

Two Burial Stories in the Gospel of John

Summary

First Story – The Roman soldiers disposed of the bodies of the three crucified men. How and where? The text does not say.

Second story – Joseph of Arimathea put the body of Jesus in a tomb that was hewn in the rock.

My study shows that the second story goes back to the Gospel of Mark and was derived from the first one. It has all the features of a pious forgery. Consequently the empty-tomb story is also pious fiction. The empty-tomb story is important because it shows that the resurrection experience of the disciples was not strictly spiritual, but affected the dead body of Jesus.

The resurrection experience of the disciples was real and had a formidable influence on them. But, if it did not affect the dead body of Jesus, it must have been purely subjective. The immediate consequence of this fact is that the Christian faith in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is unsustainable.

There is another passage in the Gospel of John which confirms the fact that the resurrection experience of the disciples was strictly spiritual. This shows that the mystical experience is to itself its own proof, and is enough to justify faith. No tangible proofs are needed. This point is confirmed by the study of the mystical experience that was conducted by Michel de Certeau in a book entitled *The Mystic Fable*.

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1 - Two Burial Stories in the Gospel of John¹

“The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder.
The difficulty lies not in the execution of the deed
but in the doing away with the traces.”²

The two burial stories appear side by side in John’s narrative.

First burial story

A - ³¹It was the Preparation day, and so, to prevent the bodies from remaining on the crosses during the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a great day), the Jews asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies removed. ³²Accordingly the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first man, and then those of the other who had been crucified with Jesus; ³³but, on coming to him, when they saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

John 18:31-33

Second burial story

³⁸After this, Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus – but a secret one, owing to his fear of the religious authorities – begged Pilate’s permission to remove the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him leave; so Joseph went and removed the body. ³⁹Nicodemus, too – the man who had formerly visited Jesus by night – came with a roll of myrrh and aloes, weighing nearly a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen with the spices, according to the Jewish mode of burial. ⁴¹At the place where Jesus had been crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a newly made tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²And so, because of its being the Preparation day, and as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:38-42)

First story

I have divided the first story into two parts. Part **A** reports what was in the source used by John. Part **B** introduces new concerns that are unique to John. In itself, Part **A** is of no interest to John. He uses it only to explain why the soldiers did not break the legs of Jesus, which is for him a sign that Jesus is the Passover lamb of which no bone can be broken.

Next comes the piercing of Jesus’ side (Part **B**) and the coming out of blood and water. This is the point that is of interest to John, who sees in it a miraculous sign that calls for faith. This sign is strengthened by the fulfillment of two scriptures.

¹ This paper was published in *The Fourth R*, November-December 2018.

²Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, translated by Katherine Jones (Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1939) 70. A PDF copy of the book is now available on the Internet.

Verse 35 is in the center of Part **B**. It introduces the witness who saw what the soldiers did and what happened when one of them pierced the side of Jesus with his lance. Now this witness remains a mystery. Who was he? The Greek text refers to him in the masculine form. So he must be one of the male disciples. But according to Mark 15:50, all the male disciples of Jesus run away when he was arrested. Only some female disciples were present near the crucifixion place. According to John, however, the disciple whom Jesus loved was present there with Mary, the mother of Jesus (see John 19:25-27). The Beloved Disciple is mentioned only in the Gospel of John and his identity remains a mystery. I have written a paper about him. You can find it in section 3. Let me say here that what pertains to the Beloved Disciple is likely to involve special theological insights that are unique to John and his gospel.

This explains why John forgets so easily the last part of what the soldiers had done, namely that they removed the bodies of the three crucified men once they were dead, and disposed of them in a common grave. None of the disciples, including the women, knew where it was. The women could have seen the soldiers come and break the legs of the two men who were crucified with Jesus. But as the sun was about to set, they had to leave on account of the Sabbath. They did not see the soldiers remove the bodies and do what they had to do.

John left the action of the soldiers unfinished. But they must have obeyed the orders they had received and made sure no traces of the crucifixion were left during the Sabbath. John reported what the soldiers were ordered to do, because this was for him a way of introducing an important testimony of the Beloved Disciple.

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Second Story

The second story is centered on Joseph of Arimathea, who went to see Pilate and asked permission "to let him remove the body of Jesus." His obvious intention was to give Jesus an honorable burial. His request differs from that of the Jewish council in one major point: he was interested only in Jesus. He had no objection to leaving the other two men on the cross during the Sabbath. In other words, Joseph did not share the concern of the Jewish leadership to have the crucifixion ordeal ended before a particularly important day.

The second story is well known. Not only is it found in John, it is the only burial story in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. In comparison, the first burial story is barely implied in the text of John. This is why, I suppose, it has been ignored to this day.

I will argue that the second burial story was derived from the first one. But first, I would like to analyze the significant discrepancies that plague the four accounts of the second story. They show that each evangelist tried to overcome the problems inherent in that second story.

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Part 1

Comparative study of the second burial's four versions

We have read John's version. Here are the other three versions.

Mark

⁴²The evening had already fallen, when, as it was the Preparation day – the day before the Sabbath – ⁴³Joseph from Arimathea, a councillor of good position, who was himself living in expectation of the kingdom of God, came and ventured to go in to see Pilate, and to ask for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴But Pilate was surprised to hear that he had already died. So he sent for the officer, and asked if he were already dead; ⁴⁵and, on learning from the officer that it was so, he gave the corpse to Joseph. ⁴⁶Joseph, having bought a linen sheet, took Jesus down, and wound the sheet around him, and laid him in a tomb which had been cut out of the rock; and then rolled a stone up against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷Mary of Magdala and Mary, the mother of Joseph, were watching to see where he was laid. (Mark 15:42-47)

Matthew

⁵⁷When evening had fallen, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸He went to see Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate ordered it to be given him. ⁵⁹So Joseph took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen sheet, ⁶⁰and laid it in his newly made tomb which he had cut in the rock; and, before he left, he rolled a great stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁶¹Mary of Magdala and the other Mary remained behind, sitting in front of the grave. (Matt 27:57-61)

Luke

⁵⁰Now there was a man of the name of Joseph, who was a member of the Council, and who bore a good and upright character. ⁵¹(This man had not assented to the decision and action of the Council.) He belonged to Arimathea, a town in Judea, and lived in expectation of the kingdom of God. ⁵²He now went to see Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus; ⁵³and, when he had taken it down, he wrapped it in a linen sheet, and laid him in a tomb cut out of stone, in which no one had yet been buried. ⁵⁴It was the Preparation day, and just before the Sabbath began. ⁵⁵The women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee followed, and saw the tomb and how the body of Jesus was laid, ⁵⁶and then went home, and prepared spices and perfumes. (Luke 23:50-55)

Main differences

The three synoptic gospels make sure that the women knew where the body of Jesus was laid. This was essential for the story of the empty tomb, in which it is assumed that the women had witnessed what Joseph of Arimathea had done. Only John fails to mention this point. He has Mary Magdalene go to the tomb early on the first day of the week (see John 20:1). How did she identify the tomb? This inconsistency

suggests that John picked up the story, from Mark or its source, in which the women see where Joseph of Arimathea had left the corpse of Jesus. According to Mark, Jesus was hastily buried, and the ritual preparation of the body was not performed but rather was left for the women to do after the Sabbath (see Mark 16:1). John realized that putting the ritual off until then meant that Jesus had not received a proper burial, so he had Joseph and Nicodemus perform the ritual burial and, I should add, without the presence of the women. In addition, John must have thought that Joseph could not handle burying Jesus all by himself, so he gave him a helper in the person of Nicodemus.

The time factor

Mark states that Joseph went to see Pilate "when evening had come." This means that, if Joseph was concerned with observing the Sabbath law, he had to act quickly because the interval between evening and night is short in that part of the world. Matthew paid special attention to this point. He reduced Joseph's activity to the bare minimum: wrapping the body in a clean linen cloth and depositing it in his own tomb. Thus Joseph did not have to go and buy anything for the burial of Jesus, as in Mark (and John), and he did not have to look for a tomb, as in John.

John, on the other hand, does not mention that evening had come when Joseph went to see Pilate. This provided more time for what Joseph (and Nicodemus) had to do. In John's story, Nicodemus comes with a wagonload of myrrh and aloes, and the two good Samaritans gave Jesus a royal burial, a time-consuming activity. But, at the end, they had to hurry and find a tomb, because the day of Preparation was about to end and the Sabbath about to start. So they just used a tomb that was there! John's story is not realistic here. Matthew is the only one who cared to avoid the strange conduct of using a tomb that was just there.

The identity of Joseph of Arimathea

According to Mark, Joseph was member of the Jewish council. This identification was problematic because the council had handed Jesus over to Pilate for crucifixion. Mark emphasizes that the council's verdict was unanimous (Mark 14:64), which obviously implies that Joseph had voted to condemn Jesus—an embarrassing problem that Luke explicitly contradicts in Luke 24:51. In order to overcome this difficulty, Mark specified that Joseph was a pious Jew who waited expectantly for the Kingdom of God (Mark 15:43). Matthew must have thought that piety was not enough to motivate Joseph's action. He transformed him into a disciple of Jesus. He also made him a rich man in order to explain how he could afford to have his own tomb hewn in the rock.

In order to make Joseph's action believable, Mark spoke of the courage he showed when he "boldly" went to Pilate to request the body of Jesus. Matthew and Luke omit this detail.

John avoided a big problem by not associating Joseph with the council. For him, Joseph was a secret disciple of Jesus. This explains his concern about Jesus, but not the access he had to Pilate. If he was not

an important person, he would not have had a chance to reach the Roman governor.³ This is a weak point in John's story. But he was wise to give Joseph a helper in the person of Nicodemus.

Conclusion

This quick survey of the four accounts shows that the tradition of a burial by Joseph of Arimathea was problematic. Each gospel writer tried to fix it as best he could.

In all four narratives, Joseph of Arimathea appears out of the blue and saves the day. Not only does he give Jesus an honorable burial, but he provides the premise for the empty tomb story. This is why he reminds one of a *deus ex machina*, lowered in a basket at the end of a Greek play, who resolves all the problems.

As a *deus ex machina* Joseph appears to be fictive, and the four gospel accounts concerning what he did for Jesus are likely to be pious fictions as well. But is the evidence really conclusive? I must admit that all the evidence that I have produced so far is circumstantial. An impartial jury might find it impressive, but not conclusive. Is it possible to produce some really compelling evidence?

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Part 2

How the second burial story evolved from the first one

The proof that Joseph's story is a pious fiction can be found in Mark's text. Let us read it once more.

When evening had come, and **since it was the day of Preparation**, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. (Mark 15:42-43)

There is, in this text, a causal connection between Joseph's request and the fact that "it was the day of Preparation." This is very strange, because the impending sabbath had nothing to do with Joseph's request. He just wanted to give Jesus an honorable burial. If he had acted in anticipation of the impending holy day, he would have included the two other men in his request. What seems to have happened is that Mark (or the tradition he is following) transformed the story of the first burial using a simple substitution: the original request from the Jewish leadership became a request from just one of them, Joseph of Arimathea. In the first story, it is the impending holy day that motivated "the Jews" to

³John was perceptive enough to give Peter an associate who could help him gain access to the high priest's courtyard (see John 18:15-16). He should have known that, as disciple of Jesus, Joseph could not have had access to Pilate.

request the removal of the bodies. But it is clear that Joseph was not interested in all three men, only in Jesus. Mark has inadvertently reproduced a feature of the first burial story in his revision. While his explanation, "since it was the day of Preparation," made sense in the first story, it did not in the second one. Matthew and Luke removed that incoherent reference to the day of Preparation. Mark's mistake is the "smoking gun" that shows he knew that first story when he wrote his own.

Another honest mistake is found in John's version of the second burial story, in which he has Joseph and Nicodemus bury Jesus when the female disciples were not present. Therefore, the women would not have known where Jesus was buried. John exposes his error when he has Mary Magdalene go to the tomb on the first day of the week, as if she had seen what Joseph and Nicodemus had done.

A third discrepancy exists in Mark's account. He says that Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the council. Now, according to Mark, all the members of the council agreed that Jesus deserves to die (see Mark 14:64). This means that Joseph of Arimathea condemned Jesus. How could he have been waiting for the Kingdom of God, the central feature of Jesus' message?

It is easy to change a story. What is difficult is to do so without leaving traces of the forgery. When a story is judged unacceptable, it is not so easy to invent another one in its place without betraying oneself. Mark's text illustrates this point with its mention of the day of Preparation. The tradition concerning the first burial survived for some time but was finally lost, while the written texts of the second story survive to this day.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence that I have produced, I conclude that the second burial story, in which Joseph of Arimathea is the central actor, is pious fiction. The body of Jesus must have been disposed of by the Roman soldiers. This is clearly implied, although not explicitly said, in the first story.

The two burial stories illustrate a phenomenon that occurs very frequently in the various narratives concerning what happened during the life of Jesus. Important memories of the past were repressed. Other events were invented. Traces of those systematic transformations exist in the texts. Some of them are easily recognizable; others are not. This is particularly the case of memories that were repressed, and have remained unrecognized to this day.

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