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## The Veracity of the Empty Tomb Tradition

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## The Veracity of the Empty Tomb Tradition

### Abstract

While several historical facts surrounding Jesus' bodily resurrection find agreement among virtually all critical scholars, the fact of the empty tomb finds far less critical agreement. Despite this attempt to "leave the door open" for naturalistic explanations of the early Christian resurrection claim, the overwhelming evidence renders the empty tomb tradition historically reliable and Jesus' bodily resurrection, the most plausible explanation of the historical facts. This paper will examine the evidence for the empty tomb, including the early eyewitness nature of the core tradition and the necessity of the empty tomb to explain the more widely accepted facts surrounding Jesus' resurrection.

### Keywords

empty tomb, resurrection of Jesus, early eyewitnesses, 1 Corinthians 15, bodily resurrection, naturalistic theories

### Cover Page Footnote

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## Introduction

The bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the linchpin of Christianity. The apostle Paul claimed as much when he asserted that, apart from the resurrection, the Christian faith is futile, and therefore, Christians are above all people, the most pitiable (1 Cor 15:17, 19). Opponents of Christianity have long suggested naturalistic explanations for the historical facts surrounding Jesus' resurrection, including the historical fact that in many locations, on many occasions, individuals and groups, both believers and skeptics, believed to have seen post-mortem appearances of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Naturalistic theories regarding these alleged appearances have included hallucination, mistaken identity, and delusion<sup>2</sup>, among others. If any of these naturalistic hypotheses are demonstrated to be more plausible than the bodily resurrection of Jesus, then the central Christian claim is significantly undermined. Perhaps, the best argument against these naturalistic theories is the fact of the empty tomb. After all, if the body of Jesus were still in the tomb, then any of the proposed naturalistic theories would be more plausible than a bodily resurrection. However, if the body of Jesus were missing from the tomb, then any naturalistic theory must satisfactorily answer the question of what happened to the body. The assertion that Jesus' tomb was found empty is not as widely supported by scholars as other facts surrounding the resurrection.<sup>3</sup> However, there is significant evidence for the historicity of the empty tomb tradition, a tradition that has enjoyed virtual unanimity within the church since its earliest times. Despite the various theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural differences within the church, the empty tomb tradition is among its foundational unifying themes. This paper will examine the evidence for the empty tomb, including the early eyewitness nature of the core tradition and the necessity of the empty tomb, given other more widely accepted historical facts. Further, this paper will demonstrate that the resurrection of Jesus is more plausible than the various naturalistic theories that are ultimately diminished by the absence of a corpse in

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<sup>1</sup> This is best illustrated by the early Christian creed found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, which lists believers, as well as those who were previously skeptical, including Paul and James.

<sup>2</sup> According to Loke, “[David] Strauss rejected the historicity of the Gospels’ account of the empty tomb and offered an alternative naturalistic explanation for Jesus’ ‘resurrection appearances,’ claiming that the disciples sincerely believed that Jesus was the Messiah and were deluded in thinking that he rose and appeared to them.” in Andrew Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Habermas and Licona have written, “The empty tomb of Jesus does not meet our two criteria of being a ‘minimal fact’ because it is not accepted by nearly every scholar who studies the subject.” in Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 69-70.

the tomb. As a result of these conclusions, the church's collective belief in the empty tomb and the resurrection of Christ are once again affirmed.

### **The Early Tradition of the Empty Tomb**

Several issues have been raised in regard to the empty tomb tradition. First, the earliest written account of the discovery of the empty tomb is found in Mark's Gospel, written approximately forty years after the death of Jesus of Nazareth. The time gap between the events and the first record of the events provides ample time for legendary development. Second, there are significant differences between the empty tomb accounts of all four canonical Gospels. This begs the question of historical reliability, both of the details and the core tradition. The issues surrounding the empty tomb tradition have led German theologian Hans Graß to assert, "The question of the empty tomb belongs to the most difficult and debated problems of investigation and theology about the Easter events."<sup>4</sup> Despite these critical objections, there is evidence for a core tradition of the discovery of the empty tomb that predates Mark and that is evident in all four canonical Gospel accounts. This section will demonstrate that the most plausible explanation of the facts surrounding the empty tomb tradition is that it originated with the eyewitnesses and that the core tradition has remained unchanged from the beginning.

While the Gospel of Mark is the earliest extant written account of the discovery of the empty tomb, it does not follow that the tradition necessarily originated with the writing of the Gospel, or even that the Gospel records later tradition that was not originally held by the Christian community. Perhaps, the primary safeguard to the reliability of the empty tomb tradition is the presence of the original eyewitnesses within the earliest Christian community. Such individuals would have been the originators, perpetuators, and regulators of the oral tradition that stemmed from the events they witnessed.<sup>5</sup> Writing in the mid-

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Edward Lynn Bode, *The First Easter Morning* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Bauckham writes, "We should beware of the well-established tendency in New Testament scholarship to envisage the oral traditions about Jesus as handed down anonymously in the early communities as though the disciples of Jesus, those who must first have told these stories and handed on these sayings, had all disappeared as soon as the Christian movement got going. On the contrary, they were well-known figures and there were a large number of them. They surely continued to be active traditioners whose recognized eyewitness authority could act as a touchstone to guarantee the traditions as others relayed them and to protect the traditions from inauthentic developments." in Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 295.

80s, the author of Luke testifies to the tradition handed down by the eyewitnesses and implies that by using their accounts, he is able to provide his reader with certainty concerning the things he had been taught (Lk 1:1-4). Therefore, the author of Luke assumes a preserved line of tradition that originated with the actual eyewitnesses. However, one might argue that, although the author of Luke believed the tradition originated with the eyewitnesses, that doesn't necessarily make it so. The author of Luke makes no claim to be himself an eyewitness. He could have been unaware of the legendary development that had taken place prior to his research. While this is certainly possible, there is further evidence that makes this suggestion implausible.

Jewish New Testament scholar Geza Vermes has suggested that the strongest case for the authenticity of the empty tomb account is the fact that it was women who first discovered the tomb empty.<sup>6</sup> If the empty tomb tradition was a legendary development, the story would have been significantly undergirded by casting Peter, John, or another of the Twelve as the original discoverer of the empty tomb. In the culture in which this tradition was proclaimed, casting women as the discoverers of the empty tomb would undermine the tradition. This is due to the low status of women in the first-century Jewish context. In fact, their testimony was of little to no value in court.<sup>7</sup> And while their testimony of the empty tomb was not within the context of the court, this is highly indicative of the weight of a woman's testimony in important matters. Would the early Christian leaders stake their claim of the empty tomb, with its significance to the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection, to women, whose testimony was highly suspect? William Lane Craig has suggested that it is likely for this reason that the early Christian creed, recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:4-8, does not mention the women in the list of Jesus' post-mortem appearances.<sup>8</sup> However, the most likely

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<sup>6</sup> Vermes writes, "The corollary must be, curious though this may sound, that for the historian it is Mark's evidence, the weakest of all, that possesses the best claim for authenticity, the story brought by two women which—to quote Luke—the apostles themselves thought such 'nonsense' that they would not believe it." in Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1981), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Craig writes, "Josephus indicates what was probably the typical prejudice of the time: 'From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex' (*Ant.* 4.219). Luke shares the same skepticism (Luke 24.11)! Subsequently it was specified in the Mishnah that the law about 'an oath of testimony' (Lev. 5.1) applied only to men and not to women (m. Shebu 4.1); the ineligibility of women as witnesses was a benchmark of what was to be counted as ineligible (m. Rosh Hash. 1.8)" in William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 833n28.

<sup>8</sup> Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 833.

reason for the women's inclusion in the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb is because this is what actually occurred.

While there are notable variations between the canonical Gospel accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb, the discovery by the women is multiply attested in all four Gospels.<sup>9</sup> Do the variances between the accounts negate the core of the empty tomb tradition, which finds unanimity between the Gospel accounts? Certainly not. The variances provide contrast to that which is agreed upon by all of the canonical Gospel authors. James D. G. Dunn argues that, while Matthew and Luke had access to Mark's Gospel, their variances are best explained by numerous retellings of the empty tomb story, all with a common core tradition.<sup>10</sup> The best explanation for the core tradition is careful preservation of the eyewitness accounts, most likely, by the eyewitnesses themselves, who remained a significant part of the early Christian community.<sup>11</sup>

There is good reason to believe that the core tradition of Jesus' empty tomb was not the product of legendary development, but rather, the preserved testimony of the eyewitnesses. Therefore, the empty tomb was among the earliest Christian traditions. However, this does raise a significant question. Why is the empty tomb account not directly referenced in earlier New Testament writings (e.g., the Pauline Epistles) if it is among the earliest Christian traditions? As will be demonstrated in the following section, although not directly referenced, the empty tomb was both strongly implied and logically necessary to substantiate Paul's assertions regarding the resurrection of Jesus.

### **The Necessity of the Empty Tomb**

One of the most significant New Testament chapters to the questions surrounding Jesus' resurrection is 1 Corinthians 15. Paul's letter to the church at Corinth is dated to the mid-50s, and it is widely agreed upon by New Testament scholars that all or part of 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 is a recorded oral tradition that

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<sup>9</sup> Orr writes, "... when the women reached the tomb of Jesus on that Easter morning, after much dubiety as to how they were to obtain entrance, they found *the stone rolled away and the tomb empty*. Here, again, there is entire unanimity among the witnesses." in James Orr, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 43.

<sup>10</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 831.

<sup>11</sup> Dunn writes, "From where then did the tradition emerge? What gave it the degree of stability within the diverse retellings?... [T]he most obvious answer is: Those who were involved in the episode, those who experienced the impact of the event, those who in speaking of what they had thus seen and heard gave the tradition its definitive and lasting shape." in Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 832.

dates back to within the first few years following Jesus' death. In fact, Dunn contends, "This tradition, we can be entirely confident, was *formulated as tradition within months of Jesus' death*.<sup>12</sup> If the empty tomb tradition is true and therefore predates the oral creed, then why does neither the creed, nor Paul, directly reference the empty tomb? This section will demonstrate that Paul's assertions are entirely consistent with the empty tomb tradition, that they strongly imply that Jesus' tomb was empty and that the empty tomb was logically necessary to substantiate Paul's assertions regarding Jesus' resurrection. Far from an argument from silence, it will be demonstrated that Paul presupposes the empty tomb tradition.

As Paul reminds the Corinthians of the gospel he preached to them a few years earlier, he writes, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures..." (1 Cor 15:3-4, ESV 2016). Jesus died, was buried, and was raised. The most obvious question is: In what manner was he raised? Some critics have suggested that Jesus' resurrection was not bodily, and the subsequent "appearances" were mere visionary experiences.<sup>13</sup> If this were the case, it would explain the absence of the empty tomb in Paul's writing, for such a resurrection would not require a missing body. However, there are several substantial problems with this theory that will now be examined.

First, while there may be various conceptions of "resurrection" that modern scholars postulate, the word had only one meaning in the first century—new bodily life. N. T. Wright has written,

the meaning of 'resurrection', both in the Jewish and the non-Jewish world of late antiquity, was never that the person concerned had simply 'gone to heaven', or been 'exalted' in some way which did not involve a new bodily life. Plenty of disembodied post-mortem states were postulated, and there was a rich variety of terminology for denoting them, which did not include 'resurrection'. 'Resurrection' meant embodiment; that was equally so for the pagans, who denied it, as it was for the Jews, at least some of whom hoped for it.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 855.

<sup>13</sup> Habermas and Licona write, "It is common today for critics to claim that the original disciples believed that he rose in a nonbodily form and that the story of his bodily resurrection, as found in the Gospels, was the result of embellishments added as the event of Jesus' resurrection faded into the past." in Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 154.

<sup>14</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 694.

To claim any other meaning for “resurrection” is anachronistic, since it imposes later conceptions of the term onto first-century Jews, for which any other view was foreign.

Second, the very etymology of the word used in 1 Corinthians 15:4 for raised (ἐγήγεραται) suggests bodily resurrection. William Lane Craig has argued that its primary meaning is “to awaken,” as if from sleep, a common euphemism for death, which Paul himself employs elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> Craig writes, “The picture is thus of a dead person’s waking up again to life. [The verb] also mean[s] ‘to raise upright’ or ‘to erect.’ This can only have reference to the body in the grave, which is raised up to new life.”<sup>16</sup> The verb used would be nonsensical if used in reference to a non-bodily resurrection, since the disembodied soul cannot “awaken,” since it does not sleep, and it cannot “raise upright” since it is incorporeal.

Third, a commonsense interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:3b-4 would strongly imply the tomb was empty. Based on the previous two arguments, it can be concluded that Paul’s use of resurrection could only mean bodily resurrection. Therefore, if someone died, was buried, and then came back to life, the warranted assumption would be that the tomb they previously occupied had been vacated.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, while Paul did not directly mention “the tomb was found empty,” the emptiness of the tomb is strongly implied through what Paul did write.

The latter part of the early creed contained within 1 Corinthians 15 lists those who experienced post-mortem appearances of Jesus. Paul lists these individuals and groups as evidence to substantiate the gospel message, that Jesus had died for sins, been buried, and been raised. However, Wright has compellingly argued that the appearances—in and of themselves—do not justify belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, apart from the empty tomb.<sup>18</sup> The empty

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<sup>15</sup> Craig, *Assessing the New Testament*, 89.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Craig writes, “Now while I should not want to assert that the ‘he was buried’ was included in the formula in order to prove the empty tomb, it seems to me that the empty tomb is implied in the sequence of events related in the formula. For in saying that Jesus died—was buried—was raised—appeared, one automatically implies that an empty grave has been left behind.” in William Lane Craig, “The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus,” *New Testament Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1985), 40.

<sup>18</sup> Wright asserts, “The two things which must be regarded as historically secure when we talk about the first Easter are the emptiness of the tomb and the meetings with the risen Jesus... Neither the empty tomb by itself, however, nor the appearances by themselves, could have generated the early Christian belief. The empty tomb alone would be a puzzle and a tragedy. Sightings of an apparently alive Jesus, by themselves, would have been classified as visions or



tomb and the appearances of Jesus are inextricably linked. If the tomb was found empty, but there were no appearances, the emptiness of the tomb would be devoid of meaning. Conversely, post-mortem appearances of Jesus would be ultimately meaningless if his corpse still resided in the tomb. Therefore, the empty tomb was logically necessary to substantiate Paul's claims regarding the bodily resurrection of Jesus and its implications for the gospel.<sup>19</sup>

While Paul did not directly reference the empty tomb, it was clearly presupposed in his recording of the early Christian creed (1 Cor 15:3-7). The only possible meaning of resurrection in his historical-cultural context was a bodily resurrection. That this was his meaning is further supported by the etymology of the word used (ἐγήγερται). The natural conclusion that results from one experiencing physical death, burial in a tomb, and bodily resurrection is that the tomb has thus been vacated. Further, Paul's entire agenda of substantiating the veracity of the gospel data is contingent on both an empty tomb and verifiable post-mortem appearances. Therefore, it must be concluded that Paul not only knew and believed the empty tomb tradition but that it undergirded his assertions regarding the resurrection of Jesus.

### **A Cumulative Case for the Empty Tomb**

The fact that the empty tomb account originated with the eyewitnesses and continued in an uninterrupted stream of tradition, combined with the fact that Paul's preeminent resurrection argument presupposes the empty tomb is enough to make the empty tomb the most plausible historical reality. However, several other substantial lines of evidence further corroborate this thesis. This section will evaluate three of them: the Jewish polemic that the disciples stole the body of Jesus, implications from the Acts sermon summaries, and the absence of tomb veneration among the early Christian community. While each of these lines of argumentation strongly suggest the plausibility of the empty tomb, the cumulative effect of these arguments demonstrates that belief in the empty tomb is historically warranted.

The first line of evidence that will be examined is the Jewish polemic that the disciples stole the body of Jesus. Matthew 28:11-15 depicts an exchange between the guards who were assigned to Jesus' tomb and the Jewish leadership

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hallucinations, which were well enough known in the ancient world... However, an empty tomb and appearances of a living Jesus, taken together, would have presented a powerful reason for the emergence of the belief." in Wright, *The Resurrection*, 686.

<sup>19</sup> It is also worthy to note that the empty tomb not only substantiates Paul's assertions, but the very early creed he cites, which represents the beliefs of the earliest Christian community. Further, 1 Corinthians 15:11 equates Paul's gospel with the one proclaimed by the other apostles, and the empty tomb is logically necessary to substantiate their beliefs and proclamations as well.

in the aftermath of the resurrection. In Matthew's account, the Jewish leaders concoct the polemic that Jesus' disciples stole the body from the tomb, thus attempting to undermine any assertion of a resurrection. That the Jewish leaders anticipated such a Christian proclamation was made clear in Matthew 27:62-64. Further, Matthew mentions that the Jewish polemic—that the disciples stole the body—had been spread among the Jews even up to the time of the writing of the Gospel (circa AD 80) (Matt. 28:15b). Critical scholars have long argued that this account is an apologetic legend, included within the Gospel to account for the accusation that the disciples stole the body, which was circulating at the time Matthew's Gospel was being written. However, its apologetic nature does not necessarily render it historically false. Craig has written, "Matthew's account [of the guards at the tomb] has been nearly universally rejected as an apologetic legend, though the reasons for this assessment are of unequal worth. For example, the fact that the story is an apologetic answering the allegation that the disciples stole the body does not therefore necessarily mean that it is unhistorical."<sup>20</sup> While other Gospel writers may not have deemed it necessary to include such details in their account, the allegations circulating within the Jewish community at the time of Matthew's writing may have rendered it necessary for inclusion. Regardless of whether or not the exchange between the guards and the Jewish leaders actually took place, Matthew's apologetic inclusion raises some interesting questions that imply Jesus' tomb was empty.

If there had been a corpse in Jesus' tomb, why would it have been necessary for the Jews to spread the allegation that Jesus' disciples stole his body? It would have been a decisive blow to the fledgling Christian movement to rather assert that Jesus' tomb was undisturbed or occupied.<sup>21</sup> However, this could not be claimed if, in fact, the tomb was empty.<sup>22</sup> Edward Lynn Bode has argued that the

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<sup>20</sup> Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 211.

<sup>21</sup> Pannenberg writes, "Among the general historical arguments that speak for the trustworthiness of the report about the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb is, above all, the fact that the early Jewish polemic against the Christian message about Jesus' resurrection, traces of which have already been left in the Gospels, does not offer any suggestion that Jesus' grave had remained untouched. The Jewish polemic would have had to have every interest in the preservation of such a report. However, quite to the contrary, it shared the conviction with its Christian opponents that Jesus' grave was empty. It limited itself to explaining this fact in its own way, which was detrimental to the Christian message." in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1977), 101.

<sup>22</sup> Orr writes, "There is not a hint anywhere that the fact of the empty tomb was ever questioned by either friend or foe. It would have been easy to question or disprove it when the Apostles were boldly proclaiming the Resurrection in Jerusalem a few weeks later. But no one appears to have done so." In Orr, *The Resurrection*, 44.

Jewish leaders had every reason to investigate the claim of the empty tomb. He writes,

Even if one grants for the sake of argumentation that the bodily resurrection needs to be demythologized, the situation still remains that the contemporary Jews of Jerusalem with their notion of resurrection would have got around rather quickly to investigate the tomb of Jesus. By their manner of thinking, the tomb would have to be empty. Its emptiness did not prove the resurrection, but its fulness would have ruled out the resurrection. Thus someone would have checked the tomb.<sup>23</sup>

Bode and others<sup>24</sup> have made the case that the Jewish leaders had every possible reason to investigate the tomb in hopes of falsifying the Christian claim. It is beyond reason to assume that they did not investigate the tomb and merely accepted the claim that the tomb was empty, choosing instead to invent a competing narrative of events. This is especially true in light of the early Christian proclamation of Jesus' resurrection in Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup> The Christian movement would not have gained much ground if the Jewish leaders had falsified the claim of the resurrection by producing the body of Jesus.

The second line of evidence that will be examined is the implication of the empty tomb from the Acts sermon summaries. James D. G. Dunn has written, "Whatever the precise details and dates, *the resurrection of Jesus, and not just a re-preaching of Jesus' earlier message*, seems to have been the heart of infant Christianity's distinctive message from the first."<sup>26</sup> On what does Dunn base this assertion? His assertion is based on primitive Christian tradition, included within the sermonic material of Acts.<sup>27</sup> Although Acts itself is dated in the latter part of the first century, early Christian teaching is recorded and preserved in Luke's

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<sup>23</sup> Bode, *The First Easter*, 162.

<sup>24</sup> See Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 836. See Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 101.

<sup>25</sup> Pannenberg writes, "Thus general historical considerations already show that the proclamation of the news of Jesus' resurrection in Jerusalem, which had established the Christian community, is hardly understandable except under the assumption that Jesus' tomb was empty." in Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 101.

<sup>26</sup> Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 836.

<sup>27</sup> Dunn writes, "Luke's use of primitive material in the sermons in Acts is notable here; see particularly 2.22-32; 3.13-15, 19-21; 10.36-41." in *Ibid.*, 836n50.

writing.<sup>28</sup> The empty tomb is strongly implied by the content of the Acts sermon summaries.

One such example is Peter's speech in Acts 2:22-39, specifically in verses 24-32. Peter's emphasis is on the proclamation of Jesus' bodily resurrection. Speaking of King David, he argues that David "died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (2:29, ESV 2016). By contrast, Peter says of Jesus "that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses" (2:31b-32, ESV 2016). Perhaps, the most striking aspect is the contrast between David, whose tomb is known, implying that his corpse still resides there, and Jesus, who was not abandoned to death and whose flesh did not see decay, implying that the body is no longer dead and no longer in the tomb.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Paul's speech in Acts 13, specifically verses 29-31, strongly implies the empty tomb. Craig writes,

The empty tomb also seems implicit in Paul's speech in Antioch of Pisidia, which follows point for point the outline of the formula in I Cor 15.3-5: '... they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead; and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem' (Acts 13:29-31). No first century Jew or pagan would be so cerebral as to wonder if the tomb was empty or not. That the empty tomb is not more explicitly mentioned may be simply because it was regarded as *selbstverständlich* given the resurrection and appearances of Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

A commonsense interpretation of Paul's words indicates that the tomb would be empty since the one who physically died and was buried was no longer physically dead but alive and meeting with his followers. Thus, the early Christian tradition, preserved in the Acts sermon summaries, also demonstrates that Jesus' tomb was vacant.

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<sup>28</sup> Wilcox has written, "That is, it may well be that one source has been made to do duty for a variety of speeches and occasions. The fact that the speeches in many ways seem closely related to each other, has long been recognized. It has, on the other hand, been thought by a number of scholars to be due to the common origin of the speeches in the mind of the author. The alternative view, that they may have come ultimately and in varying degrees from a common block or blocks of tradition, however much edited and rephrased, must not be overlooked." in Max Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 159.

<sup>29</sup> Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 93.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

The third and final line of evidence is the absence of tomb veneration subsequent to Jesus' death. If Jesus' corpse remained in the tomb, then the site of his burial would have become a special or holy place for his followers, at least initially and in the decades to follow. There is no evidence of tomb veneration in Jesus' case. Craig argues, "This is indeed striking, because within contemporary Judaism, as in other religions, the desire to honour the memory of the revered dead by constructing appropriate tombs and (by implication) by veneration of the site is well attested."<sup>31</sup> The centrality of Jerusalem to the earliest Christian community would have put the earliest Christians in close proximity to the tomb. The tomb would likely have remained undisturbed, at least until AD 70. Yet, in all the extant Christian writings, there is no reference to tomb veneration. In fact, the opposite is true, as has been evident thus far through this study. The emptiness of the tomb was assumed, and the focus of the early church was not the interment of Jesus' body, but its resurrection.<sup>32</sup>

Why have many critical scholars conceded the empty tomb, when they gain no benefit from its veracity? It is because there is an abundance of evidence to support the empty tomb tradition. Geza Vermes has concluded,

But in the end, when every argument has been considered and weighed, the only conclusion acceptable to the historian must be that the opinions of the orthodox, the liberal sympathizer and the critical agnostic alike—and even perhaps of the disciples themselves—are simply interpretations of the one disconcerting fact: namely that the women who set out to pay their last respects to Jesus found to their consternation, not a body, but an empty tomb.<sup>33</sup>

Certainly, some of the arguments presented in this paper are more compelling than others. Yet, the cumulative effect of the evidence provides sufficient warrant to confirm the historicity of the empty tomb. The tradition itself has been demonstrated to originate with the eyewitnesses themselves, who not only testified to the discovery of the empty tomb but preserved its core tradition. Rather than contradicting the empty tomb tradition, Paul's teaching on the resurrection of Jesus presupposed and was contingent on, the fact of the empty tomb. Several other strong arguments stand in favor of the empty tomb, including

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 837.

<sup>32</sup> Craig writes, "Why would the first Christians not act out this pious instinct and tradition? The only obvious answer, in the light of the evidence... is that they did not believe any tomb contained his body. They could not venerate his remains because they did not think there were any remains to be venerated." in Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 838.

<sup>33</sup> Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 41.

the early Jewish polemic that the disciples stole the body. The allegation itself demonstrates that the Jewish leaders were unable to claim the tomb was undisturbed or that Jesus' corpse remained in the tomb. The primitive Christian source material which Luke included in the Acts sermon summaries strongly imply that Jesus' tomb was empty because his body had new life and was active apart from the tomb. Finally, there is no record of any tomb veneration in the decades following Jesus' death. The reason is evidenced through the early Christian proclamation of Jesus' bodily resurrection. There is no reason to mark the tomb as a sacred space. It is empty.

### **Conclusion**

The resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin of Christianity, and yet, the facts surrounding the resurrection ensure that it is not easily unfastened. The historical fact of the empty tomb undermines several naturalistic theories regarding the resurrection of Jesus. Hallucination theory, delusion theory, mistaken identity theory, and several others do not hold up under scrutiny, especially in light of the empty tomb. If the tomb were occupied, these theories would have added value. However, in light of the evidence examined in this paper, there is substantial evidence for the historicity of the empty tomb. Without a corpse in the tomb, naturalistic theories lack explanatory scope. This paper has examined the evidence for the empty tomb, including the early eyewitness nature of the core tradition and the necessity of the empty tomb, given other more widely accepted historical facts. It has been concluded that the substantial evidence for the empty tomb demonstrates that it is historically secure. Further, this paper has demonstrated that the resurrection of Jesus is more plausible than the various naturalistic theories that are ultimately diminished by the absence of a corpse in the tomb. Thus, the church can remain secure in its unified conviction that "He has risen" (Mk. 16:6c).