The Resurrection of Jesus and the Talpiot Tomb

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The authors in this volume argue that severe problems beset the Talpiot tomb hypothesis. Rarely is this more apparent than when this proposal purports to address the known data regarding the early church’s claims that Jesus’ burial tomb was empty and that He later appeared to His disciples in a resurrected body. In this chapter, we will compare the Talpiot hypothesis to the accredited information that contemporary research has confirmed on these topics.

A WORD ABOUT METHODOLOGY

In addressing this topic, it must be emphasized that there will be no effort to argue that the Talpiot hypothesis is mistaken simply because it disagrees with the New Testament, Christian tradition, or with orthodox Christian beliefs. This approach has appeared occasionally in the recent dialogue but is the wrong tact for those who wish to evaluate the strength of the claims themselves.

Conversely, we will rely almost exclusively on the established information that the vast majority of scholars who study this topic take to be historical. Whenever such scholarly agreement is present concerning particular historical data, it is usually because strong reasons exist to establish such a consensus. This is especially intriguing when specialists of different theological persuasions still share similar views on historical issues that are crucial to the Christian faith.¹

The critiques that are perhaps the most difficult for the Talpiot hypothesis appear to be those that are drawn from generally accredited information that is approved by a scholarly consensus, precisely due to the strength of the data. If these strongest and best-established historical facts make it difficult to accept the Talpiot theme, then this will be a weighty hurdle, indeed. In the space of this essay, I will be unable to reconstruct the actual details of how this historical consensus is established. However, I have done so elsewhere in a great amount of detail.²

JAMES TABOR’S HYPOTHESIS

James Tabor³ is one of a small number of scholars to champion the possibility that the Talpiot tomb is the actual burial chamber that stored the reburied bones of Jesus of Nazareth. In the process Tabor attempted to develop a plausible scenario that explains what happened to Jesus’ body while still remaining at least partially within the bounds of the Gospel accounts.

Following the testimony of our earliest New Testament accounts, Tabor stated, “I have to agree with evangelical apologists that Paul knows an ‘empty tomb’ tradition. I cannot see how his language can make any

¹ It is crucial to distinguish that scholars often agree about particular facts while still disagreeing about either additional specifics or their applications.


³ For the record, I want to state clearly that James Tabor and I are good friends. For instance, almost a full year before the Talpiot story made the news, we visited for a few hours, discussing some of his research, including the possibility mentioned in his book below that DNA testing might be performed on the Talpiot ossuaries (although nothing had been done at that time). I mention this so that my critique will not be construed in any way other than what it is: a hearty disagreement with the thesis of a scholar whom I respect, who still remains a good friend.
sense otherwise.”4 Both Mark and John present a hasty burial due to the approaching Sabbath. But Tabor added, “This initial burial of Jesus was by definition a temporary and emergency move, based on necessity, until something more permanent could be worked out or arranged.”5

Beyond this, details of the initial, temporary tomb are “unfortunately a matter about which historians can say little.” Still, we “must assume that the corpse was taken and reburied, perhaps as soon as the Sabbath was over.” That Joseph of Arimathea performed this task would be likely, “given that the tomb near the crucifixion site was never intended as a permanent place for Jesus’ corpse.”6

What about the general scenario that the vast majority of scholars follow regarding the early creedal material found in Paul’s undoubted epistles and elsewhere, along with any early preaching traditions in Acts? And what of Paul’s well-accredited accounts of his two trips to Jerusalem to ascertain the nature of the gospel message as it was preached by the other apostles, chiefly Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and John (Gal 1:18–2:10)? Tabor thinks that we can know little during this time frame (up until Paul’s writings in the 50s) and referred to Paul’s claim that the other apostles accepted his gospel message as a “myth of origins.” But Tabor explained that his primary purpose behind his reconstruction of the events is “to make the simple point” that “we would expect that first tomb to be empty within twenty-four hours. And I think we can safely assume that it was.”8

In fairness to Tabor, he did not simply develop this scenario as the Talpiot thesis emerged in early 2007. A year earlier he had published a discussion of these and other matters, being one of the first historical Jesus scholars to mention in some detail the discovery of the ‘Talpiot tomb. He was clear that any potential DNA testing could never prove that the tomb belonged to Jesus’ family.9

Although he seems to have grown more convinced of the Talpiot thesis since his earlier book was published, he maintains that the scenario is “possible, even likely, though not conclusively proven.”10 Sometimes Tabor states his view more simply by saying that this opinion should not be dismissed out of hand.11 Tabor also seems to have taken a different angle on a few other matters, too. For instance, in the 2006 volume, Tabor apparently thought that the Maria who was buried in that tomb might be the wife of the man named Yeshua.12 Further, he still favored a Galilean burial for Jesus, as pronounced by a sixteenth-century Kabbalistic rabbi, Isaac ben Luria, rather than a Talpiot interment in the Jerusalem area.13 He originally thought that the best candidates for moving Jesus’ body on the first Sabbath were Jesus’ mother Mary, the other women, and the family members,14 rather than Joseph of Arimathea.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE USE OF THE GOSPELS AND PAUL

I will now formulate a response to Tabor’s version of the Talpiot hypothesis15 that specifically challenges its ability to provide an alternative account for the accredited scholarly data that we have regarding the New Testament claims that certain alleged events happened after Jesus’ crucifixion. My concerns are grouped under three main headings: the best historiographical use of the Gospels and Paul, Tabor’s response to Jesus’ burial and the empty tomb, and Tabor’s response to the appearances of the risen Jesus. I hold that not only does the Talpiot hypothesis fare poorly in its overall attempt to establish this tomb as the burial place for Jesus’ family16 but that, at each of these three critical junctures, it

5 Tabor, “Two Burials;” 2 (his emphasis).
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
especially misses the mark by a wide margin. I will add a few additional thoughts on the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances of Jesus.

As Tabor appropriately reminds us, all historical data must be interpreted. Crucial historical events do not stand on their own, with their meaning written into them. Rather, historians and other scholars must study the data to arrive at the clearest understanding possible. Hence, we must organize the available data. Differences will emerge here. No one is unbiased or always chooses the best routes on every single issue. But generally, the preferred solutions are those that account best for the known data with as little contrary remainder as possible. As a result, some interpretations provide better accounts than do others with regard to the known facts, as nearly as they can be ascertained. Furthermore, historians must choose which explanations to subordinate to other material, and so on.

But sometimes this subordination appears to be positioned too far in one direction or the other. When Tabor repeatedly seems to use the New Testament when it favors his viewpoint while parting from it when it does not support his view, even though there are good scholarly reasons for affirming the authenticity of the New Testament material, this provides cause for concern. Yet I am afraid that this tendency manifests itself too often.

For example, Tabor follows the broad outline of the Gospel accounts when they depict the crucifixion of Jesus. Likewise, he appreciates the Gospel reports that point to a hasty burial in a rock tomb due to the approaching Sabbath, even though burial in a trench grave was the most common mode of Jewish burial in Jesus’ day. Tabor also espouses the empty tomb, found in all four Gospels and implied by Paul, whom all, including Tabor, agree is our earliest and most reliable source.

But when it comes to Mark’s testimony that the women returned on Sunday morning in order to anoint Jesus’ dead body (16:1-2), Tabor begins to sidestep the Gospel accounts. Although there is a total lack of Gospel (or any other) testimony that either Joseph of Arimathea or Jesus’ family sought to move the body elsewhere, Tabor lists the temporary burial of Jesus’ body as a solid fact, one that is not only expected but is also “indisputable.” But on what evidence are these seemingly bare assertions based? No evidence from the New Testament, Jewish burial practices, or other ancient reports supports these points or his claim that Jesus’ body was transferred to another tomb. However, these assertions line up nicely with the Talpiot tomb burial.

Tabor surprisingly favors John’s account, where Mary Magdalene presumes that the gardener moved Jesus’ body. This is rather astounding since there is no multiple attestation of John’s report, and John is generally treated as the least reliable Gospel. But once again, this idea favors his thesis.

Directly after stating what he thinks can be said from the texts with some assurance, Tabor argues, “What happened next... is unfortunately a matter about which historians can say little, given the theological nature of our sources and their relatively late apologetic character.” Without disparaging his motives, it does appear that what Tabor needs to support his thesis can be conveniently gleaned from the Gospels and Pauline literature. However, in some places where the sources provide strong arguments against the thesis, the sources suddenly become problematic.

And this is not the only place where this happens in the development of his thesis. As indicated earlier, Tabor dismisses the widely held view affirmed by the majority of scholars that Paul checked out his gospel message with the chief apostles, James the brother of Jesus, Peter, and later John, and received their affirmation (Gal 1:18-2:10). Tabor calls this a “myth of origins.” Elsewhere, he develops this idea in greater detail, affirming that earliest Christianity followed a distinctly Jewish brand of theology led by James, along with Jesus’ mother and family. In the views of earliest Christianity, Jesus was apparently thought to be neither deity nor raised from the dead. This movement “of ethical and spiritual values” bore “no trace of Paul’s gospel.”

18 Ibid., 228–30.
19 Tabor, “Two Burials,” 2.
20 Tabor, The Jesus Dynasty, 228.
21 Ibid., 234–35.
22 Tabor, “Two Burials,” 2.
23 I mean this literally because often I have seen James Tabor kindly attribute the best reading to his opponent, compliment the views of others with whom he disagrees, and graciously consider the possibility of other positions (for example, see The Jesus Dynasty, 317). But as I have also said above, all of us speak from our own perspectives and viewpoints.
24 Tabor, “Two Burials,” 2.
Yet many powerful reasons favor Paul’s gospel stance as being basically identical to the earliest Christian message. For example, the pre-Pauline creedal tradition that Paul received and then passed down in 1 Cor 15:3–8, including the death, burial, and resurrection appearances of Jesus, dates from the early to mid-30s AD. Few conclusions are better established in the critical literature. Further, it can be shown to be the original Christian proclamation.

This creed(s) predates by one or more decades not only Paul’s writings but also the letter of James, the Q material, and the Didache, which are Tabor’s favorite sources. Why should we favor these last texts that are both significantly later than the content of this early creed and of much more questionable provenance? The material in 1 Cor 15:3–7 is more strongly supported on all counts: a much earlier date, probable authorship, strong pedigree, and scholarly approval.

Additionally, most scholars conclude that Paul received this material or at least its general content from the apostle Peter and James the brother of Jesus during Paul’s first visit to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18–20). Most scholars also concur that during Paul’s second trip to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1–10) he subjected his gospel message to the apostolic scrutiny not only of Peter and James but also of John, lest he be mistaken (2:2). However, the most influential leaders in the early church added nothing to Paul’s gospel presentation (2:6) and welcomed his witness to its truth (2:9). Paul likewise attests that he knew the details of their apostolic message about the death, burial, and resurrection appearances of Jesus and that they all taught the same thing (1 Cor 15:11–15).

These data are so well attested and affirmed by contemporary critical scholars that it is difficult to understand how a critique could dislodge these central conclusions. Perhaps Paul is too self-serving in Gal 1:18–2:10 by saying that the other apostles agreed with him. If so, then why are his two trips to Jerusalem preceded immediately by a passage that declares his independence since he was taught directly by Jesus? Why should he go at all to the chief apostles for confirmation?

Furthermore, if Paul were so self-serving, why should he acknowledge that having labored in vain was even a possibility (2:2)? Moreover, why does he turn immediately to record an argument between himself and Peter over the issue of Jewish fellowship with Gentiles (Gal 2:11–21)? If the response is that telling his account of Peter’s error elevated himself at Peter’s expense, this still militates against and risks the unanimity that was the central point that Paul had just finished recording in 2:6,9.

In order to sidestep the force of Gal 1:18–2:10 one must somehow challenge Paul’s credibility. Yet Paul is both the earliest and most accredited source that we have in the early church as is attested by the vast majority of contemporary critical scholars. What source that contradicts Paul is both earlier and more reliable?

Tabor states that “many” scholars have questioned Paul here. Although I do not doubt that he could produce a few names of scholars who take his position, the issue, of course, will not be decided by a “head count.” Still, it may be true, as is often thought, that the preponderance of scholarly opinion often renders particular positions more credible, due not to the sheer numbers themselves but to the reasons on which these positions are taken. If this is the case, then Tabor’s stance against Paul’s witness to the major beliefs of the earliest church is not likely to succeed. This is the area in which I have specialized over my entire career. I have even kept a tally of scholarly opinion regarding these issues over the last 30 years, and it shows that texts like 1 Cor 15:3–8 and Gal 1:18–2:10 are well accredited, being accepted by the vast majority of scholars.

After speaking of the consensus scholarly view that Paul received this material in Jerusalem from a reliable source, Richard Bauckham contended in a recent work that in 1 Cor 15:11, Paul “asserts the unanimity between himself and the other apostles on the key matters he has

26 For this argument, see Habermas, “Experiences of the Risen Jesus,” 288–97; Habermas, “Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present,” 141–43. For many more details, see Habermas, The Risen Jesus and Future Hope, especially chapter 1.
27 There is much scholarly debate about both the author and date of the letter of James, which nonetheless affirms the deity of Jesus (1:1; 2:1). The existence as well as the authorship and content of the Q sayings document have never been questioned as much as recently. Besides, Q denies neither the deity of Jesus nor His resurrection. The Didache has no known author and is probably much later than the other sources.

28 Victor Furnish is probably correct that, in Galatians 1, Paul is distinguishing between the content of the gospel message, being given to him by Jesus during the resurrection appearance to him, and the human, testimonial confirmation of the message by those others who also saw Jesus’ appearances (Furnish, Jesus according to Paul [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 29: cf. 65).
29 Tabor, “Two Burials,” 2.
just rehearsed (v. 11). This unanimity existed because he had received the tradition in question from the Jerusalem apostles.30

Reginald Fuller remarked on the pre-Pauline creedal tradition in 1 Corinthians 15: “The importance of Paul’s statement can hardly be overestimated.” It presents a clear example of the earliest Christian claims, as witnessed by the eyewitnesses who experienced these events.31

Even Jewish New Testament scholar Pinchas Lapide listed eight reasons for holding that this creedal text is early and predates Paul. He concluded that this tradition “may be considered as a statement of eyewitnesses.”32 In spite of being agnostic on the issue of the resurrection, Wedderburn says that the statements preserved here “are the foundations of the church.”33

Can this text be cross-examined? Years ago German historian Hans von Campenhausen attested: “This account meets all the demands of historical reliability that could possibly be made of such a text.”34 Much more recently, Howard Clark Kee was even more specific: the early traditions recorded by Paul “can be critically examined and compared with other testimony from eyewitnesses of Jesus, just as one would evaluate evidence in a modern court or academic setting.”35 Even skeptical scholars regularly think that Paul was in the right place at the right time, where he met with the right witnesses to have received this testimony concerning the early Christian gospel. Accordingly, this material is usually dated in the early to mid-30s AD.36

Likewise, the majority of scholars who consider the possible sources of the tradition that Paul preserves here think that Paul received this material from Peter and James the brother of Jesus in his first trip to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18–20). This gospel message was later confirmed during Paul’s second trip during which he consulted with these same apostles, plus John (Gal 2:1–10).

For instance, A. M. Hunter speaks for many in favor of the great antiquity and apostolic origin of the creed because of the presence of Semitisms in the creed which seem to indicate that it originated in Palestine and because the names of the apostles Peter and James both surface in 1 Corinthians 15 and in Galatians 1. Accordingly, the tradition recorded by Paul is “open to testing.”37 Other scholars agree with this and affirm that Paul checked out his message with the other apostles and received their confirmation.38

For reasons like these, C. H. Dodd concluded: “Thus Paul’s preaching represents a special stream of Christian tradition which was derived from the main stream at a point very near to its source.” Therefore, anyone who wants to “maintain that the primitive Christian Gospel was fundamentally different from that which we have found in Paul must bear the burden of proof.”39 Since Paul is our earliest and most critically attested source, his testimony is difficult to set aside. Paul was indeed at the right place and the right time, gathered the crucial evidence from William Collins Sons, 1976), 104; G. A. Wells, Did Jesus Exist? (London: Pemberton, 1986), 30; Jack Kent, The Psychological Origins of the Resurrection Myth (London: Open Gate, 1999), 16–17.

30 A. M. Hunter, Jesus: Lord and Saviour (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 100 (Hunter’s emphasis).


32 A. J. M. Wedderburn, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 266 (Bauckham’s emphasis). For further confirmation of this scholarly consensus and Paul’s knowledge that the other apostles agreed with him on the nature of the resurrection appearances, Bauckham cites several works, including those by A. Eriksson, Martin Hengel and A. M. Schwemer (endnotes 7, 8).


34 A. M. Hunter, Jesus: Lord and Saviour (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 100 (Hunter’s emphasis).


161
the proper persons, and passed it on to his readers. The reasons for this are sufficient to convince the majority of contemporary critical scholars concerning the early apostolic agreement on the nature of the Christian gospel data.

On the other hand, Tabor’s reasons for dismissing Paul’s claims regarding Jesus’ resurrection are not strong enough to offset the position. Tabor seems to dismiss Paul’s testimony for the same reason that he rejected elements of the Gospel accounts that oppose the Talpiot hypothesis: it creates havoc for his position. In fact, the pre-Pauline creed in 1 Cor 15:3–8 connected with Gal 1:18–2:10 presents a formidable roadblock against his hypothesis. As long as these data stand, the earliest gospel of the death, burial, and resurrection appearances of Jesus also stands. This was the central message not only of Paul but also of James the brother of Jesus, Peter, John, and the other apostles.

THE EMPTY TOMB OF JESUS AND THE TALPIOT RESPONSE

All our ancient sources, whether by friend or foe, agree that Jesus’ burial tomb was found empty shortly afterwards. Every Gospel reports that the women who visited Jesus’ tomb discovered that it was open and empty. Reportedly, even the Jewish authorities thought that the tomb was empty. Our earliest source (1 Cor 15:4) states that Jesus rose from the dead just three days after the crucifixion.

Surprisingly, the scholarly literature lists more than 20 reasons for the historicity of the empty tomb. Most frequently championed is the unanimous agreement that women were the initial witnesses. In the patriarchal culture of Palestine in the first century AD, women were unlikely to be asked to provide important testimony. Although there were exceptions, there was generally an inverse relation between the magnitude of the subject and whether women would be allowed to testify in court.

Why are the women enumerated by each Gospel as the initial witnesses to the empty tomb unless they actually were the first witnesses? Moreover, why would we be told also that Jesus’ male disciples reacted to the report by belittling the women and accusing them of spreading tales—basically gossip (see Luke 24:11)? Here we have two examples of the principle of embarrassment since it is unlikely that the New Testament authors would humiliate their heroes without good reasons.

Several strange items are operating here. If the authors wanted the greatest impact in evidencing the crucial report of the empty tomb and are as uncritical as some contemporary scholars think, why not simply invent the story that the men found the empty tomb? Their testimony would certainly be received more readily. Even if female testimony was utilized, by all means avoid criticizing the later leaders of the church, the male disciples. After all, it is counterproductive to make the early church leaders, who were taught by Jesus, look so badly mistaken. This is a horrible way to establish a case for the empty tomb unless the Evangelists were committed to reporting the events precisely as they occurred.

Another major reason establishing the empty tomb is that the city of Jerusalem would presumably be the last location for this claim to have originated if it were not so. As both the birthplace of the Church as well as the stronghold of its many enemies, it was risky business to proclaim a message that could almost immediately be checked out. An afternoon walk by either foe or friend could either verify or falsify the claim. If the tomb were not empty, it could easily have been disproven.

One objection is that the Gospel accounts do not begin to surface until about 35 or 40 years after the events. But this objection overlooks more than one crucial point. For instance, the predominant Jewish notion of afterlife at this time is clearly that of bodily resurrection. How could the disciples have gotten away with proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection appearances if the stone still remained in place, blocking His tomb? Anyone who went further and opened the tomb would disprove the entire enterprise in one easy step.

Just one other consideration favoring an empty tomb will be mentioned. Ancient historian Paul Maier points out, “Many facts from antiquity rest on just one ancient source, while two or three sources in agreement generally render the fact unimpeachable.” Yet the empty tomb is


42 Maier, In the Fullness of Time, 197.
taught or implied in three to six independent sources, both in the Gospels and elsewhere. By ancient standards, as Maier reminds us, this is simply excellent attestation. Due to these and many other reasons, most critical scholars hold that Jesus’ burial tomb was discovered to be empty shortly afterwards. This is the best explanation of our data.

How does the Talpiot hypothesis account for this information? As we have seen, Tabor holds that Jesus of Nazareth died by crucifixion and was buried hastily in a tomb, according to the general outline in the Gospels. Very quickly, perhaps even immediately after the initial Sabbath, the body was probably moved to the Talpiot tomb, either by Joseph of Arimathea or by family members. After perhaps a year, when His flesh would have rotted, Jesus’ bones would have been reburied in the ossuary that bears His name.

Tabor’s thesis has nothing to do with someone “stealing” Jesus’ dead body. The body was simply transferred to the Talpiot tomb in an orderly fashion, with the bones being placed in the ossuary a little later.

But this scenario appears bizarre, one that would seem never to have been imagined unless one were trying specifically to coalesce the burial story preserved in the Gospels with the assumptions of the Talpiot tomb hypothesis. It fails to make the best sense of the known data regarding Jesus’ burial.

To begin, why would Joseph or Jesus’ family members rebury His body just 24 hours or so after the original interment? Granted, we must concede that the body was buried hastily due to the oncoming Sabbath. But what was wrong with the initial tomb? Contrary to Tabor, a hasty burial is far from a temporary burial. Further, not a single ancient source supports such a move.

Even if it could be established that the body was moved so quickly, what is the advantage of placing it in the same sort of tomb that Jesus’ body had already occupied? At the outset, we made the methodological point that we need to work with the best explanation of our data, in keeping with the wide recognition of scholars, unless we have strong reasons for doing otherwise. But we have no good reasons to hold that Jesus’ body was reburied perhaps a day after His death, but prior to the third burial in the ossuary, unless the chief goal is to get Jesus’ bones into the Talpiot tomb. But, simply said, no data establishes this scenario.

There is another relevant issue here. Biblical archaeologist Jodi Magness concluded that the best explanations of the available data are that Jesus was raised from the dead or that Jesus’ body was reburied in a trench grave, which was the most common burial practice in first-century Israel. The latter would require that the shrouded body be placed in a rectangular notch in the soil. But, “whatever explanation one prefers . . . his bones could not have been collected in an ossuary, at least not if we follow the Gospel accounts.” The point is not that the Gospels must be followed at all costs but that once again we must utilize our chief sources of information. So if the most common kind of reburial were employed—burial in a trench grave—the bones would not have been reburied a year or so later.

Tabor is undecided as to whether Joseph would have told Jesus’ family about the initial reburial in a different tomb. However, how could Joseph, a respected man who attempted to honor Jesus, never have informed anyone of his decision? Surely this would be a private choice within the purview of the deceased individual’s family. To neglect to inform Jesus’ family of the new location of His body would be indecent and almost unconscionable. Anything else seems so out of place as to be almost ridiculous. Moreover, if Jesus’ bones are to show up later in the family tomb, with His name scratched on the outside of the ossuary, we can assume that many family members must have been aware of it.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that Joseph moved Jesus’ body by himself. Would no one else have witnessed the removal, especially when Joseph was not attempting to act secretly? And assuming that he received some assistance in relocating Jesus’ body, perhaps from more than one person, what prevents those assistants from sharing this incredibly newsworthy information? If Joseph and any other helpers or witnesses kept some assistance in relocating Jesus’ body, perhaps from more than one person, what prevents those assistants from sharing this incredibly newsworthy information? If Joseph and any other helpers or witnesses kept...
their actions hidden for some reason, especially if they never told Jesus’ mother and family, the hypothesis seems to require Joseph and his associates to have been guilty of conspiracy and fraud. It is almost reminiscent of the old Egyptian stories that those who buried the Pharaohs had to be killed so as not to divulge the whereabouts of the tomb.

Due to these and other serious problems, let us suppose that Joseph did tell Jesus’ family that he had moved the body. It makes the most sense that Joseph would have informed Jesus’ family before actually moving the body. In any culture and time, would someone who appears to be virtually unknown to a family (as far as we know) simply move their son’s or brother’s dead body without informing them ahead of time? Such an imposition would appear to be simply incredible.

Yet this becomes a thorny issue in that the women, including Jesus’ mother Mary, still went to the vacated tomb on Sunday morning. The women then concluded that it was momentous that Jesus’ body was no longer there. And even if Joseph straightened out the matter upon hearing the rumors of their mistake, or at some later time after the Christian preaching began, further serious problems would ensue due to the rise of their initial resurrection faith. We will pursue this further in the next portion of the essay.

So the burial and the empty tomb present major problems for Tabor, in spite of his overall agreement with some of the broad contours of the Gospel narratives. But when he gets to some of the sticky questions, such as those raised here, he simply punts and states that we can go no further due to the theological nature of the Gospels. Not only is this response itself problematic, given the most recent New Testament studies; but by this time in his discussion, Tabor has already borrowed from the Gospels whenever he wants to make the points or implications that favor his thesis. As we have seen, he accepts the general crucifixion and burial scenarios, the existence of Joseph of Arimathea and his role in Jesus’ burial, the day of the week as well as the time of day in which Jesus was buried, the hasty nature of Jesus’ burial, the nature of the rock tomb, the stone rolled in front, and on and on. But when these exact same texts agree against his hypothesis, he opts out of the process.

One major roadblock so far for the Talpiot reburial hypothesis is that the evidence for the empty tomb is both specific and powerful. Indeed, Tabor concedes because of the early date of Paul’s tradition and the difficulty of making sense of the data otherwise. But then he reinterprets it and bases his reinterpretation on mere speculation without evidence from ancient sources for doing so. Thus the empty tomb alone plays havoc with the Talpiot thesis.

Many problems need to be solved by those who espouse the likeliness of the Talpiot scenario with virtually no specific data to sort them out. To summarize: (1) There is no known rationale or evidence for either Joseph or Jesus’ family to rebury the body within a mere 24 hours or so. (2) If Jesus’ body had been reburied in the most common manner employed by the Jews of this time and moved to a trench grave, His bones would not have been placed later in the Talpiot tomb ossuary. Furthermore, there seems to be no reason for simply relocating the body to another tomb that was similar to that in which Jesus was initially buried. (3) If Joseph never told anyone else that he had reburied the body, how would he keep this fact from becoming known? Whether or not he needed help, this course of action would almost certainly attract attention. Even worse, the decision violates every rule of privacy, as well as meaning that the Talpiot tomb could not be Jesus’ family tomb, for they would not know about it. (4) If Joseph did inform especially the family beforehand, as seems highly likely, then why do Mary the mother of Jesus and others proceed to the now empty tomb on Sunday morning, apparently having no idea where to find Jesus’ body? If they are not told until later, then an entirely new set of problems emerge, as we will see next. (5) Over this entire procedure, a methodological pitfall continues to be manifest. By what justification do we accept such a large amount of the Gospel textual substantiation of Jesus’ death and burial, except when it clearly opposes our hypotheses?

**THE RESURRECTION APPEARANCES OF JESUS**

Whether liberal, moderate, or conservative, scholars generally concur on a fair number of historical details from the end of Jesus’ life to the beginning of the early church. For instance, virtually all critical scholars...
today think that Jesus’ disciples along with others really experienced what they were utterly convinced were appearances of the risen Jesus. 50

Why are these crucial historical experiences conceded by the vast majority of scholars, including skeptics? Of the many reasons several are especially significant. 51 Scholars often begin with (1) Paul’s eyewitness testimony to an experience of the risen Jesus (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8–10), which prompted his conversion from a vigorous persecutor of Christians to a passionate missionary (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13–14; Phil 3:4–6). Equally important is (2) the early creedal material containing the gospel data that Paul had received and passed on to others, including Jesus’ appearances to His followers (1 Cor 15:3–7). We have said that most scholars hold that the content of this tradition dates from immediately after Jesus’ crucifixion, and that Paul probably received it in the early to mid-30s AD. Most likely Peter and James the brother of Jesus passed it on to Paul during his initial visit to Jerusalem (Gal 1:13–20). Moreover, (3) these gospel data were so crucial to Paul that years later he took great care to establish the message again with Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and John. These key Christian leaders confirmed Paul’s view of the gospel, adding nothing (Gal 2:1–10). (4) Paul attests that he knew what the other apostles were teaching regarding their own experiences of the resurrected Jesus, and their message was the same as his (1 Cor 15:11–14).

Additional factors indicate that the other disciples had also seen the risen Jesus. (5) As we will note later, the predominant scholarly view is that James the brother of Jesus was an unbelieving skeptic until he was convinced that he had seen an appearance of the risen Jesus too (1 Cor 15:7). (6) Jesus’ disciples were willing to die specifically for their message of the resurrection, and some did, which indicates that they were totally persuaded that it was accurate. (7) Many other creedal texts that date from the earliest period of Christianity also confirm Jesus’ resurrection appearances. 52 (8) As addressed above, the empty tomb argues that whatever happened involved Jesus’ body, which is another indication in the direction of actual appearances of the risen Jesus.

These eight arguments are also espoused by most scholars, and they all indicate strongly that the earliest disciples were utterly convinced that they had witnessed actual appearances of the risen Jesus. Additionally, most scholars agree that alternative attempts to rule out the resurrection on natural grounds fail to explain the known data. 53 In light of the eight arguments just presented, if natural explanations are inadequate, then the best explanation for what the disciples experienced is actual appearances of the risen Jesus.

In brief, the historical evidence indicates that the disciples thought they had seen appearances of the risen Jesus. If natural events have not explained these experiences, then the resurrection appearances remain as the most probable explanation. Therefore, the experiences of the risen Jesus plus the absence of natural alternatives equals resurrection appearances!

To repeat, we have not accepted these facts just because they are reported in the New Testament. If that were the case, then skeptical scholars who reject the inspiration or reliability of Scripture would presumably also discard these data. But virtually all critical scholars think that Jesus’ disciples had real experiences that they thought were appearances of their risen Lord. Actually, it is rare to discover scholars who deny this. That is because there are so many credible reasons to accept these facts as historical, such as the eight we just listed. That is the reason so many scholars grant these data.

How does the Talpiot hypothesis deal with all this critically accredited historical data? It did not fare well with the burial and empty tomb records. Does it do any better in addressing the nature of the resurrection appearances? My contention is that the Talpiot tomb thesis is pressed even harder on this subject. I have argued that it makes by far the most sense that if Joseph of Arimathea had reburied Jesus’ body, that he would have informed the family before he did so. As a fairly obscure follower of Jesus, it is highly unlikely that he would decide privately to move the body without telling the family and friends. Regardless, Jesus’ family would necessarily have to know at least at some later time since it was their family tomb and they would have to know where to find Jesus’ bones in order to rebury them in the ossuary that would bear His name.

According to every burial scenario that we entertained, Mary the mother of Jesus must have known, sooner or later, that her son Jesus had

50 For many details here, see Habermas, “Experiences of the Risen Jesus,” 288–97; Habermas, “Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present,” esp. 149–53.
52 For specific details, see Habermas, The Risen Jesus and Future Hope, 22–23.
53 For both points here, see Habermas, “Experiences of the Risen Jesus,” 289–93; Habermas, “Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present,” esp. 140–45.
been reburied from the initial tomb in which His body had been placed. She would also have to know that His bones were placed in an ossuary in the family tomb, perhaps a year later. After all, she was the family matron, and preparing bodies for burial was generally a job for the women, as we see in the Gospels.

We have also said that if the women, including Mary and Mary Magdalene, knew of the reburial ahead of time, they would have no reason to go to the initial tomb on Sunday morning to finish the burial, which Joseph would have completed. Plus, they would expect to find the tomb empty. But this leads to the next problem—even critical scholars take seriously the claim that the women also had experiences that they thought were appearances of the risen Jesus. Needless to say, their conviction that they had seen the risen Jesus would collide with the knowledge that Jesus’ body, at that very moment, lay dead in another tomb.

Though highly unlikely, what if Joseph did move the body but waited until later to inform them? This still does not dissolve the problems of either the initial resurrection appearances that reportedly occurred to the women near the tomb (Matt 28:9–10; John 20:14–18), or the later appearances, where they would assuredly be present in the groups to which Jesus appeared. For instance, the women are specifically mentioned as being present after the ascension (Acts 1:14). Even apart from these texts, it is simply shortsighted to think that Jesus’ own mother along with His female disciples would not be in attendance during several of Jesus’ appearances.

So there ought to be no question that the relevant texts make it obvious that both Jesus’ mother Mary and Mary Magdalene were believers, thought they had also seen the risen Jesus, and supported the efforts of the early church. Yet if within a year or so of His death, Jesus’ bones inside the Talpiot tomb now needed to be placed in an ossuary, what would happen to their ongoing faith?

Over the years, each time one of Jesus’ family members entered their tomb in order to rebury another relative, they would be confronted by the reality of Jesus’ horrible death by crucifixion. From time to time, it was perhaps necessary to shift Jesus’ own ossuary or at least to step over or around it. Mother Mary could not help but remember. And since the predominant Jewish view at that time was that one’s corpse would be raised, with the ossuaries themselves serving as an ongoing pointer to the importance of the human bones, how could the women go on believing that Jesus truly had been raised from the dead? Then what about their firm conviction that He had appeared alive to them after His death?

In the case of James the brother of Jesus, we have a different angle to this problem. As the head of the family after Jesus died, James obviously would be another one who would have to have known where the family tomb was located. He also would know that Jesus’ name was displayed on the outside of the ossuary. Like Mary, James also would have to trip almost repeatedly over or at least pass by his brothers’ bones as they reburied additional family members during the intervening years prior to his own death.

But this would be highly problematic. Due to the dual source attestation, as well as the extreme example of embarrassment if Jesus had an unbelieving brother who later became the head of the Jerusalem church, the predominant scholarly view is that James had converted from skepticism due to a resurrection appearance of Jesus (1 Cor 15:7). James was transformed from believing Jesus was deranged to experiencing a profound faith change.

However, this generally accepted scholarly view cannot be reconciled with the claim that James knew without a doubt that Jesus’ “body” was still interred in the family tomb. As a pious Jew, how could James truly believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead? His brother’s bones were plainly safe and sound in the family tomb, awaiting the resurrection at the end of time. But this introduces far more serious problems in James’s case that were not present for the two Marys.

Given Jesus’ second burial in the family tomb followed by His final interment in the ossuary, what would account for James’ conversion from skepticism? If James had not been informed immediately that his brother’s corpse had simply been moved, what about Jesus’ appear-

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56 Mark 3:21; John 7:5.

57 In fact, among critical scholars, John Painter acknowledges that he is one of the few dissenters to this view. See Painter, “Who Was James?” in The Brother of Jesus: James the Just and His Mission, ed. Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 24.

58 For details, see Habermas, The Risen Jesus and Future Hope, 21–22.
ance to him after he discovered the truth? Beyond his initial conversion because of the resurrection appearance, as held by the majority of scholars, why did he keep believing upon learning the truth? A few years after Jesus’ death, James is still the leader of the Jerusalem church. And if it is thought that James is the author of the letter that bears his name, written later, he refers to his brother as the “Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1; 2:1), as “glorious” (2:1), waiting to return (5:7), and preparing to serve as the Judge (5:9). Indeed, Bauckham refers to the early date of James’ “high Christology.”

Another item regarding James should also be mentioned briefly. Although strongly disputed, if the recently discovered James ossuary is authentic, it might actually work against the Talpiot scenario. The ossuary designation “James son of Joseph brother of Jesus” would argue for that until his death, James continued to be identified with Christianity. This would corroborate the New Testament witness, as well as Josephus’s account of James’s martyrdom in Jerusalem. Additionally, the ossuary inscription may actually insinuate Jesus’ resurrection, for if James doubted that Jesus had been resurrected and if He was therefore less than Lord, it would seem that he would no longer be so identified with Jesus in his death.

This leads us to another devastating problem for the Talpiot thesis. Whenever mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, and James found out about the reburial of Jesus’ body, it would have to be within the first year or so after the crucifixion, occasioned by both the reburial in the Talpiot family tomb and the later move to the ossuary. This also would constitute the first year in the life of the Christian Church. But how could this information of the double reburial of Jesus’ body and bones possibly remain concealed from Jesus’ apostles and other early leaders, especially when the Talpiot tomb has outside decorations that demand attention and contained an ossuary that bears Jesus’ name? But the effect on the Christian faith and message would be overwhelmingly devastating.

As soon as the horrible secret leaked out, how would the early proclamation of the gospel—the deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus—ever be the same? The knowledge of Jesus’ reburial and the present whereabouts of His bones would hit the movement right between the eyes, indeed, in its very heart. How would it affect Peter? John? Others?

Even further, how can we make sense of Paul’s conversion, based on what he likewise thought was a resurrection appearance of Jesus? With both Jesus’ body and bones already being reburied by this time, does the Talpiot hypothesis reveal any new insights regarding Paul’s conversion? It does not appear that the thesis helps in any way to account for Paul’s transformation from a fearsome persecutor to an ardent believer in Jesus Christ. But Paul’s conversion must be explained thoroughly, due to the central nature of his experience and his early resurrection report. As a former Pharisee (Phil 3:3–6), it is even more clear that Paul believed in bodily resurrection, as they did. This is further evident in his works.

There is not the slightest sign that Jesus’ disciples or Paul thought that Jesus might not have been raised, that His bones were resting in a Talpiot grave, or that they were less than totally committed to the truth of the resurrection. The testimonies of James, Peter, and Paul were sealed by their deaths as martyrs for the gospel they preached, as indicated by first-century sources. This means that they were totally convinced of the central truth of Jesus’ resurrection, and they believed this gospel message to the end of their lives. This resurrection belief provides several powerful refutations of the Talpiot hypothesis.

As mentioned above, Tabor holds that James and perhaps even Jesus’ disciples did not believe in Jesus’ resurrection but saw Him as simply continuing the line of the Jewish prophets and John the Baptist. We cannot repeat our earlier evaluation, but there are multiple reasons why this view fails. The early pre-Pauline creedal formula in 1 Cor 15:3–7 and Paul’s visits to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18–2:10) to confirm the gospel message are highly evidential. And these texts pertain not only to Paul himself but to at least the views of James, Peter, and John. As the chief leaders of the church, this was their message too (1 Cor 15:11–15), resulting in a renewed effort to continue their missionary activity with more zeal than ever (Gal 2:9–10).

60 Richard Bauckham, “James and Jesus,” in The Brother of Jesus, 135.
61 Josephus, Ant. 20:9:1.
63 See Wright, Resurrection of the Son of God, chaps. 5–8; Gundry, chaps. 5–7, 13; Habermas and Licona, chap. 9, and Michael Licona’s essay in this volume.
64 For James’ martyrdom, see Josephus, Ant. 20:9:1. For Peter’s and Paul’s martyrdom, see Clement of Rome, To the Corinthians 5.
This is why there is minimal scholarly dissent to the assertion that the resurrection of Jesus was absolutely central to Christian origins, contrary to Tabor’s thesis. This definitely includes not only the four main leaders—Paul, James, Peter, and John—but also mother Mary and Mary Magdalene, as well as the other disciples.

Tabor also holds that Paul believed in spiritual resurrection appearances. But the problems with this hypothesis are simply immense. From the beginning, the earliest proclamation was the unwavering conviction that Jesus had appeared to His followers. From centuries before Jesus until a couple of centuries after His death, the chief New Testament terms for “resurrection” (anastasis) and “raise” (egeírō) virtually always referred to the body, not to the immaterial portion of persons. And the words were used in this manner by almost everyone in the ancient world—pagans, Jews, and Christians alike. Moreover, in Paul’s works, the human body (sôma) was corporeal, and the resurrection body of Jesus was “physical in nature.” So Paul did not claim that Jesus was somehow spiritually alive while His body rotted.

Additionally, in the pre-Pauline creed(s) that we have discussed (1 Cor 15:3–7), both individuals and groups claimed to have seen the risen Jesus, which is hardly even questioned in the critical scholarly literature. But group appearances, like an empty tomb, are much more conducive to substantial, bodily appearances. Once again we must account for what the earliest evidence indicates rather than trying to fit another scenario instead. Michael Licona’s chapter in this volume addresses other aspects of this view in much greater detail.

Now we must summarize the issue in this chapter by adding to the earlier list of problems related to Jesus’ burial, as engendered by the Talpiot hypothesis. This thesis does not adequately explain the critically ascertained historical facts regarding the convictions of the disciples, James the brother of Jesus, and Paul that they had seen the risen Jesus, convictions that seem to be verified by their subsequent transformations and martyrdoms for the gospel message.

Some of the chief issues are as follows: (1) That the early Christian view is that of bodily resurrection is established by many factors, including a) the predominant Jewish view in the first century AD, b) the almost unanimous use of the relevant terms anastasis and egeírō in the ancient world, whether by pagans, Jews, or Christians alike, c) Paul’s use of the term sôma, and d) the ossuary process itself. (2) With such a definition, how could Jesus’ mother Mary and Mary Magdalene reconcile their eyewitness experience of appearances of the risen Jesus with their certainty that His body and bones remained in a local tomb? (3) How can we explain the conversion of James, the brother of Jesus, from skepticism, his personal confirmation of the gospel message of the deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as well as his lifelong piety and service to the Jerusalem church, when he too, knew that Jesus’ bones were in the family tomb? (4) Peter, John, and the other apostles also confirmed this gospel message, including the centrality of the resurrection. To postulate that word of Jesus’ reburial by Joseph and His later interment in the ossuary never leaked out to the apostles is simply too much to suppose. (5) The Talpiot hypothesis fails to account for Paul’s experience of Jesus’ postresurrection appearance and his own conversion, which would most likely have occurred after the ossuary reburial. (6) The zeal of Jesus’ chief apostles, followed by their recorded martyrdoms, indicates that they believed to the very end, in spite of their knowledge of the reburials.

CONCLUSION

The Talpiot tomb hypothesis lacks explanatory scope and power, both of which are key ingredients in historical research. It is opposed by the historical evidence at virtually every turn. Thus it stumbles on virtually every one of its major claims. Scarcely has a theory regarding the historical Jesus ever been confronted by more major refutations. Even more seldom has almost the entire scholarly community—skeptical, liberal, moderate, and conservative alike—joined ranks and reacted with almost a single voice against a hypothesis. In fact, a quick survey indicates that critical scholars may be leading the charge even more than their conservative counterparts. “The thesis is clearly refuted by the evidence” could be the clarion cry that has arisen time and again.
GARY R. HABERMAS

In light of virtually all the facts attested by contemporary biblical scholarship, there can be little doubt that the Talpiot hypothesis was tried in the scholarly courts and found wanting.

Paul on the Nature of the Resurrection Body

Michael Licona

INTRODUCTION

Suppose you are watching the evening news and the lead story concerns a team of archaeologists in Jerusalem all of whom are highly respected for their painfully careful work. They have just discovered an interesting ossuary in a tomb that has been sealed since the first century. The ossuary is a box that is approximately 20 inches long, 10 inches wide, and 12 inches tall. They observe an inscription on the side of the ossuary that is uniquely written in Aramaic, Greek, and Latin.

The archaeologists carefully brush and blow the dirt off of the box until they are able to discern the inscription in all three languages: “Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph.” The lid of the ossuary is carefully removed, and we are all startled by what we see: the skeletal remains of a victim that appears to have been crucified and an ancient document made of papyrus written in Greek.

Two of the archaeologists are skilled at reading the ancient language, and after one minute their voices become noticeably louder and their speech more rapid as they compare their translations of the first page, which contains a single statement in large letters. They look at each other in amazement then share their translations with the news crews present. “This document says, ‘We fooled the world until today!’ And it is signed by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John!”

This scenario isn’t even close to what occurred in New York City on February 25, 2007 when James Cameron, Simcha Jacobovici, and