has been recognized elsewhere in Mark, in which a second phrase qualifies the first.\(^40\) If one rejects the theory that the phrase “on the first day of the week” comes from a source, then the first two indicators may be seen as one: “very early on the first day of the week.” Then the phrase “after the sun had risen” may be seen as a second phrase, qualifying the first in typical Markan fashion. More significantly, the temporal markers in 16:1–2 may be seen as the author’s attempt to explain why the women did not attempt to anoint Jesus sooner. They had to wait until the Sabbath was over to purchase the spices (v. 1); then they went to the tomb at the earliest feasible time—as soon as it was light (v. 2).

Another kind of “overloading” has been perceived in 16:8. This verse has several references to fear. The second clause states that *tromos* (trembling) and *ekstasis* (astonishment) seized the women. The word *tromos* does not appear elsewhere in Mark. It appears four times elsewhere in the New Testament in the combination *phobos kai tromos* (fear and trembling). The word *ekstasis* is used in Mark 5:42 to express the astonishment of the onlookers when Jesus raises the daughter of Jairus from the dead. Some argue that these two words expressing fear are rare, whereas the verb used in the last clause—(and they said nothing to anyone,) for they were afraid (*ephobounto*)—and the related noun (*phobos*) occur often in Mark in connection with the disciples.\(^41\) Against this argument it must be pointed out that *tromos* is hardly a rare word. In addition, the word *ekstasis* appears twice in Mark, in both cases in the same sense, and both times the context is related to resurrection. Linguistic arguments alone do not compel the conclusion that the “overloading” of this verse with references to fear is evidence for the use of a source.

Both cases of alleged “overloading” may be understood as features of composition rather than of editing. The several indications of time in verse 2 may be understood in various ways, for example, as an attempt at verisimilitude or at accurate reporting. The several expressions of fear in verse 8 may have been used for dramatic effect. It may well be that the last two clauses link this incident with an aspect of the theme of discipleship in the gospel. But such a link does not necessarily imply that the preceding clause comes from a source.

These linguistic arguments, weak in themselves, are meant to bolster a form critical argument against the unity of this passage.\(^42\) Legendary elements in the passage have been pointed out, such as the motif of the large stone and the implicit quest for a helper to remove the stone.\(^43\) Similarly, apocalyptic elements relating to narratives about the appearance of an angel, the genre “angelophany” or “angelic epiphany,” have been noted. The discernment of such elements, however, does not warrant the conclusion that they could not occur together in a single, unified narrative.\(^44\)

The command of the angel to the women to go and tell the disciples and Peter that “he goes before you to Galilee” in verse 7 is seen by some as secondary and thus as evidence of a source. Bultmann, for example, argued that the speech of the angel originally functioned simply to point out the empty tomb as evidence for the resurrection (v. 6). The command in verse 7, in his view, was added by the author of Mark to link the empty tomb tradition connected with Jerusalem to the tradition of appearances in Galilee.\(^45\) This argument, however, is bound up with Bultmann’s opinion that the Gospel of Mark could not have ended with 16:8. His reconstruction of how the gospel “must have ended” is overly speculative. Nevertheless, many scholars have agreed with him that verse 7 was added to an existing story.\(^46\) The most obvious reason for seeing this verse as Markan composition is its connection with 14:28. In chapter 14, soon after Jesus and the disciples arrive on the Mount of Olives, Jesus tells them that after he is raised he will go before them to Galilee (v. 28). In chapter 16, the angel asks the women to remind the disciples of this promise.
Obviously, the link between 16:7 and 14:28 is insufficient evidence by itself to require the conclusion that a source was used in 16:1-8. A deeper reason for seeing 16:7 as redactional rather than as part of a unified composition by the author of Mark is the perceived tension between the command of the angel and the response of the women. Wilhelm Boussert argued long ago that the statement in verse 8, “and they said nothing to anyone” referred originally to the discovery of the empty tomb (v. 6) and not to the command that they give the disciples the message about Galilee (v. 7). The point of their silence, according to Boussert, was to explain why the story of the empty tomb had remained unknown for so long. A number of scholars have argued that the reminder that Jesus goes before the disciples to Galilee implies the restoration of Peter after his denial and of all the disciples after their flight. Pheme Perkins concluded that the implication of restoration may be the import of 16:7 as pre-Markan tradition, but not of the passage as a whole in the intention of the author. She seems to imply that the tension between verse 7 and the context supports the hypothesis that a source was used. At the same time, however, she admits that the element of restoration may be seen as a feature of Markan redaction. Her own interpretation of the passage as a whole makes sense of the tension as a paradoxical affirmation that the disciples will be Jesus’ witnesses, in spite of their incomprehension and fear, combined with an implicit warning to the readers not to repeat the pattern of both the male and the female disciples. Another possibility is that the silence of the women is not to be taken literally, but is a conventional expression of the human reaction to the numinous. In any case, it should be apparent that the hypothesis of a source is unnecessary to explain or resolve the tensions in the passage.

Mark 16:1–8 as a Unified Composition

Mark 16:1–8 may be seen then as a unified and effective composition. It continues chapter 15 logically and appropriately. Joseph had buried the body of Jesus just before or just as the Sabbath was beginning. The women, however, it is implied, do not accept that burial as adequate. As soon as the Sabbath ends, presumably at sunset or shortly thereafter, the women purchase the aromatic spices needed to anoint Jesus (v. 1). Then they wait, presumably for the sake of safety or propriety, until sunrise to go to the tomb (v. 2). Their question to one another on the way to the tomb, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb,” creates dramatic tension and leads the reader to expect something extraordinary to occur (v. 3). The arrival of the women at the tomb is narrated very strikingly. They see that the stone has already been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. The extraordinary character of this situation is brought out by the remark that the stone was very large (v. 4). Some scholars have argued that the removal of the stone is significant for how the reader of Mark is intended to conceive of the resurrection of Jesus. We shall return to this point later. The next verse builds dramatically on the previous one. The extraordinary situation of the stone is followed by an even more uncanny incident. When the women enter the tomb, there is a young man there dressed in a white robe (v. 5). It is clear that this young man, in spite of the parallel with the young man in 14:51–52, is not presented as a human being. It was a well-known apocalyptic convention to speak of angelic beings as “men.” The white robe is also a conventional attribute of heavenly beings. The reaction of the women is described in very strong terms: exethambēthesan (they were amazed).

The description of the appearance of the angel is so restrained that it does not seem appropriate to characterize the passage as an angelic epiphany. The role of the angel is to indicate the significance of the empty tomb. Thus the angelic young man plays the role of the angelus interpres, a narrative role common in apocalyptic literature and other texts influenced by it. His exhortation to the women that they not be amazed (v. 6) is a typical angelic reassurance relating to the consternation and fear of the human recipient of revelation. The rest of the speech of the angel, including verse 7, has the narrative function of interpreting the empty tomb. The remarks following the reassurance, from “You seek Jesus, the Nazarene, who was crucified” to “see the place where they laid him” (v. 6), have at least the implicit function of making the point that the women have come to the right place. They have not confused the grave of Jesus with
another, empty grave. In the center of this first pronouncement is the key interpretation of the empty tomb, "he has been raised" (agerethē). In the narrative context of Mark 16, the announcement of the resurrection of Jesus serves to interpret the empty tomb. As I shall argue below, the author of Mark has interpreted the early Christian proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus by composing a narrative about the empty tomb.66

The second pronouncement of the angel, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He goes before you into Galilee; there you will see him, just as he said to you'" (v. 7), indicates the significance of the empty tomb for the disciples. It is the first stage in the fulfillment of the prophecy Jesus gave them on the Mount of Olives. At the moment in which the angel is speaking to the women within the narrative, the first part of Jesus' prophecy, "after I am raised up" (14:28), has been fulfilled. Some scholars have argued that the renewed promise, "there you will see him" (16:7), refers to the parousia, that is, to the return of Jesus on the clouds as Son of Man.67 This interpretation is unlikely because language of "power" and "glory" associated with the parousia elsewhere in Mark (9:1, 13:26; cf. 14:62) does not occur here. The parousia and Galilee are not associated anywhere else in the Gospel. It is more likely that the promise alludes to the same tradition of appearances that Paul recounts in 1 Corinthians 15:5.58

It was standard literary practice in the ancient world to allude to well-known events that occurred after those being narrated in a text without actually narrating those later events.59 The Iliad is perhaps the best-known example of this technique.60 Thus the fact that the appearances are not narrated in Mark does not necessarily mean that the author believed that they did not occur or wanted to suppress them. The main problem is how to interpret the relationship between the angel's announcement and the conclusion of the narrative in verse 8.

The first part of verse 8, "And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and amazement had seized them," is understandable as an example of the typical human reaction of terror in the presence of the numinous. The second part of the verse, "and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid" is a stupifyingly abrupt ending to the Gospel. Werner Kelber has historicized this ending, claiming that it means that the Twelve

and the members of Jesus' family rejected his intention that the Kingdom of God on earth, the Christian community, be established in Galilee. The Twelve never got the message. In any case, they and the family of Jesus preferred to stay in Jerusalem, closer to the center of power as they understood it and the place with which their own eschatological expectations were associated.61 It is surprising that a scholar with so much literary sensitivity, who has argued that the Gospel of Mark is "parabolic,"62 should insist on defining the meaning of verse 8 so absolutely. It seems more appropriate to see this ending as deliberately provocative and open-ended as numerous scholars in this century have taught us to read the parables of Jesus. It lures the reader to reflect on the events narrated and on one's own relation to those events. The disciples function in a complex way as both positive and negative examples or role models.

With regard to the eschatological events, the lack of narration of the appearances makes the impression on the reader that the chain of eschatological events is not yet completed. The narratives of the appearances of the risen Jesus in Matthew, Luke, and John, round off the story. Matthew and Luke still express eschatological expectation, but it is balanced by the sense of the presence of the risen Lord with the community. Mark lacks such a satisfying denouement. One result is that the readers are asked to complete the story, not only by imagining the fulfillment of the promise of appearances, as 14:28 and 16:7 should probably be interpreted, but also by imagining the fulfillment of the dramatic and vivid promises that the Son of Man would return (13:24-27, 14:62).

The Ancient Notion of Translation

The idea that a human being could be removed from the sphere of ordinary humanity and made immortal is a very ancient one. The oldest narrative known to me of such an event is found on a tablet excavated in Nippur that contains part of the Sumerian flood-story.63 The hero of this story is the king Ziusudra. A deity informs him that there will be a flood and instructs him to build a huge boat. After the flood, Ziusudra offers sacrifice. Near the end
of the passage that is preserved, it is said that the gods Anu and Enlil cherished Ziusudra. They give him life like a god. They give him breath eternal like [that of] a god. They cause him to dwell at the place where the sun rises. These honors are granted him apparently because he is the preserver of vegetation and the seed of humankind.

In the Akkadian Gilgamesh Epic, Gilgamesh journeys through a great mountain range and over the Waters of Death to reach the flood-hero, who in this epic is named Ut-napishtim. The purpose of the quest is to obtain the secret of immortality. In tablet XI of the epic, Ut-napishtim recounts the story of the flood for Gilgamesh. At the end of the story he tells how the god Enlil announced, "Henceforth Ut-napishtim and his wife shall be like unto us gods. Ut-napishtim shall reside far away, at the mouth of the rivers." Earlier in the epic it was said that Ut-napishtim had joined the Assembly [of the gods]. In the Atrahasis Epic, that includes a Babylonian version of the flood on tablet III, a similar story is told about the flood-hero Atra-hasis and his wife.

In the Hebrew Bible it is not the flood-hero Noah who was translated, but the antediluvian patriarch, Enoch. His destiny is tersely related in chapter 5 of Genesis. It is said that "Enoch walked with God" (vv. 22 and 24) and that "he was not, for God took him" (v. 24). It is not said that Moses was translated. In the book of Deuteronomy it is said that he died in the land of Moab (34:5). But it is said that God buried him and that no one knows the place of his burial (v. 6). These latter remarks suggested to later readers that Moses had in fact been translated. The translation of Elijah is described in vivid detail in the second chapter of the second book of Kings. This translation, unlike that of Enoch, is explicitly said to have been witnessed (by Elisha).

The oldest Greek texts that speak of translations of human beings are the Iliad and the Odyssey. According to book 20 of the Iliad, Tros, the lord of the Trojans, had three sons. One of these, Ganymedes, because of his unsurpassed beauty, was caught up by the gods to themselves, made immortal and made the cupbearer of Zeus (20.230–35). The mortal Tithonos is mentioned in this context as the descendant of one of Ganymedes' brothers (20.237). Earlier in the epic, his translation by the goddess Dawn is mentioned (11.1). This allusion presupposes a tradition that Dawn had made Tithonos immortal to be her spouse and to dwell by the River Okeanos where Dawn rises (cf. Iliad 19.1–2).

In book 4 of the Odyssey, Menelaos, the husband of Helen, tells Telemachos how he tricked the god Proteus into advising him how to make his way home and giving him news of his companions. Proteus' revelations include a prophecy that Menelaos will not die; rather the gods will cause him to dwell on the Elysian Plain at the end of the world, where life is as pleasant as on Mount Olympus. The reason given for this great blessing is that he is, as husband of Helen, a son of Zeus (4.560–70). Menelaos is to join Rhadamantys who apparently was transported to the Elysian Plain earlier, according to tradition. The details of his story are lost, but it is interesting to note that he was also said to be a son of Zeus (Iliad 14.321–22).

All of these traditions imply that the human beings translated became gods, i.e., immortal. They seem to assume that in these cases, the soul (psyche) was never separated from the body. In some cases, however, the human being in question dies first and then is made immortal. The Aithiopis, a continuation of the Iliad that survives only in references to it in other authors, tells how Memnon, the Ethiopian prince, brought help to the Trojans. He is slain by Achilles, whereupon Memnon's mother, Dawn, obtains permission from Zeus to carry his body to the end of the earth in the East and there to grant immortality to her son. According to the same epic poem, when Achilles was slain and placed on his funeral pyre, his mother, the divine Thetis, carried his body from the pyre to White Island. The extract does not say so, but undoubtedly she restored him to life there and made him immortal.

All the traditions discussed so far involve immortal life in regions on the surface of the earth, most of which are normally not accessible to humanity. There is another type of translation-story that involves removal beneath the earth and subterranean immortality, often in a cave. This type of immortality is analogous to that of the "heroes," who died, were buried, and from their graves gave proof of a higher existence and powerful influence. It is noteworthy that the later belief in heroes required a grave at which the continued existence and potency of the hero was localized. Erwin Rohde's reconstruction of one of the traditions...
associated with the hero Hyakinthos is instructive. Originally a chthonic deity, he was later transformed into a hero, who died, was buried, and then was translated to heaven.\textsuperscript{75}

The case of Asklepios as hero is also instructive. According to this tradition, he was a mortal who was transformed into an immortal by a flash of Zeus' lightning.\textsuperscript{76} Part of this tradition is that Asklepios was buried.\textsuperscript{77} Thus his story is that of a hero who died, was buried, and then translated.

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 observances at the site of the tomb, it would still be important as a literary motif in characterizing Jesus as hero-like.\textsuperscript{78}

An example that does not involve the death of the hero, but is instructive for the role of the angel in Mark 16, is the case of Kleomedes of Astypalaia, related by Pausanius and several other writers. Kleomedes killed his opponent in the boxing match at the seventy-first Olympic festival (486 B.C.E.) and was therefore disqualified. In his anger at this turn of events, he behaved destructively upon his return home. His behavior caused the death of some boys. He fled to the temple of Athena and hid in a chest. When the chest was forced open by his pursuers, Kleomedes was not inside. Envoys were sent to inquire of the oracle. They were told that he had become a hero and must be honored with sacrifice. The oracle is able to explain a supernatural occurrence to human inquirers because the oracle sees such events as one spirit sees another.\textsuperscript{79} This perspective is instructive both for the role of the angel at the empty tomb and for the role of the demons or unclean spirits in Mark who know that Jesus is the son of God.

Finally, the case of Herakles should be mentioned. In agony because of the poison on his garment, he made his own funeral pyre and mounted it. Apollodorus says, "While the pyre was burning, it is said that a cloud passed under [Herakles] and with a peal of thunder wafted him up to heaven. Thereafter he obtained immortality, and being reconciled to Hera he married her daughter Hebe, by whom he had sons..."\textsuperscript{80} The traditional mythic view is obviously that immortal life is much like mortal life and that Herakles was embodied in his afterlife. Another interpretation is that the pyre burned away the mortal part of his nature, inherited from his mortal mother, so that the immortal part, inherited from his father Zeus, could ascend to the gods.\textsuperscript{81} The Pythian priestess had promised Herakles immortality upon completion of the ten labors or tasks (Apollodorus, Library 2.4.12). Later writers interpreted this as an honor granted because of his great benefactions to humankind.

In the Hellenistic and early Roman periods these traditions of translation and deification were very widespread. The Hellenistic Babylonian historian Berossus, writing in Greek, retold the ancient flood-story. In his version the flood-hero is named Xisouthros. In recounting his translation, Berossus says that he "disappeared" (aphanës gignomai), using a term that had become almost technical in describing such occurrences.\textsuperscript{82} A new element in the account is Berossus' explanation of the event: he was translated because of his piety. Josephus describes Enoch's translation as "he returned to the divinity" (Ant. 1.85). He uses an expression similar to Berossus' in describing the translation of Elijah, "Elijah disappeared from among human beings." A little further on, he says of both Enoch and Elijah that "they became invisible and no one knows of their death" (Ant. 9.28). The expression "become invisible" is synonymous with "disappear" and is also typical of Hellenistic accounts of translation.\textsuperscript{83}

The terminology used by Josephus makes clear that he was presenting Enoch, Moses, and Elijah as Jewish forefathers who had not died, but had been translated alive and made immortal, like the forefathers of the Greeks and Romans.\textsuperscript{84} Another Jewish writer who wrote in Greek shows that the idea of resurrection could be associated with the Greco-Roman ideas of translation and deification. Phocylides was a Greek poet from Miletus who lived in the sixth century B.C.E. Around the turn of the era, a Jewish poet wrote a work under the name and in the style of Phocylides, probably in Alexandria.\textsuperscript{85} A section of this poem is devoted to death and after-life. The author advocates moderation in grief (lines 97–98) and the duty of burying the dead (99). He then advises against opening the graves of the deceased (100–103). The rejected practice may be secondary burial\textsuperscript{86} or the removal of bodies from their graves in order to dissect the corpses.\textsuperscript{87} The following statement is given as the reason, "For in fact we hope
that the remains of the departed will soon come to the light again out of the earth. And afterwards they become gods" (104). The coming to light of the remains of the departed out of the earth is a clear expression of hope in the bodily type of resurrection, that will be discussed below. The statement that the dead become gods after being raised is an expression of the idea of resurrection in Greco-Roman terms. The word "god" in Greek is synonymous with the word "immortal." So Pseudo-Phocylides is using typical Greek language of the blessed dead to express the idea that the resurrected faithful are exalted to the angelic state. We should recall at this point that the community at Qumran referred to angelic beings as "gods" (elîm). 89

The Resurrection of Jesus in Mark

At the time the Gospel of Mark was written, there were two basic notions of resurrection current, one that emphasized its heavenly character and one that emphasized its bodily character. The heavenly type was expressed in Daniel 12, as was pointed out earlier. 90 The bodily or physical type is attested by the second book of Maccabees. This work contains the story of seven brothers and their mother who were tortured and killed during the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Among the tortures were the cutting out of the tongue and the cutting off of hands and feet. Regarding the torture of the third son, the text reads, "When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, and said nobly, 'I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again!'" (2 Macc 7:10–11). 91 There is no sign in the book of Daniel of a belief in bodily resurrection of the type present in 2 Maccabees. In the later period, however, the two types could be combined as the example of Pseudo-Phocylides shows. 92

Two elements are constant, however, in Jewish literature of the time, namely, that resurrection is a collective event and that it is an event of the future. 93 The notion of resurrection was not necessarily universal. 94 The picture of Daniel 12 is collective, but not universal: "many . . . shall awake" (v. 2). In 2 Maccabees, the emphasis is on the restoration of individuals, because of the narrative context. Nevertheless, the implicit context of the resurrection is the apocalyptic notion of the renewal of all creation. 95 Thus, one of the innovations of the Christian movement was the claim that God had raised a single individual, Jesus. Paul explained the resurrection of Jesus as the beginning of the renewal that would be followed soon by the resurrection of those who belong to him (1 Cor 15:20–23, 51–52).

The author of Mark was heir to the shocking but simple Christian proclamation that God had raised Jesus from the dead and to the tradition that the risen Jesus had appeared at least to Peter and the Twelve. In writing an extended narrative that expressed the good news (euaggelion; 1:1) of God's activity through Jesus, this author was faced with the challenge of narrating the resurrection. I have argued elsewhere that the genre of Mark is history in the apocalyptic mode. 96 My working hypothesis in this paper is that Mark 16:1–8 is fiction. In composing the story of the empty tomb, the author of Mark interpreted the proclamation that Jesus had been raised.

I am aware that objections have been raised to the notion that evangelists made up episodes and speeches. 97 With regard to speeches, it is widely known that Thucydides, the ancient historian with the most rigorous standards of evidence, stated explicitly that he constructed the speeches in his history of the Peloponnesian War by giving "whatever seemed most appropriate to me for each speaker to say in the particular circumstances, keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of what was actually said" (1.22). 98 I submit that the author of Mark did something analogous. He was convinced that what actually had happened was that Jesus had been raised from the dead. In composing 16:1–8, he described that event in what seemed to him the most appropriate way. So I am not arguing that the author of Mark made up an episode out of whole cloth. He regarded the resurrection of Jesus as an event attested by those to whom the risen Jesus had appeared. Since he did not have evidence for the details regarding how Jesus was raised, he reverently supplied those details in accordance with his sense of what must have happened. Since the male disciples had fled from the scene of the arrest, presumably because their lives were in danger, and since the author apparently assumed that they were in hiding at the time of the crucifixion
and burial, it seemed most appropriate to have female disciples discover the empty tomb.

The creation of the empty tomb story shows that the author of Mark had a notion of resurrection closer to that of 2 Maccabees than to that of Daniel 12. Resurrection for Mark is not the giving of a new, spiritual body to the inner person, the psyche, in a way that the former body does not matter. For Mark it is either a revival or transformation of the earthly body. If the text implies that Jesus pushed the stone away from the tomb and walked out, the resurrection is understood as a revival of the body. But such is not a necessary implication. The stone had to be rolled aside so that the women could enter the tomb and see that Jesus was not there. The stone could just as well have been moved by the angel. At least this is how the author of Matthew rewrote the text of Mark (Mt 28:2). If the text does not imply that Jesus walked out of the tomb, his resurrection, according to Mark, is best understood as a transformation of his earthly body.

If the risen Jesus is not pictured as walking out of the tomb, the alternative, in the language of the typical western Christian exegete, is that he ascended to heaven immediately. It has been pointed out that the ascension of Jesus, as narrated in the book of Acts, is similar to the Greco-Roman narratives of translation. I am suggesting that this tradition also influenced how Mark narrated the resurrection. The Christian affirmation was that a single individual, Jesus, had been raised from the dead. Apart from the usual collective context of the Jewish notion of resurrection, this affirmation seemed quite similar to the claim made in some Jewish circles that Enoch had been taken up to heaven and to the claims made in Greco-Roman circles regarding the translation or apotheosis of heroes, rulers, and emperors. I am not claiming that the empty tomb story was created with an apologetic purpose in the narrow sense. It was not meant to prove to outsiders that Jesus really was raised. Rather, the narrative pattern according to which Jesus died, was buried, and then translated to heaven was a natural way for an author living in the first century to narrate the resurrection of Jesus.

It could be objected that it is hard to find much influence of Greco-Roman literature in Mark. The first response that must be made to such an objection is to remind the objector that the Gospel of Mark was composed in Greek. This simple fact speaks volumes about the cultural milieu in which the text was written. One does not learn and use a language without being influenced by the culture of which it is part. Similarly, one does not address people competent in a certain language without drawing upon the thought-world for which that language is a vehicle. Recent studies have supported older suggestions that there are significant similarities between Mark and Greco-Roman literature in form, content, and style.

If, according to Mark, Jesus was translated from the grave to heaven, then there was no period of time during which the risen Jesus walked the earth and met with his disciples. The book of Acts states that he did so for forty days. The Gospels of John and Luke also imply that he did so, but, in the case of John at least, for a shorter period. Even Matthew recounts a scene in which the women meet the risen Jesus and take hold of his feet (28:9). If, as was concluded above, the author of Mark accepted the tradition that the risen Jesus had appeared to Peter and the Twelve, this appearance (or appearances) was probably of a more heavenly type, like the apocalyptic visions of heavenly beings. The appearance to the Eleven in Galilee in Matthew (28:16–20) may be understood in this way. The appearance to Paul as it is narrated in Acts is definitely of this type.

The effect of this understanding of the resurrection of Jesus is to place the accent on the absence of Jesus more than on the presence of Jesus during the time of the readers. As noted earlier, this accent is related to apocalyptic expectation. The disciples have a mission in this world (13:9–13, 8:34–37) and they will be judged on the basis of their fulfillment or non-fulfillment of that mission (8:38). The interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus as a type of translation has an effect on one’s reading of the apocalyptic discourse of chapter 13. That discourse has its climax in the prediction of the coming of the Son of Man with the clouds with great power and glory. The result of his appearance is that he will send out the angels to gather the faithful “from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven” (13:27). It is likely that this prediction refers to the same event that Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and 1 Corinthians 15:52. As their master was translated, so will his faithful disciples.
NOTES


2. This general perspective is that of the postliberal, cultural-linguistic school of theology, that characterizes the work of George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas, and others. See the discussion of this point of view (in general, not in relation to the resurrection in particular) by Frederic B. Burnham, "The Bible and Contemporary Science," Religion and Intellectual Life 6, The Bible and the Intellectual Life, (1989) 60–61.


12. Compare 1 Corinthians 11:23 in which the same verbs are used in citing the words of Jesus over the bread and wine at the last supper. That these terms were technical in the Hellenistic and Roman periods is shown by Hans Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 195.


15. The remark that Jesus appeared to Paul "last of all" (1 Cor 15:8) is not evidence that he distinguished the type of appearance he was granted from those of Peter and the Twelve. On the contrary, it marks his experience as the last in a series of the same type of experiences. The remark that Jesus appeared to him "as one prematurely born" (v. 8) does not imply that the nature of the appearance was any different. It was Paul who was different—he was not even a disciple yet. This interpretation is supported by the remark in the following verse that he was persecuting the Church of God (i.e., even at the time that Jesus appeared to him).


18. On the notion of astral immortality in the ancient world, see Franz Cumont, Lux Perpetua (Paris: Geuthner, 1949).

19. On the variety of conceptions of resurrection and other forms of personal afterlife in Palestinian Judaism, see Friedrich Schwally, Das Leben nach dem Tode: Nach den Vorstellungen des alten Israel und das judaicum einschließlich das Volksgericht im Zeitalter Christi (Giessen: J. Ricker, 1892); K. Schubert, "Die Entwicklung der Auferstehungslehre von der nachexilischen bis zur frühjüdischen Zeit,“
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the tomb was empty prior to the formulation of Mark 16:1–8 [or its source], but a presumption is not a tradition ("Empty Tomb," 136).


31. See, for example, Perkins, Resurrection, 115.

32. Bultmann argued that Mark 16:1–8 was independent of the sections of Mark that went before. If the narrative about the empty tomb had followed upon the narratives of the crucifixion and burial, he argued, the names of the women would not have needed to be given again in 16:1 (History, 284–285). Given the importance of the events being narrated, however, it is understandable that the names would have been given each time. The repetition is softened by variation in the form of the name of the second woman (see above).

33. The fact that the third woman, Salome, is not mentioned as a witness to the burial does not seem to be significant for the question of sources. It does not seem to be sufficient evidence to warrant the conclusion that the pericope about the burial was once a separate anecdote.


35. See the discussion of irony in David Rhoads and Donald Michie, Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 59–62.


37. For example, R. Pesch, cited by Perkins, ibid. See also Crossan, "Empty Tomb," 146–147.


40. Perkins, Resurrection, 117 and 140, n. 13, citing Rhoads and Michie, Mark as Story, 47–49.

41. Perkins (Resurrection, 121–122) and those cited in note 44, p. 143.

42. E. Bickermann attempted to define a literary form that could be called "translation-story" or "removal-story" and then to argue that


20. Paul’s language about being “further clothed” rather than “naked” does not imply material continuity from earthly body to heavenly “body” (2 Cor 5:2–4). Rather it expresses his opposition to the notion that the soul is completely immaterial.


23. In Matthew, of course, the guards see the angel and know that the tomb is empty. It is generally agreed, however, that the story of the guards at the tomb and the lie that they spread about the disciples stealing the body is later than the empty tomb story and is definitely apologetic. One of the problems that this story addresses indirectly is the reliability of women as witnesses.

24. At least these studies indicate that the material that follows Mark 16:8 in many manuscripts is not original. Some scholars argue that the original ending of Mark has been lost or suppressed. See, for example, Bultmann, History, 285, n. 2. In this paper, the assumption is made that the gospel ended with 16:8, since that is the earliest recoverable ending. Any attempt to reconstruct an earlier ending would be unduly speculative. An ending at verse 8 is also defensible.

25. So, for example, Perkins, Resurrection, 90.


27. As Crossan puts it, there may have been a presumption that
the source used by the author of Mark in 16:1–8 was such a story ("Das leere Grab," Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 23 [1924]: 281–292). Bultmann rightly disagreed and concluded that there is insufficient evidence that such a story lies behind Mark 16:1–8 (History, 290, n. 3). The conclusion that the literary form "translation-story" does not define Mark 16:1–8 or its alleged source does not mean that such stories or the notions they express had no influence on the passage.

43. Ibid., 118.

44. F. Neirynck has written an extensive survey of attempts to reconstruct the source used in Mark 16:1–8 (cited by Perkins, Resurrection 138, n. 2 and 139, nn. 9 and 10).


46. For example, J. Kremer, J. Delorme, R. H. Fuller, and A. Lindemann (cited by Perkins) and Perkins herself (Resurrection, 116, 120 and 140, nn. 16 and 17).


49. Ibid., 121.

50. Ibid., 121 and 122-123.

51. See, for example, Daniel 8:15–16, 9:21, 10:5. The term translated "young man" in Mark 16:5 is neaniskos. A related word, neanias, is used of angels in 2 Maccabees 3:26 and 33 and in Josephus, Antiquities 5.277.

52. See Daniel 7:9, 2 Maccabees 11:8–10, Acts 1:10.

53. The author of Mark is the only New Testament writer to use this word. It may express simple surprise (9:15) or the deepest kind of emotion (14:33); see Vincent Taylor, The Gospel According to St. Mark, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1966), 396, 552, 606.

54. So Bultmann, History, 287, 290. The angelus interpres sometimes interprets a vision (Daniel 7:15–18, 8:15–26) and sometimes explains a situation (Daniel 9:21–23, 10:2–14). Note that this same device is used to comment on the significance of the ascension in Acts 1:10–11.

55. Compare, for example, Daniel 8:17–18, 10:8–12.

56. See the discussion by Perkins (Resurrection, 119) of the kerygmatic elements in Mark 16:6.


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415–421. Werner Kelber and John Dominic Crossan hold this view, but understand the parousia in Mark in terms of the realization of the Kingdom of God in the activity of the followers of Jesus in Galilee (Kelber, The Kingdom in Mark [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974], 105, 107, 140, 146; Crossan, "The Empty Tomb," 146, 148–149).

58. Perkins, Resurrection, 120.


60. Ibid., 30–31.


64. An English translation by E. A. Speiser may be found in ANET, 73–97.

65. ANET, 95.

66. Ibid., 88.

67. The story of Kleitos, the mortal son of Manios, has similarities with both the stories of Ganymedes and Tithonus. Kleitos was carried off by Dawn to live among the gods because of his beauty (Od. 15.248–252).

68. Women, as well as men, were said to have been translated.

There is a tradition that Helen herself was made immortal and made to dwell on the White Island or in the Islands of the Blest (Erwin Rohde, Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1925], 83, n. 21). The nereid Leukothea was once the mortal Ino (Od. 5.333–335). There was also a tradition that Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon, was not sacrificed, but was translated by Artemis and made immortal in the land of the Taurians (Rohde, Psyche, 64).

69. Rohde, Psyche, 57.

70. Ibid., 64.

71. Ibid., 64–65.

72. Ibid., 89–92.

73. Ibid., 97.

74. Ibid., 98.

75. Ibid., 99–100.

76. Ibid., 100, 582.

77. Ibid., 101.
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Similitudes of Enoch, in which it is said that the resurrected righteous “will become angels in heaven” (1 Enoch 51:4; Sparks, The Apocryphal Old Testament, 231).

91. See also 2 Maccabees 14:37–46.
92. Pseudo-Phocylides incorporates several different understandings of afterlife with little concern for systematic coherence (see van der Horst, Pseudo-Phocylides, 188–189).

93. The idea that individual humans who had been translated would return to the earth at the end was widespread in Jewish literature of the second temple period, but these were men who had not died and thus did not need to be resurrected (e.g., Malachi 4:5 [3:23], 1 Enoch 90:31).

94. Many texts speak only of a resurrection of the just, e.g., Psalms of Solomon 3:10–12 [3:13–16].

99. Bultmann implies that the position of the stone when the women come to the tomb indicates that Jesus pushed it aside (History, 290, n. 3).

100. Compare the Gospel of Peter in which the stone rolls away by itself, presumably by divine power (Gospel of Peter 37; English translation given in David R. Cartridge and David L. Dungan, eds., Documents for the Study of the Gospels (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 85).
101. Bultmann, History, 290, n. 3.
103. Pease, citing a brief suggestion by F. Pfister, notes that there are certain likenesses between the disappearance of the body of Jesus.
from the tomb and certain pagan traditions, but he does not attempt
to explain them or to reconstruct the process by which they arose
(“Invisibility,” 29).
104. On the translation of rulers and emperors, see ibid., 16–17.
ment (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987); Vernon K. Robbins, Jesus
the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark (Philadelphia:
Fortress, 1984).

Resurrection Resurrected:
Comments on the Paper of
Adela Yarbro Collins

Norman Kretzmann

Professor Collins’s paper is illuminating and challenging. We
can all be grateful to her for the illumination; as her comment-
tator, I am especially grateful for the challenges clustered in her
bold, complex hypothesis and the elaborate, learned argument she
provides for it. The hypothesis and argument have to do with a
written report we have received from the first century: Jesus rose
from the dead.

Reflective, non-devotional considerations of this report under-
standably tend to focus immediately on the event it reports:
Is that possible? Did it really happen? What is its theological
significance? Of the nine “perspectives” on Jesus’ resurrection
Collins surveys early in her paper, the first seven are all focused
on the reported event. The last two, the historical and the literary
perspectives, are focused not on the event but instead on the
report itself, asking questions such as these: In the texts that
preserve it, what is that report really claiming? How are the
various versions of the report related to one another? Do they
agree with one another? And, as we have seen, Collins herself
adopts a literary-historical approach, focusing on the report rather
than the event.

It is not hard to accept her claim that such literary-historical
questions are more basic than all the others we are inclined to
ask about the resurrection of Jesus. Still, most Christians would
take those more basic questions to have been settled long ago. They would say that what is being claimed in the report that Jesus rose from the dead is that Jesus, after he died on the cross and was buried, left the tomb alive, on his own two feet. They would also say that all the various versions of this report in the New Testament are mutually compatible, differing only in their emphasis and the degree of their completeness. Collins's literary-historical results certainly challenge that standard position and call for a rejoinder from its adherents, among whom I still count myself, even after studying her paper.

Collins's main thesis is that the author of Mark's Gospel, whom I will call Mark, is the originator of the idea that Jesus' rising from the dead involved his leaving the tomb. She is definitely not suggesting (and indeed she denies) that Mark made up the story that Jesus rose from the dead, just the part about his leaving the tomb. Before hearing her paper, we might have thought that that wouldn't be enough of a contribution to get anyone even partial authorial credit; but we now know better: "Mark 16:1–8 is fiction. In composing the story of the empty tomb, the author of Mark interpreted the proclamation that Jesus had been raised." Although she refers to this claim as merely her "working hypothesis in this paper," it is actually the conclusion of an argument, which may be laid out in this form:

1. Mark 16:1–8 contains the story of the empty tomb.
2. Mark wrote his Gospel before the other evangelists wrote theirs.
3. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians before Mark wrote his gospel.
4. "Paul's understanding of the resurrection of Jesus does not involve the revival of his corpse. [F]or Paul . . . the resurrection of Jesus did not imply that his tomb was empty" (pp. 111 and 114).
5. The summaries of the gospel in the book of Acts are embedded in speeches the apostles made before Mark wrote his gospel.
7. Paul's letters and the summaries of the gospel in the book of Acts are the only New Testament sources besides Mark's gospel that are relevant to these considerations.
8. Mark 16:1–8 is the earliest appearance in the New Testament of the empty tomb as part of the story of Jesus' resurrection.
9. Mark 16:1–8 is not dependent on any earlier source.
10. Mark 16:1–8 is an original composition, a fictional narrative.

Although Collins's argument is directly concerned only with some of the New Testament accounts of Jesus' resurrection rather than with the resurrection itself, her conclusions clearly bear on our understanding of the resurrection, especially because she takes the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (at least) to be dependent on Mark. Her argument, therefore, deserves a careful look, even by those who, like me, are not biblical scholars.

Claim (8) does follow from (1) through (7); and, if we set divine inspiration aside for the sake of the argument, (10) follows, too. So unless we can reasonably object to one or more of her premises, we cannot reasonably reject her interpretation of Mark 16:1–8 and all that it entails.

I suppose (1) is the only utterly uncontroversial premise in the argument. From my point of view, the other premises fall into two groups. The first group are those concerned with relative dating of texts. Since I am neither equipped nor inclined to raise doubts about any premises of that sort, I accept premises (2), (3), (5), and (7). Premises (4) and (7), in any case, are merely my friendly amendments to Collins's argument. I added (7) just for completeness' sake, and (5) just because I thought it was implied by her use of (6) in the argument. After all, if she thought that the relative dating of the composition of the book of Acts rendered its summaries of the Gospel irrelevant to her argument, why would she bother to cite those summaries as if they supported her conclusion in (8)?

As for premises (4), (6), and (9), the second group of questionable premises, I have serious doubts about each of them.

The most fundamental basis for my doubts about (4) and (6) is what I take to be the natural, ordinary interpretation of 'Jesus rose from the dead', an interpretation that is also shared...
by most Christians, present and past: Jesus, after he died on the cross and was buried, left the tomb alive, on his own two feet. This natural interpretation artlessly weaves together the disputed revived-body thesis and empty-tomb thesis, denials of which can be found in premise (4). In fact, it really consists altogether of just those two theses. As we have seen in her paper, Collins thinks that the empty-tomb thesis can be maintained without the revived-body thesis, but she understandably shows no signs of taking seriously the possibility of maintaining that Jesus remained within the tomb even though his body had been revived. As she sees them, the revived-body thesis entails the empty-tomb thesis, but not vice versa.

In premise (6) she claims that the summaries of the Gospel in Acts do not mention the empty tomb. She must intend the emphasis to fall on ‘mention’, since in a footnote to the strong claim she makes in (6) she admits that “The empty tomb is presupposed in Acts 2:23–31 and 13:34–37.” In each of those passages a preaching apostle cites Psalm 16:10, “thou wilt not... suffer thine Holy One to see corruption,” as a prophecy of Jesus’ resurrection; the first preacher is Peter and the second, interestingly enough, is Paul. She might also have mentioned what strikes me as even stronger evidence for the acceptance of the disputed theses in Acts—Peter’s claim in 10:40–41: “Him God raised up the third day, and showed him openly; Not to all the people, but unto... us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead.”

Where do these considerations of passages in Acts leave premise (6)? I think it is clear that on this basis premise (6) must be considered either simply false, or, at best, true only on an irrelevant technicality—viz., that the empty-tomb thesis is only entailed, not expressly mentioned. On this basis alone, anyone who took the reports of the apostles’ speeches in Acts to be historically accurate would already have evidence that the revived-body thesis and, therefore, the empty-tomb thesis were accepted before Mark wrote his Gospel. I also think that giving up the claim about the material in Acts should make a serious difference to Collins’s position. But since it’s clear that she herself puts more weight on her reading of the material in Paul, I will go on to consider her argument as if premises (6) and the now unnecessary (5) had simply been discarded.

Premise (4), as far as I can see, is founded on three claims about just one passage:6 In 1 Corinthians 15 (a) Paul does not mention the empty tomb; (b) Paul takes the appearances of the risen Jesus to Peter and the others to be of the same sort as the appearance of Jesus to him on the road to Damascus; (c) Paul takes the risen Jesus to have had a spiritual body discontinuous with his physical body: “Presumably it [the physical body] decays and has no importance for the resurrected person” (p. 113).

Claim (a) is true, but this sort of argument from silence is certainly not enough to support premise (4). Neither is claim (b) strong enough for (4); and (b) itself is very doubtful. The only evidence for (b) is the fact that in verses 5–7, where Paul is talking about Jesus’ appearing to Peter and the others, he uses the same language he uses in verse 8, where he is talking about Jesus’ appearing to him. But, according to the story of Paul’s conversion in Acts (chaps. 9, 22, and 26), Jesus’ appearance to him was radically different from any of the other appearances, different in ways Paul can hardly have ignored, even though in 1 Corinthians 15 he does use just the one verb ‘ophthe’, ‘he was seen’, for all of them.

Claim (c), then, is crucial; but (c) strikes me as the least plausible of all. It depends on Paul’s discussion in verses 35–50 of the nature of resurrection. That entire discussion is concerned with the eventual resurrection of the dead, however—not with the unique resurrection of the man Paul believed to be the Son of God. And I see no reason to suppose that Paul would treat those two events as simply two instances of the same sort, especially as regards the details of the resurrection body. I conclude that Collins has not given us evidence enough to ascribe to Paul the very unnatural interpretation of ‘Jesus rose from the dead’ she provides for him in premise (4).7

All the same, even if premises (4) and the no longer needed (3) and (7) were also discarded, Collins would still have an argument for (8) based simply on the remaining premises (1) and (2). Of course, if we take the results of our investigations of the other premises to have shown that we have not been given reasons good enough to believe that the empty-tomb thesis was unknown or unaccepted before Mark wrote, then (8) will have to be construed as a claim about only the story of the empty tomb and not also, as
originally intended, as a claim about the very idea that Jesus’ tomb was empty after his resurrection. Furthermore, if the empty-tomb thesis may very well have been known and accepted when Mark 16:1-8 was written, premise (9) will be even harder to support.

Obviously, (9) would not have been easy to support even before questions were raised about other premises. A negative claim of that sort is by its very nature very hard to support and theoretically impossible to prove. Collins’s support for (9) has two parts. She first considers the possibility that Mark drew on an earlier passion narrative, concluding merely that “the existence of such a document is not an assured result of New Testament scholarship” (p. 116). She then considers, at much greater length, the much broader possibility that Mark 16:1-8 “is based on another source, oral or written, adapted by the author of Mark” (ibid.). In doing so she very effectively criticizes the reasoning of those who have thought they saw evidence of an earlier source, concluding that “the hypothesis of a source is unnecessary to explain or resolve the tensions in the passage” (p. 120).

But neither of these considerations rules out or even diminishes the likelihood that Mark relied on oral or written testimony about the empty tomb. So premise (9) remains unsupported. And, for everyone inclined toward the natural interpretation of Jesus rose from the dead’, (9)’s implausibility has not been lessened.

So I am irresistibly led to believe that on the basis of the argument we have been reviewing we cannot be expected to accept or even to feel a tendency to accept its conclusion—viz., that Mark 16:1-8 is an original composition, a fictional narrative.

The argument, however, is not all there is to consider in assessing that hypothesis. Collins’s narrative development of her interpretation of Mark 16:1-8 contains many details that do not emerge in the argument, and so it also deserves to be taken seriously. In order to examine it in a way that is suited to these circumstances, I will present it again, largely in her own words, interjecting my comments as we go through it.

As I see it, then, Collins’s account of Mark’s achievement in 16:1-8 may be spelled out in this way. “In writing an extended narrative that expressed the good news...of God’s activity through Jesus, this author was faced with the challenge of narrating the resurrection” (p. 129). Mark had to include the resurrection in his narrative because he “was convinced that what actually had happened was that Jesus had been raised from the dead” (p. 129); and he was convinced of it because he “regarded the resurrection of Jesus as an event attested by those to whom the risen Jesus had appeared” (p. 129). But narrating the resurrection was a challenge for him because “he did not have evidence for the details regarding how Jesus was raised” (ibid.).

Collins does not tell us how she knows Mark had no such evidence; and his story does, after all, say that there were witnesses to the empty tomb and the angel’s explanation of it. Presumably she is partly relying on the line of reasoning in her main argument, which, I have already claimed, is unconvincing. But when we review in more detail what she takes Mark’s Easter story to be, we may be able to come up with further reasons for thinking that Mark could not have had evidence for its details.

Faced with the challenge just described, Mark “reverently supplied those details in accordance with his sense of what must have happened” (p. 129); “he described that event in what seemed to him the most appropriate way” (p. 129). “The creation of the empty tomb story shows that...[J]esus’ resurrection for Mark is not the giving of a new, spiritual body to the inner person, the psyche, in a way that the former body does not matter” (p. 130). That is, the account of Jesus’ resurrection that Collins attributes to Paul is clearly ruled out immediately by the fact that in Mark’s story the tomb is empty. Friends of the natural interpretation of Jesus rose from the dead’ might have thought they knew what must be coming next, but in that case Collins’s development of Mark’s story would have surprised and disappointed them.

Her very next move is cautious, introducing a set of three alternatives. “For Mark it [Jesus’ resurrection] is either a revival or transformation of the earthly body” (p. 130). Revival, of course, just is the natural interpretation (or the essence of it); transformation, it turns out, is ascension or bodily translation to heaven.

Collins proposes a literary test on the basis of which to decide between these alternatives: “If the text implies that Jesus pushed the stone away from the tomb and walked out, the resurrection is understood as a revival of the body... If the text does not imply
that Jesus walked out of the tomb, his resurrection, according to Mark, is best understood as a transformation of the earthly body” (p. 130).

The first thing to notice about the transformation alternative is that it would radically alter the Apostles’ Creed to read ‘the third day he rose again from the dead, that is, he ascended into heaven’.

Notice, second, that if, “according to Mark, Jesus was translated from the grave to heaven, then there was no period of time during which the risen Jesus walked the earth and met with his disciples” (p. 131). In that case those appearances the testimony of which is supposed to have convinced Mark of the resurrection must have been not of a Jesus who ate and drank with Peter and the others but “probably of a more heavenly type, like the apocalyptic visions of heavenly beings” (p. 131).

In the third place, notice that if the transformation alternative had been the one Mark intended, Matthew and Luke, who are supposed to have used Mark’s Gospel in composing their own, would have failed utterly to understand their source; for Matthew and Luke agree with John in telling the Easter story along the lines of the natural interpretation of ‘Jesus rose from the dead’.

Notice, finally, how weak a criterion is proposed for so strong and unusual an interpretation: not ‘if the text implies that Jesus did not walk out of the tomb’ but merely ‘if the text does not imply that Jesus walked out of the tomb’. But surely the text is not the only source of relevant implications in a case like this. Common sense and natural expectations have an important part to play as well, providing a default explanation. If the text says nothing that implies either that Jesus walked out of the tomb or that he did not walk out of the tomb, the natural conclusion is that he walked out of the tomb.

And yet, as we know, it is Collins’s view that Mark intended the transformation alternative. What is more, she thinks it is only natural that he should have done so: “the narrative pattern according to which Jesus died, was buried, and then translated to heaven was a natural way for an author living in the first century to narrate the resurrection of Jesus” (p. 130). I think I speak for most people when I say that I can’t believe it could ever have been natural for anyone to “narrate the resurrection” in such a way that the resurrection simply disappeared altogether into the ascension. More particularly, I find it very hard to believe that this would have been natural for Mark, in whose Gospel the notion of resurrection generally seems clearly physical. In Mark 5:22-43 the daughter of Jairus walks after being raised from the dead, and in Mark 6:14-16 Herod is reported as believing that Jesus, going about doing miracles, might be John the Baptist risen from the dead. Since Mark 16:1-8 says nothing to suggest that Jesus’ resurrection involves no physical presence of the sort that characterizes resurrection or the concept of resurrection elsewhere in Mark’s Gospel, it is only natural to infer that Mark is presenting the resurrection of Jesus as also being of this sort. Why does Collins infer otherwise?

Here is where her six-page survey of more than a dozen stories involving “the ancient notion of translation” comes into play. As she says, “It has been pointed out that the ascension of Jesus, as narrated in the book of Acts, is similar to the Greco-Roman narratives of translation. I am suggesting that this tradition also influenced how Mark narrated the resurrection” (p. 130). It is this familiar pagan literary background that makes the adoption of the transformation alternative in her view “a natural way for an author living in the first century to narrate the resurrection of Jesus” (p. 130). And Collins tries to underline the culturally relative naturalness of this unnatural interpretation of ‘Jesus rose from the dead’ with observations that tie Mark’s Gospel into Greco-Roman literature (ibid.). Still, as she observes, what characterizes all the pagan translation narratives on which Mark is supposed to have drawn is the “idea that a human being could be removed from the sphere of ordinary humanity and made immortal” (p. 123). And that idea alone, I think, would have ruled out these narratives as literary models for the author who described his book as “the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

I conclude, then, that neither in her argumentation nor in her narrative explanation of her hypothesis has Collins given us reasons good enough to think that the empty tomb is Mark’s invention.
NOTES

1. “All the other approaches depend on these two” (p. 111).
2. Mark “regarded the resurrection of Jesus as an event attested by those to whom the risen Jesus appeared” (p. 129).
3. P. 129; emphasis added.
4. See, e.g., pp. 118 and 130.
5. Note 21, emphasis added.
6. Near the end of her section on Paul she cites 2 Corinthians 5 as confirming her interpretation of Paul’s theory of “the resurrection ‘body’” (pp. 113–114), but that is the only other Pauline passage she alludes to in developing (4). The parenthetical list of passages on p. 113 supports only an incidental point about Paul’s use of ‘soma’.
7. As some evidence that he accepted the natural interpretation one might cite, besides his speech in Acts 13:34–37, 1 Corinthians 6:13–15, where Paul speaks of the resurrection of Jesus in the context of talk about bodies, and Romans 10:7: “Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, bring Christ again from the dead.)”

Response to Kretzmann

Adela Yarbro Collins

I would like to thank Professor Kretzmann for his gracious comments on my paper, even though he remains unpersuaded.

The first part of my response relates to his outline of my argument, specifically to point (5). It reads: “The summaries of the Gospel in the book of Acts are embedded in speeches the apostles made before Mark wrote his Gospel.” He admits that this statement is not in fact part of my argument, but states that he added it because he thought it was implied by (6), namely, the observation that “The summaries of the Gospel in the book of Acts also fail to mention the empty tomb” (p. 114). In fact, (5) is in no way implied by (6). The consensus among New Testament scholars today is that the author of Acts, who was also the author of the Gospel according to Luke, composed the speeches in Acts and that these speeches reflect the point of view and milieu of that author, who wrote after Mark. The only reason for mentioning the summaries of the Gospel in these speeches is that scholars of the last generation argued that these summaries, not the whole speeches, represented earlier Christian preaching. That argument seems dubious to many today in any case.

In his critical comments on premise (6), Kretzmann failed to notice the distinction made in the note that he cited between the summaries of the Gospel and the rest of the speeches. The passages that presuppose the empty tomb do not come from the summaries, but from their elaboration by the author of Acts. Since the author of Acts had narrated a form of the empty tomb story in the first volume of his work, it is not surprising that the empty
tomb would be presupposed in the speeches of Acts. It would be naive, however, to assume that these speeches represent an accurate detail of what was actually said on some specific occasion.

Kretzmann’s “fundamental basis” for doubting my interpretation of Paul’s understanding of resurrection shows an unfortunate lack of historical imagination and appreciation for cultural differences. It should be remembered that the notion of resurrection does not represent an “ordinary” or “natural” event. Further, it is a notion that developed in two specific cultures, Jewish and Persian, probably with some influence of one upon the other. The presence of the notion in any system of beliefs can be traced back to one or the other of these cultural traditions. The idea of resurrection appears not to have been part of these cultures from the beginning, but to have evolved over time. Since the notion deals with matters beyond ordinary human experience, it is shortsighted to claim that it has always had one simple meaning.

In my paper I argued that Paul considered the appearance of the risen Christ to him to be of the same type as the appearances to Peter and the Twelve. Kretzmann points to the “radical” differences between the appearances to the apostles and the appearance to Paul in the book of Acts and claims that Paul could hardly have overlooked these differences! But this argument overlooks the fact that the book of Acts was written later than Paul’s letters! Although Paul never speaks of his experience as occurring “on the road to Damascus,” the account of Paul’s experience in Acts does fit with the impression given by 1 Corinthians 15, Galatians 1, and 2 Corinthians 12 that the appearance of the risen Jesus to him was of a visionary or apocalyptic type. Thus, Paul’s description of his experience in the same terms used for those of the Twelve suggests that their experiences were also of this type. The distinction in kind between the appearances of Jesus to the Twelve and the appearance to Paul has long been seen as part of the agenda of the author of Luke-Acts. The experiences of the apostles were reinterpreted and recast, whereas the basic character of Paul’s experience was preserved.

Kretzmann rejects my conclusion that Paul considered the spiritual body of the resurrected Jesus to be discontinuous with the earthly, physical body of Jesus. He apparently accepts my interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:35-50, but objects that here Paul is speaking only of the eventual resurrection of Christians. He denies that the resurrection of Jesus and the later collective resurrection are two instances of the same sort of event. But that is exactly the point of Paul’s argument. Some in Corinth deny the eventual resurrection of Christians (“some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead”; 1 Cor 15:12). Paul’s argument in verses 12-19 depends on two premises: (1) that Christ was raised from the dead, and (2) that the resurrection of Christians is the same type of event as the resurrection of Jesus: “If the dead are not raised, Christ has not been raised” (v. 16). This interpretation is supported by the image Paul uses for the resurrection of Jesus in verse 20: he is the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. This image implies that the resurrection of Christians will be the completion of the harvest begun when God raised Jesus: i.e., the events are of the same order; in fact, they are two phases of the same event.

On page 446 of Kretzmann’s written response is an argument that I find very strange. He remarks that I criticized very effectively the reasoning of those who have thought that they saw evidence for the use of an oral or written source in Mark 16:1-8. But then he goes on to say that this refutation does not rule out or even diminish the possibility that Mark relied on oral or written testimony about the empty tomb! If there is no evidence that the author relied on a source, how can one conclude that he did? This willingness to hold a conclusion without evidence relates to a comment I made in the opening part of my paper regarding historical method. Historians deal in probabilities not possibilities. It is of course possible that Christians before Mark thought that the tomb of Jesus was empty. The point I have tried to make, however, is that there is no evidence that anyone so thought or taught before the Gospel of Mark was written. If there is no such evidence, then it is reasonable to conclude that the story of the empty tomb was invented by Mark to narrate the resurrection of Jesus.

I argued in my paper that the best way to interpret the resurrection of Jesus in Mark 16 is as the transformation of his earthly body. It is not obvious that this interpretation requires a radical alteration of the Apostles’ Creed, as Professor Kretzmann claims. The Creed of Nicea reads, “He suffered and the third day he rose, and ascended into the heavens.”2 The Apostles’
Creed, a statement of faith used only in the Western Church, at an early stage in its development contained also a reference to Jesus’ descent into hell. This article is omitted in the form of the Creed that is now recited in the liturgies of many churches. In Worship II, used in many Catholic parishes, the relevant part of the creed reads, “On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven. . . .” In both of these creeds, the “rising” and “ascending” may be seen as two phases of the same event. I cannot resist pointing out that neither Creed says that Jesus walked out of the tomb on his own two feet.

The interpretation of the resurrection in Mark 16 as transformation does not entail the conclusion that the authors of Matthew and Luke misunderstood their source. Matthew presents two types of appearance of the risen Jesus. The appearance to the women implies that Jesus’ body was revived. The appearance to the Eleven makes the impression of the more spiritual or heavenly type of appearance. I do not suggest that Matthew was illogical. Rather, he was aware of two distinct understandings of resurrection and reverently included both. The authors of the Gospels of Luke and John had their own reasons for emphasizing the point of view that Jesus’ resurrection entailed the revival of his earthly body.

The issue of historical imagination and appreciation for cultural differences comes up again in Kretzmann’s reluctance to consider my interpretation of Mark 16 seriously. What is a matter of common sense and natural expectations for a twentieth-century reader of Mark 16 is not necessarily so for the author and first readers. If the text does not necessarily imply that Jesus walked out of the tomb and if it does not describe appearances that entail a revival of his body, it is reasonable to conclude that the understanding of resurrection embodied in this text is the transformation and translation of the body. As I pointed out in my paper, such ideas were extremely widespread in the culture in which Mark was written.

The narratives about the raising of Jairus’ daughter and about Herod thinking that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead are indications only that there were various types of notions about “resurrection” current in the culture. They do not imply that the author considered the resurrection of Jesus to be identical with either of these types.

Kretzmann’s final argument is that the author of Mark could not have adapted a tradition according to which “a human being could be removed from the sphere of ordinary humanity and made immortal” because he described his book as “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Let me point out first of all, lest there be misunderstanding, that “the sphere of ordinary humanity” means the realm or realms in which most persons were believed to pass their existence between birth and death and after death, i.e., the earthly, physical world and Hades or Sheol. The interpretation offered in my paper of Mark 16 is by no means incompatible with the opening of the gospel. As was pointed out in the discussion, “son of God” in Mark 1 is equivalent to “messiah.” Neither term implies divinity in the Nicene sense. In fact, Kretzmann unwittingly has pointed out a further similarity between Mark and the texts I cited. In many cases, it is precisely because a person was perceived as both human and divine that he or she was said to have been translated. Menelaos and Herakles were each translated because he was a “son of God.”

NOTES

1. Even if the account in 2 Corinthians 12 is not an allusion to the same experience mentioned in Galatians 1, it is evidence that Paul had ecstatic, visionary experiences of an apocalyptic type.