

The Burial of Jesus: With Focus on the Views of the Jesus Seminar

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The renowned scholar Raymond E. Brown wrote by 1973:

Many have pointed out that the normal procedure following the execution of an accursed criminal (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13) would have been to dump the corpse into a common burial place reserved for malefactors....However, an almost insuperable obstacle to such theorizing is raised by the person of Joseph of Arimathea who appears in all four Gospels. It is virtually certain that he was not a figment of Christian imagination, that he was remembered precisely because he had a prominent role in the burial of Jesus, and thus there was someone who knew exactly where Jesus had been buried. [REB.VCBR 113-14]

In line with this assessment, there has generally been scholarly acceptance of the reliability of the tomb burial of Jesus.

However, a rather vocal minority (J.D. Crossan, the Jesus Seminar) has stuck its neck out against this consensus; the burial tradition is passed off as "wishful thinking" (see JUF 142). Rather, Jesus either was not buried (and eaten by birds on the cross) or was buried in a shallow common grave, where his carcass was devoured by wild dogs. This odd view has left several scratching their heads. Craig writes:

Having carried out fairly extensive research into the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, I was well aware that the wide majority of New Testament critics affirm the historicity of the Gospels' assertion that Jesus' corpse was interred in the tomb of a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea. Thus it puzzled me why a prominent scholar like Crossan would set his face against the consensus of scholarship on this question. [JUF 142]

Craig was disappointed by Crossan's lack of any compelling argumentation to back his exorbitant claim [JUF 142]. The Jesus Seminar does raise some objections to the burial which should be answered; however, proponents of the tomb burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea have some much more powerful questions which the Jesus Seminar needs to answer. What follows is an examination of this debate.

We shall here examine the evidences usually cited in favor of the burial tradition of the gospels, as well as the objections to them:

1. The pre-Pauline creed mentions the burial. It is virtually universally acknowledged that Paul is citing a primitive creed in ICor 15:3-8. This tradition most likely dates to the early to middle 30's; it was most likely handed down to Paul by the time of Paul's two-week conference with Peter in ad 36 (Gal 1:18), roughly 14 years before the Jerusalem Council (Gal 2:1). As C.H. Dodd once quipped, "We may presume that they did not spend all their time talking about the weather" [*The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, 3d. ed. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967), p. 26]. Also, the tradition which Paul cites in ICor 15:3-8 is focused mostly on Jerusalem-based disciples (Kephaz [Peter], James, and the Twelve), and in this situation, it becomes difficult to imagine that Paul did not discuss these appearances--and the Passion/burial traditions behind them--in some depth. In addition, the word for 'confer' in Gal 1:18 "is generally used elsewhere to designate fact-finding missions to well-known cities and other points of interest with a view toward acquiring first-hand information about them" [WLC.ANTE 17; on the origins/unity of the entire ICor 15 tradition in general, see WLC.ANTE 1-49]. Even the Jesus Seminar seems to agree with this mid-30's dating of the tradition:

Most fellows think that the components of the list reported there were formed prior to Paul's conversion, which is usually dated around 33 C.E.... [AJ 454]

...the conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead had already taken root by the time Paul was converted about 33 C.E. On the assumption that Jesus died about 30 C.E., the time for development was thus two or three years at most. [AJ 466]

The Jesus Seminar has seemingly boxed itself in with its own words; the only way they attempt to escape from the implications of the tradition's antiquity is by misinterpreting Paul's view of the burial and resurrection.

Anyhow, ICor 15:3-5 reads:

...hoti Christos apethanen huper ton hamartion hemon kata tas graphas

kai hoti etaphe

kai hoti egergetai te hemera te trite kata tas graphas

kai hot ophthe Kephias, eita tois dodeka

Though some have suggested ambiguity in the word '*etaphe*' as to whether it implies a tomb burial, it should be remembered that (a) this is a very brief tradition, and thus it is not very verbose/detailed; and (b) since Paul elsewhere shows knowledge of the context of the Passion tradition (see, ICor 11:23-26 and the allusion to Passover week in ICor 5:7, as well as the 'third day' motif), if no serious competing burial tradition is found (see below), it should be assumed that the tradition behind Paul's tradition is the same tradition which was behind that of the four Gospels.

2. Mark's account is simple in its basic elements and is not heavily imbued with theology. The account is rather simple--Joseph asks for the body, it is granted to him, Joseph has it wrapped, and lays it in a tomb. Even Bultmann seems to agree [see JUF 169, n.16]. Predictably, the Jesus Seminar does not agree. They see the burial as a '[historicized prophecy](#)' based on Dt 21:22-23 and Josh. 10:26-27. But (a) the parallels are not really significant, as was the case when the History of Religions school of thought had its heyday, and (b) the dissimilarities between the burial account and Josh. 10:26-27 suggest that Mark's account is not based on the latter. For the details, see JUF 169-70, n.16.

Also, the town of Arimathea from which Joseph came has no theological significance. The Seminar nonetheless has its objections to Joseph of Arimathea, which shall be examined.

3. Joseph of Arimathea, as a member of the Sanhedrin which, according to Mark, unanimously voted to condemn Jesus to death (Mk 14:55, 64; 15:1), is highly unlikely to be a Christian invention. If a high level of anti-Semitism is claimed to be present in the early Christian documents, then some weighty problems arise for those who claim that Joseph of Arimathea was invented by Mark. The Jesus Seminar is very confident that anti-Semitism is present in the Passion narrative. Crossan's book, *Who Killed Jesus?*, is subtitled, *Revealing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Narratives*. The statement that "The assertion that the Romans were innocent of Jesus' death and the Jews responsible is pure Christian propaganda" is (rather predictably) deemed red by the Jesus Seminar's Fellows [AJ 133]. But why, then, was a member of this viciously-portrayed Sanhedrin chosen to bury Jesus? Raymond Brown writes:

...I suggested that "a respected council member who was also himself awaiting the kingdom of God" meant that Joseph was a religiously pious Sanhedrist who, despite the condemnation of Jesus by the Sanhedrin, felt an obligation under the Law to bury this crucified criminal before sunset. That Mark created such an identification is most unlikely since it runs counter to his hostile generalizations casting blame on all the members of the Sanhedrin for the injustice of sentencing Jesus to death (14:55,64; 15:1)....

...That the burial was done by Joseph from Arimathea is very probable, since a Christian fictional creation from nothing of a Jewish Sanhedrist who does what is right is almost inexplicable, granted the hostility in early Christian writings toward the Jewish authorities responsible for the death of Jesus. [REB.DM 2.1239, 1240]

The Jesus Seminar, ever so surprisingly, does not find such a line of argument convincing. On the contrary, they have found a couple curious ways to get around this problem. The first solution, given by Crossan, states that Joseph was created by Mark as a middleman, to shift the responsibility for Jesus' burial from his enemies to his friends. But Crossan's theory is untenable in light of the fact that Mark never states that Joseph was a friend of Jesus; as Brown noted, that Joseph was awaiting the kingdom of God does not necessarily mean that he was a Christian or a friend of Jesus; that Mark's account states that the whole Sanhedrin voted to condemn Jesus tells against the theory that Mark wrote with any such emphasis. The issue of why Mark would pick a member of the council which killed Jesus (and not someone else) to bury him remains to be resolved.

A further concern with Crossan's hypothesis is that if Joseph of Arimathea is, as Crossan asserts, the "perfect in-between figure," he should have, as Crossan believes, "solid and powerful foot in both camps" [JDC.HJ 393]. But though Joseph supposedly had some power in the Jewish camp as a distinguished member of the Sanhedrin, he obviously did not or could not prevent the crucifixion; Mark still records a unanimous decision to condemn Jesus, without a dent or hesitation made by Joseph. On the other hand, Joseph was probably not very powerful in the Christian camp; he is mentioned nowhere else in the NT. If he was powerful in either camp, his presence/absence would certainly have made a memorable impression on the memory the Christian church as well as Jewish memory, making a credible invention difficult. But if Joseph was less powerful, then Crossan has less support for his thesis. As Paul Rhodes Eddy points out, whichever horn of this dilemma Crossan moves towards, the general plausibility of his thesis begins to unravel [see RIS 276-7]. In any event, Crossan's rejection of Jesus' burial by Joseph looks like an attempt to set up an unverifiable hypothesis; whatever Mark does will be seen as fitting some supposed theological agenda of his.

A different line of argumentation surrounding Joseph being a member of the Sanhedrin is found in AJ 159:

Mark's story begins to take on the hues of fiction immediately with the mention of Joseph of Arimathea (v. 43). The Seminar concluded that Joseph was a Markan invention: after all, Mark describes him as "a respected member of the Council"--the Council that had just condemned Jesus--and as someone who was looking for the kingdom's arrival (v.43). That is backhanded Christian apologetic: Jesus' opponents are refashioned into friends and supporters after the damage has been done. [AJ 159]

One cannot help but wonder what has led the Seminar to such an odd exegesis. In addition to giving the impression of an attempt at an unfalsifiable hypothesis, as Crossan's theory does, I have my own reservations with their hypothesis.

(a) They suggest that Jesus' *opponents* (plural) are represented by Joseph's act. But Joseph is not presented as a delegate of the Sanhedrin. Craig writes:

That Joseph *dared* to go to Pilate and ask *specifically* for Jesus's body is difficult to understand if he was simply an emissary of the Sanhedrin, assigned to dispose of the bodies. If he was not acting as an emissary of the Jews but as a private citizen, then the thieves' bodies would naturally have been disposed of by the Romans, while Joseph took Jesus's body. On the other hand, if Joseph was a delegate of the Sanhedrin and a secret disciple as well, he may have directed that the thieves' bodies be taken down and immediately dumped into some common grave, while Joseph tended for Jesus's body properly, knowing that his own tomb was near and intending to lay Jesus there. [WLC.ANTE 175-6]

So while it is not impossible that Joseph was a in Mark's mind a delegate of the Sanhedrin, that Mark mentioned that he *dared* to ask for *Jesus'* body (and not those of the two thieves) goes against this hypothesis. Besides which, even if he was doing so, this would not imply that the rest of the Sanhedrin had anything to do with Joseph's private plan for Jesus' burial.

(b) Also telling against this hypothesis is that Mark's readers did not interpret his narrative as suggesting that the Sanhedrin had a 'change of heart'. This is seen most specifically in Luke. In Lk 24:51, we are told that Joseph "had not consented to their plan of action." Though it is not impossible that Joseph did not

consent to their action (had he sat out from the hearing or did not vote), my interest is not with whether this passage is of historical value, but that it shows that Mark's account was not interpreted in the way that the Seminar demands it should have been. (And of what use is an apologetic if it is not clearly understood?) Rather than the Sanhedrin having a change of heart 'after the damage has been done,' Luke understood it that Joseph had simply never been so bloodthirsty in the first place. Accounts of subsequent actions of the Sanhedrin did not have much flattering to say about their post-crucifixion behavior. On this, see Acts 22:30-23. The Pharisaic scribes are *temporarily* lenient on Paul, but only because of his mention that he was a Pharisee. The Council is otherwise as brutal as always (see esp. 23:2-3, 10, 12-15, 20-21).

Similarly, when John stated that Joseph was secretly a disciple 'for fear of the Jews' (Jn 19:38), it seems all the more distant from John's mind that the burial which he has begun to narrate was somehow sanctioned by the other (now supposedly sympathetic) Jewish authorities.

(c) If Mark's mention of Joseph's membership in the Sanhedrin was apologetic, it was not very successful in its aim. Both Matthew and John omit that Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin, which supports the idea that Joseph's status was *dissimilar* to the interests of the Christian writers, while making the Jesus Seminar's inversion of this theory look all the less attractive.

So, when looked at in detail, this theory espoused by the Jesus Seminar is plagued with difficulties. This hypothesis has no serious foundation in the text, and seems to go against the grain of what is actually there. Despite the Seminar's efforts, the most tenable conclusion is that as a member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea was much *less* likely to be a Christian invention, due to the dissimilarity with Christian interests. Had Mark been inventing the burial, it would have been less problematic to have Jesus' disciples bury him, rather than going to the trouble of inventing a Sanhedrist to perform the task. On the issue of verisimilitude, see below.

But there is still more to the issue. What of Joseph's roots in the town of Arimathea? The Seminar's treatment of Joseph's identity is unusual:

And Joseph is from an unidentified place, Arimathea. Storytellers like to invent names and places because they give verisimilitude to their fictions. [AJ 159]

Crossan [JDC.HJ 393] is a bit more explicit: "Need I say that Mark's naming him renders him more not less suspect as an historical figure in my eyes?" This line of argument is, needless to say, rather unconvincing. That Joseph is named "Joseph of Arimathea" counts against his historicity? This sounds like a sign of argumentative desperation. Scholars outside the Jesus Seminar have usually seen things quite the other way around. Boyd writes:

In any case, it is, for most scholars, difficult to imagine Mark simply making such a person as Joseph of Arimathea up. Why this particular name? And why this particular obscure village? [GB.CSSG 279]

Craig [JUF 148] agrees, as does Brown: "Moreover, the fixed designation of such a character as 'from Arimathea,' a town very difficult to identify and reminiscent of no scriptural symbolism, makes a thesis of invention even more implausible" [REB.DM 2.1240] On another note, though Arimathea may be hard to pin down, it is hard to imagine (as the Seminar seems to imply) that Arimathea was an invented town. Craig writes, "Arimathea is probably Ramathaio-zophim, the home of Samuel (I Sam 1:1; cf. Eusebius *Onomasticon* 32), just north of Jerusalem." Why the Jesus Seminar finds a sign of invention in the 'anonymity' of Arimathea is beyond me.

But if, as the Jesus Seminar suggests, Mark invented Joseph for verisimilitude, a couple issues are raised. First, if Mark's aim was verisimilitude, why was Joseph of Arimathea invented a picked for the job rather than someone like, e.g., Jesus' family? Another issue raised is this:

And if Mark would have made such a person up, would he have had him be such an overtly public figure as one of the seventy-one leaders who served on the Sanhedrin? Knowledge about who served on the Sanhedrin was common in Jewish circles, and fabricating such a person would make exposing his narrative as a lie very easy. [GB.CSSG 279-80]

While the average Sanhedrin member would not be known to a post-70 a.d. Gentile audience, Mark did present Joseph as a *prominent* member of the Sanhedrin. It is conceivable that someone with ties to the Sanhedrin could prod at the issue, e.g., 'My uncle was on the Sanhedrin, and he doesn't remember any big shot named Joe.'

The Seminar points to what they see as legendary developments about Joseph of Arimathea. Matthew, they point out, presents him as a rich man and a disciple of Jesus, but not a member of the Sanhedrin [AJ 159]. But that he is rich would not be significantly new, since Mk 15:43 already stated that he is 'distinguished'; the Greek word here can mean 'noble,' 'influential,' or 'wealthy'; also supporting this is the type and location of the tomb Joseph used for the burial [see WLC.ANTE 185-8]. That Joseph was a disciple is independently attested in John; besides which, the discipleship of Joseph may be a mere anachronism, rather than an invention, as suggested in REB.DM 2.1239. Finally, as with John, Joseph's membership in the Sanhedrin is not explicitly denied, but simply omitted; this is better explained by dissimilarity between a Jewish-guilt theme and the burial by a Sanhedrist (see above) than by the weaker solution that "Matthew evidently felt it incongruous to have someone who just voted for the death penalty reverse himself so completely" [AJ 159].

The Seminar points to Luke's 'dissenting vote' detail as a legendary development; this could be granted while still accepting the core details of the burial as authentic. As noted earlier, it is possible that Luke is correct in this regard, but if he is not, as most would agree, this is probably yet more evidence of the dissimilarity with Christian interests which would be involved in the invention of a Sanhedrin member who does a favor for Jesus, and again tells against the 'apologetic' option which the Seminar endorses.

Besides, if the Seminar does manage to show a significant amount of legendary development among the burial narratives, this will not help their case greatly. As Brown writes, "The very fact that the later Gospels had to ennoble Joseph and to increase the reverence of the burial given to Jesus shows that Christian instincts would not have freely shaped what I have posited for the basic account" [REB.DM 2.1240-1241]. The Fellows have the impression that Pilate would be unconcerned with the disposition of a crucified body. This might technically be true (during Passover week, for example, Pilate would probably be more lenient), but the Fellows ignored the legal risks taken by Joseph in his request [WLC.ANTE 174], or possibly even the 'peer pressure' involved in asking for the body ('for fear of the Jews'; see REB.DM 2.1231).

The Fellows also are suspicious of the details narrated about Joseph's request [AJ 160], but if Joseph did become a disciple, as Mt and Jn state, these details could very well originate from Joseph himself; or the details perhaps came through the women who reportedly witnessed the burial. Barring these details as originating from a witness, though, would only show that Mark redacted these particular details, not that he invented the entire burial. Mark was likely editing an earlier tradition [see, e.g., WLC.ANTE 169].

4. Jesus was buried on the afternoon of the Day of Preparation (*Paraskeue*). The Gospels are unanimous that Jesus was crucified on a Friday, during Passover week. Paul even seems to implicitly agree with this chronology, because (a) ICor 5:7 is probably an allusion to Jesus' crucifixion/sacrifice during Passover week, and (b) the mention of the 'third day' in ICor 15:4 is likely dated to the older 'the first day of the week' motif, which probably led to Sunday worship [see, e.g., JUF 150, and WLC.HET], dates the crucifixion back to Friday. With this general dating in mind, Craig writes:

The time of Jesus' interment, given what we know from extrabiblical sources about Jewish regulations concerning the handling of executed criminals and burial procedures, must have been on Friday before the evening star appeared. The body could not have been allowed to remain on the cross overnight without defiling the land, and since the Sabbath was impending, the body had to be buried before nightfall. With help, Joseph should have been able to complete the burial prior to the beginning of the Sabbath, as the Gospels describe. [JUF 148]

Craig elsewhere writes, "...the Jews always buried the dead (II Sam. 2:12-14; Tobit 1:17-19; 2:3-7; 12:12-13; Sirach 7:33; 38:16), even the dead of their enemies (Josh. 8:29; 10:27; Josephus *Jewish War* 3.377)" [WLC.ANTE 172]. Crossan and the Seminar, of course, do not accept such arguments.

They find it unlikely that laws like Dt 21:22-23 would apply to Jesus' case, because the law in Dt applied to those who were killed and *then* hanged on a tree, not live crucifixions. But the Temple Scroll (IIQTemple)

records a command to bury the body of one who has been crucified on the same day, and applies it to both dead and live crucifixions. Crossan considers this law idealized (and thus, not really followed), but this seems much like a sign of desperation.

The same response is given to the fact that Josephus mentions the command to bury *on the same day* one who has been hung on a tree after being stoned to death, in a first-century context [*Antiquities* 4. 202 and *Jewish War* 4. 317]. Crossan again drives a wedge between law and practice, citing that the few instances of Josephus' own accounts of actual first-century crucifixion in the Jewish homeland never explicitly mention removal of the corpse before sunset. But this is at best an argument from silence.

Actually, it is worse for Crossan than this. Josephus mentions not only the Dt 21 passage in the *Antiquities* passage, but in Josephus' account of the Zealots' abuse of dead bodies during the seizure of the Temple in the First Roman War, he notes that "the Jews are so careful about funeral rites that even malefactors who have been sentenced to crucifixion are taken down and buried before sunset" [*Jewish War* 4. 317]. To avoid the implications of this, Crossan makes the entirely speculative move of deeming this report an instance of Josephan anti-Zealot polemic, which is thus not historically credible. These arguments are made in RIS 279-280.

So while one could concede that the Romans often did not grant burial to crucifixion victims, Jewish attitudes toward burial would have likely assured that Jesus was buried. While this does not argue specifically for a tomb burial, this consideration, combined with the very early ICor 15 creed which attests Jesus' burial, provides a fatal blow to the arguments of Crossan and the Seminar that Jesus was probably left to hang on the cross, to be reduced to bird feed.

But the objection of customary practices is a bit more serious when lodged against an *honorary* burial. Thus, according to Crossan, that Jesus would have been buried in a tomb by a Sanhedrist is impossible. Like Craig, I do not see why it is impossible that Joseph of Arimathea was a sympathizer of Jesus, but that is another issue. More directly relevant to the issue, in my opinion, is what is written by Brown:

In discussing the issue, however, we are partially hampered by uncertainty as to what constituted honorable burial in the time of Jesus. The Mishna (*Sabbat* 23.5) mentions burial customs such as washing and anointing the corpse, laying it out and binding up the chin, and closing the eyes. Details of honorable burial can be detected from Jewish narrative literature: trimming the hair, clothing the corpse with care, covering the head with a veil, perhaps tying the hands and feet in view of carrying the corpse. But how many of these practices were customary in Jesus' time? There is little certitude, especially since a change in burial style is reported to have been introduced between then and the Mishna. As for customs mentioned in the NT, in an honorable burial Tabitha (Acts 9:37) is washed and laid out at her home, while in a dishonorable burial no washing is mentioned for Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:6,10). [REB.DM 2.1243-44]

The point is that what exactly constituted an 'honorable' burial is not really clear, and even Crossan wishes to draw a thick line between law and practice. The burial presented by Mark is rather simple with regards to customary practices [see REB.DM 2.1243-51]. The burial could have *possibly* been intended as only a temporary interment for the Sabbath (though nothing in Mark suggests so). If, as Mt 27:60 says, the tomb was a new tomb, there would not have been other bodies which would have been defiled by Jesus' presence. Joseph likely had assistants who helped him, as the phrase "where *they* laid him" in Mk 16:6 suggests. That Mk 15:46 says "he [Joseph] took him down" does not necessarily mean that Joseph literally got up there himself and pulled out the nails. As has often been pointed out, the society of Jesus' time considered an action that a person had done through emissaries to be his/her own. Hence, Joseph did not necessarily defile himself by performing the burial.

Also, it ought be mentioned that the people who colored the statement "The assertion that the Romans were innocent of Jesus' death and the Jews responsible is pure Christian propaganda" red should not be so quick to preclude the possibility of any hint of 'sympathy' from the direction of the Sanhedrin. In sum, Crossan/the Jesus Seminar has not produced adequate evidence to preclude a tomb burial for Jesus.

5. That women witnessed the burial is likely. Women were not only worthless (even counterproductive--for a bibliography on this, see WLC.ANTE 52, n.3) as witnesses in legal matters, but had a low societal status in Judaism, as seen in the famous lines, "Sooner let the words of the Law be burnt than delivered to women" (J Sotah 19a), and "Happy is he whose children are male, and alas for him whose children are female" (B Kiddushin 82b).

The Seminar sees the presence of the women as a "back-formation" from their presence in the empty tomb narrative [AJ 364]. What is strange about their concurrence with Brown [REB.DM 2.1276] (who accepts the empty tomb tradition as historical) is that this whole theory seems dependent on the premise that the empty tomb narrative was there prior to the burial account. What sort of 'back-formation' they have in mind is unclear, especially when one considers that they date the first empty tomb tradition to the decade of the 70's. This looks like a chicken-and-egg situation, but there is no empty tomb without a tomb to start with. Perhaps it has something to do with Crossan's odd view that the Gospel of Peter (which does not mention the women) contains the original passion/resurrection narrative. But since Mark mentions the women's presence, it would have been helpful for the Fellows to clarify their ideas.

In any event, though, this does not explain why women were used as witnesses, in spite of their counterproductive status. As is often the case, the Jesus Seminar does not give sufficient attention to the workings of the Jewish world--they even posit that Mary of Magdala must have been a prominent leader of the early church, on par with Paul and Peter (who plotted to silence her)! Such concepts are hard to square off with the Palestinian environment of the early church.

Much of their thesis stands or falls on the assumption that the disciples supposedly [fled to Galilee](#)--an assumption they confidently make, without serious argument. Had the disciples fled, they would not be able to witness the burial, perhaps explaining why women were made witnesses. But even if the disciples did flee to Galilee (which is not founded in the text), it would be no trouble for Mark to displace the apostles, given that he had just invented a prominent Sanhedrin member. Luke mentions that the disciples checked the empty tomb, on Sunday, so it would be no trouble for Mark to have them check the tomb, on Friday.

In fact, the Seminar is so confident about the flight [into Galilee](#) that they write, "Peter did not deny Jesus because he was not there; he had fled with the rest of the disciples" [AJ 149]! And why do they accept the flight into Galilee as historical? On AJ p.145, they accept the flight 'into Galilee' (based on an exaggerated exegesis of Mk 14:50) as "relatively certain," on the grounds that the story "would probably not have been made up by the disciples since it was an embarrassment to them"! A moment's reflection will reveal that the Gospel of Mark has been placed on a Procrustean bed. Why the women (as opposed to, e.g., male disciples of Jesus) were listed as witnesses to the burial remains unexplained by the Seminar.

6. No other burial tradition exists. If Mark invented the tomb burial by Joseph of Arimathea, one might very well expect competition to this tradition by either the true sequence of events, or Jewish polemic. But as Matthew's story of the guarding of the tomb tells us, the Jewish polemic presupposed that Jesus' body was buried in a tomb, the location of which was known.

Crossan wishes to find competing burial traditions in the second-century Coptic document *Epistula Apostolorum* 9.20 and Lactantius' early fourth-century document, *Divine Institutes* 4.19. As Craig notes, the fact that Crossan takes such late, derivative, and sometimes imaginative sources to be significant is a comment on his methodology. Craig remarks:

...these sources do not offer alternatives to the Gospel account. The *Epistula Apostolorum* speaks of Jesus' body being taken down from the cross along with those of the thieves, but then singles him out as being buried in a place called "skull," where Sarah, Martha, and Mary Magdalene went to anoint him. The summary nature of the passage no more excludes burial by Joseph of Arimathea than does the Apostles' Creed. The same is true of Lactantius' summary, in which he says in reference to the Jews, "They took his body down from the cross, and enclosing it safely in a tomb, they surrounded it with a military guard." The desire to polemicize against the Jews leads Lactantius to include Joseph

under the general rubric "the Jews." The same motive governs Acts 13:27-29, to which Crossan also appeals. Finally, John 19:31 has to do only with a request, not with actual burial. That Crossan has to appeal to passages such as the above only serves to underline how desperate is the attempt to find other burial traditions. [JUF 170, n.16]

Crossan's key candidates for 'competing traditions' are thus overturned.

The intra-NT passages mentioned (Jn 19:31, Acts 13:27-29) have caused some commotion. Standing on their own, neither passage would get much attention. The Seminar, with a blend of minimalist zeal which may be counterproductive to those seeking for traces of alternate traditions, colors Jn 19:31 black--so I doubt they would consider it a tradition, much less a competing one--as Craig pointed out, this is only a request, and at that, only a request to kill and take down the bodies. John presents Joseph as stepping in to perform the burial; 'the Jews' do little more than ensure that the bodies did not remain hanging over the Sabbath.

Also of significance, as Brown notes, earlier stages of tradition may not have distinguished so sharply between Joseph of Arimathea (and his helpers) and Jesus' enemies, 'the Jews':

As for John, in treating the relationship between 19:31 and 19:38a, I suggested that at an earlier stage of Johannine thought Joseph was associated with "the Jews" who asked that the bodies be taken away--and thus with the group that had demanded Jesus' death (19:7). Only because of his post-resurrectional discipleship did his request for the body of Jesus come to be seen as a rival request to that of "the Jews." [REB.DM 2.1239]

By hindsight it could be seen that although the intention of the Jewish request was hostile, once the request was granted, Joseph's carrying out the burial actually worked for the good. The nuance could be caught by presenting the request twice, once with hostility and once with better intent. [REB.DM 2.1239, n.81]

While this is not the only possibility, it would adequately explain things, as does Craig's note on this verse. As for the Acts passage, a couple things should be noted. The larger context is not centered on the burial of Jesus. Thus, the *summary* nature of this kerygmatic sermon (not a 'police report'), taken together with the polemicizing tendencies of early Christian documents, and/or a consideration of Brown's ideas [see, e.g., REB.VCBR 114-5] would explain this simple turn of phrase. I do not believe that a turn of phrase such as this can be used to warrant a quest for a competing tradition, much less one on par with that presented by the Gospels. But even if this were a 'competing tradition,' one should note that the word for 'tomb' is the same word used in Luke's account. In other words, if we decided to take this turn of phrase in a longer sermon (which those of the persuasion of the Jesus Seminar would likely as an entirely Lukan creation anyway) and pull out some independent 'tradition,' it would further attest that Jesus was buried in a tomb by Sanhedrinists. To further suppose that the 'they' remark was part of an independent tradition (rather than, e.g., a passive grammatical ambiguity) while dismissing the word for 'tomb' would be a curiously selective way of finding 'traditions.'

In sum, then, we do not have any serious competitors to the tradition that Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus in a tomb. Where the specifics of the burial are not mentioned, the safest tradition to assume to be behind such a reference is the one which is found in the Gospels.

7. The burial story was probably part of the primitive pre-Markan Passion source material. Some regard this argument as rather heavy. Craig writes, "It is universally acknowledged that the burial account is part of the pre-Markan passion story, the narrative of the crucifixion and the burial being a continuous unity" [WLC.ANTE 353; cf. p.169]. Craig's case here is largely based on that of Rudolf Pesch's *Das Markusevangelium* (2 vols., Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 2 [Freiburg: Herder, 1977]). The main arguments for the existence/antiquity of such a source are based on Paul's Last Supper tradition (1Cor 11:23-25) and the unusuality of the fact that Mark's narrative never names the high priest as Caiaphas (14:53, 54, 60, 61, 63), which would be unusual after ad 37. Craig notes that even Crossan's imagined Cross Gospel has Jesus sealed in a tomb, not in a common grave (*Gosp. Pet.* 8:30-33).

While on the one hand I consider some of these points noteworthy, on the other hand have to lean towards the caution in RIS 276 that the nature and extent of the pre-Markan passion narrative is a complex question

which is highly debated. For this reason, I find it difficult to attach any certainty to the specifics regarding Jesus' burial by way of this line of argument.

Some objections to the burial include the following:

1. Roman crucifixion practices would have prevented Jesus' burial. This the most commonly made objection the Seminar gives to the burial of Jesus. This has already been examined in the section on the Jewish burial practices in relation to the day of Preparation (above).
2. There is the question of what happened to the two thieves at Jesus' side. This argument has been raised against the idea that Joseph was a pious Jew, but *not* a sympathizer of Jesus, and so had Jesus buried on grounds of the oncoming Sabbath/Dt 21:22-23. So Crossan:

There is one objection to all of that: *Joseph buries only Jesus and not the other two crucified bodies*. If he is a pious Sanhedrist, acting in accordance with Deuteronomy 21:22-23, or even a general respect for the dead, he should bury all three bodies.
[JDC.WKJ 173]

Richard Shand wrote, "The two *lestai* or bandits crucified with Jesus would have received the same treatment unless there were unusual intervening circumstances involving the deposition of Jesus' body" [<http://home.fireplug.net/~rshand/reflections/messiah/resurrect.html>].

One could brainstorm possible 'intervening circumstances'--e.g., that someone(s) had called dibs on the thieves, and perhaps no one requested to bury Jesus on the grounds that the conviction of blasphemy might make the a request for such permission a bit of a risk [see WLC.ANTE 174]--a suggestion which would be coherent in light of Mark's statement that Joseph *dared* to ask Pilate for Jesus' body (Mk 15:43). One might remember that the general sense of the gospels is that Jesus was dead early, before the two thieves (Mk 15:44; Jn 19:32-33a); had Jesus been dead well before the thieves, earlier in the afternoon (cf. Mk 15:34), Joseph may have expended the effort to bury him alone and trust the thieves to others. Perhaps Joseph simply did not have time to bury the others crucified with Jesus. A combination of such sorts of factors could be posited.

It must be said, though, that such sorts of reconstruction are *ad hoc*; one cannot really *know* exactly what became of the thieves, and so any such postulations must be kept to a basic minimum in light of Occam's Razor. But does our lack of further knowledge trouble the historicity of the burial? Mahlon Smith thinks so. As he is cited at <http://home.fireplug.net/~rshand/reflections/messiah/resurrect.html>:

...The gospels simply fail to account for the disposal of the corpses of those who were crucified with Jesus. This was not a problem that concerned either the evangelists or their audiences who were preoccupied by with the fate of Jesus' body alone. But it is a problem that any historical reconstruction of what happened to Jesus' corpse needs to take seriously. For if Jesus' body alone was allowed burial (which is all the gospels report), then one CANNOT consistently claim that potential desecration of the Passover or Sabbath was the reason for a Jewish aristocrat requesting and Pilate granting Jesus' burial. And without that general condition, the claim that Jesus was buried after his crucifixion is completely historically incredible.

I would agree that a historical reconstruction must take the thieves *into account*, but this is of course different from saying that the thieves must be *accounted for*. Our agnosticism of the fate of those crucified with Jesus does not simply diffuse to Jesus himself. Jesus was sometimes dissimilar from his peers. Like Craig, I do not see why it is impossible that Joseph of Arimathea was at least a sympathizer (if not perhaps a secret follower, as Matthew and John wrote) of Jesus. On this view, there is not any major problem with Joseph's special treatment of Jesus' body and the treatment of the two thieves' bodies, again:

If he was not acting as an emissary of the Jews but as a private citizen, then the thieves' bodies would naturally have been disposed of by the Romans. On the other hand, if Joseph was a delegate of the Sanhedrin and a secret disciple as well, he may have directed that the thieves' bodies be taken down and immediately dumped into some

common grave, while Joseph tended for Jesus's body properly, knowing that his own tomb was near and intending to lay Jesus there. [WLC.ANTE 175-76]

If this were the case, the possible intervening factors above might still have influenced Joseph's decision as well.

It is important to remember that the idea that Joseph was a silent sympathizer of Jesus (which is certainly *not* the same thing as saying, "Joseph was a full-blown Trinitarian who walked the shores of Galilee with Jesus") does not nullify the dissimilarity involved in the invention of a well-intended Sanhedrist. The arguments in favor of the dissimilarity of Christian invention of Joseph of Arimathea still hold: it is still unlikely that Mark would invent someone who, as he wrote, voted to condemn Jesus to death and was at the same time "awaiting the kingdom of God" (15:43). That Joseph, as a *Jewish Sanhedrist*, was displayed in a positive light is still an enigma. It is not claimed that each *individual* aspect of the character of Joseph of Arimathea was dissimilar to Christian interest, but the *whole* of his character almost certainly was.

3. "The fact is, Christian storytellers may well not have known what happened to Jesus' body" [AJ 440]. (Thus, Christian storytellers winged a burial story to calm their sensitivities concerning a possible improper burial.) Crossan makes an issue of this:

With regard to the body of Jesus, by Easter Sunday morning, those who cared did not know where it was, and those who knew did not care. Why should even the soldiers themselves remember the death and disposal of a nobody? [JDC.HJ 394; see also p. 392]

The Seminar's conclusion here is largely founded on the idea of the 'flight [into Galilee](#)' [see the admitted dependence on this hypothesis in JDC.HJ 392], which I have examined earlier. From this assumption, they conclude that no witnesses were present at the crucifixion to give an account.

But even if this is the case, there are still many other potential witnesses; among other possibilities, these could include crucifixion observers, the women (see above), acquaintances (e.g., government officials)/helpers of Joseph of Arimathea, and possibly, Joseph of Arimathea himself. If Joseph did bury Jesus, as related in the Gospels, it is not far away to suggest that this tomb was later found empty [WLC.HET]. If this were the case, regardless of whether Joseph had previously been a sympathizer of Jesus or not, the idea of Joseph's post-resurrectional discipleship (as Brown suggests was anachronized by Mt/Jn) is nearly implicit; if Joseph's tomb were emptied, he would certainly know of it. Granted, such a hypothesis is largely speculative, and thus no specifics can be laid out, but it is only one among several other possibilities; there could have been multiple witnesses. The point remains that there is no evidence which precludes the possibility of Christian knowledge what happened to Jesus' body, 'flight into Galilee' or not.

4. "Scholars have worked hard over the years to reconcile the various accounts of Jesus' burial--without success" [AJ 440]. This remark comes off the heels of the suggestion a supposedly irreconcilable 'shroud vs. strips' contradiction. Craig has already examined this and other details (e.g., anointing, Nicodemus, etc.) about Jesus' burial; the Seminar has apparently overlooked this [see WLC.ANTE 168-96; esp. 178-88]. If anything, the minor, incidental differences in the Synoptic/Johannine burial accounts point to their independence. As for the more significant differences (the ones due to supposed legendary developments), as I noted earlier, these would point to the unlikelihood of the invention of the original Markan account. One need not accept the entirety of the four gospel accounts as inerrant to accept the basics of the accounts of the burial of Jesus as historical; this is what a great number of scholars have done.
5. "...there is no demonstrable interest in Jesus' burial site until the fourth century. That is strange if the location of Jesus' tomb were well known" [AJ 467]. This is an argument from silence; thus it is not surprising that Craig suggested that the tomb probably was of interest in the first century [JUF 148-9; cf. WLC.ANTE 356]. Some degree of interest in Jesus' burial is presupposed by the concept of the women lingering around to watch the burial of Jesus and their later return to the (empty) tomb to anoint Jesus' body (or if not, to mourn over it).

Besides this, it is noteworthy that many have taken the lack of interest in venerating Jesus' tomb as a sign that it was *empty*, not non-existent. The tombs of Jewish holy men were preserved/venerated because their

remains imparted holiness to the site. Without such remains, the site is devoid of its holiness [WLC.ANTE 372-3]. This would likely explain the silence about usual interest in Jesus' burial site.

Having examined the arguments, the objections raised against the burial of Jesus are too weak to be of significance; on the other hand, the Jesus Seminar/Crossan fails to deal adequately with the arguments in favor of the historicity of Jesus' burial. Taken together, a powerful case for the tomb burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea remains. But why is it that the Jesus Seminar colors even ICor 15:4a black? Though the burial of Jesus is not a supernatural event, it is awarded its pigmentation by association: "The burial is a fiction because it goes with the empty tomb story, which is the central fiction in Mark's passion narrative" [AJ 161].

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