

The Burial of Jesus and Its Relation and Importance to the Gospel Message

Tony Costa, Ph.D.

“And that He was Buried...” (1 Cor 15:4a)

Abstract: The burial of Jesus is sometimes an event in the Easter story that is usually left by the wayside as peripheral as it tends to be usually eclipsed by the two great events of the death of Jesus on the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. The burial as the middle point in the Easter narrative is of tremendous importance as it establishes the location of the tomb where Jesus was interred and subsequently the discovery of the empty tomb which was one factor among many which served as a catalyst for belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Early Christian writers understood that if there was no resurrection from the dead, there was no Christianity. The push by some liberal scholars to cast doubt on the reliability of the burial of Jesus vis-à-vis the gospels and opt for the likelihood that the body of Jesus after death was thrown into a common criminal’s grave, seems to be an attempt at undermining the entire Easter story which birthed early Christianity. The accounts of the burial of Jesus are reliable as set out in the gospels and the earliest Christian creed, and they are further buttressed by external factors as well.

Keywords: burial, Easter, empty tomb, resurrection

1. *The Burial of Jesus and the Earliest Creed*

The Christian faith bases its *raison d'être* on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Much ink has been spilled on the book ends of the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection. The intermediate point, of the burial of Jesus, while it has not garnered the same amount of scholarly attention as the death and resurrection, is an important aspect.¹

¹ On the burial of Jesus from various perspectives see Byron R. McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg / London / New York: Trinity Press International, 2003); Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, “The descent from the cross and the burial of Jesus (Jn 19:31-42),” *RB* 118,4 (2011) 533-557; Petra Dijkhuizen, “Buried shamefully: historical reconstruction of Jesus’ burial and tomb,” *Neot* 45, no. 1 (2011): 115-129; Raymond E. Brown, “The Burial of Jesus (Mark 15:42-47),” *CBQ* 50 no 2 (1988): 233-245; Craig A. Evans, “Jewish Burial Traditions and the Resurrection of Jesus,” *JSHJ* 3 (2) (2005): 233-248; J. Spencer Kennard, “Burial of Jesus,” *JBL* 74, no. 4 (December 1955): 227-238; John G. Cook, “Crucifixion and Burial,” *NTS* 57(2) (March 2011): 193-213; Craig A. Evans, “Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right,” in Michael F. Bird, Craig A. Evans,

The burial relates to both the death of Jesus on one hand, but also serves as the bridge to the discovery of Jesus' tomb, and the eventual conclusion by the early disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead. In the early creed contained in 1 Cor 15:1-5,² which is believed to be extremely early and pre-Pauline,³ Paul writes,

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand,² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you- unless you believed in vain.³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve⁴

Here the creed outlines four parts, namely 1) the death of Jesus, 2) the burial of Jesus 3) the resurrection of Jesus on the third day, and 4) the post-mortem appearance of Jesus to the disciples. If one follows the trajectory of the passion narratives in the gospel accounts, one notices that the sequence of death, burial, resurrection, and post-mortem appearances seem to follow each other. The same sequence also appears in Acts 10:39-41 and Acts 13:27-31 which contains the same themes, death-burial-resurrection-appearances. In 1 Cor 15:1-5, Paul appears to be presenting a creed which reflects in capsule form, the same sequence of events one finds in the gospel accounts. The mention of Jesus being raised on “the third day” in 1 Cor 15:4 is significant as this is a Pauline *hapax legomenon* although, this language is believed to be pre-Pauline. Paul never mentions “the third day” in his letters, except here in relation the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, scholars have noted the use of non-Pauline words, another reason that suggest Paul is passing on a creed which he received.⁵ The third day motif in relation to the resurrection is repeated frequently in the gospels especially when Jesus predicts his death and subsequent resurrection (Matt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19). The question of the linguistic origin of the creed has also been raised by scholars. Some like Joachim Jeremias have argued for a Semitic original and furthermore that the creed originated in a Jewish-

Simon Gathercole, Charles E. Hill, and Chris Tilling, *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature- A Response to Bart Ehrman* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 71-93.

² There is debate among scholars as to which verses in 1 Cor 15:3ff constitute creedal material. Some have argued that the creed extends to 1 Cor 15:7 while most hold that it ends with 1 Cor 15:5. I take the position that the creeds ends at 1 Cor 15:5. See William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989), 6-7.

³ For a list of pre-Pauline texts in the Pauline corpus see Tony Costa, *Worship and the Risen Jesus in the Pauline Letters* (Studies in Biblical Literature 157; New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 284 n40.

⁴ All biblical citations are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (trans. Norman Perrin; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 101-102.

Christian setting.⁶ The creed then according to Jeremias, “comes from the Aramaic-speaking earliest community.”⁷ If this is the case, then it would seem to follow that Paul received this creed from the earliest disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem. Jerusalem appears to be the best candidate for the provenance of the creed.⁸ However, we cannot know this with absolute certainty. Paul mentions two visits to Jerusalem. In his first visit he met with Cephas (Peter) and spent fifteen days with him.⁹ Paul also mentions that he met James, the Lord’s brother (Gal 1:18-19). In his second visit Paul met again with Cephas, James, and John (Gal 2:1, 9).¹⁰ Paul’s contact with the Jerusalem apostles was most probably the time he received the creed. If the Jerusalem apostles were still using Aramaic, then it is likely Paul would have received the creed in its Aramaic rendition. This would indicate that the creed including the burial of Jesus went back to the earliest followers of Jesus. Other scholars have proposed a Greek original to the creed, one that would have emerged in a Jewish Hellenistic church.¹¹ However, even if this was the case, Joseph Kloppenborg is willing to concede about the creed that “at least one of its earlier recensions, came from the Palestinian church, although it may have been formulated in Greek.”¹² Notwithstanding the linguistic origin of the creed, the early date of the creed appears to be well established.

While Paul throughout his letters makes mention of the death and resurrection of Jesus, he makes the burial of Jesus explicit in 1 Cor 15:3. In other places in his letters, Paul does allude to the burial of Jesus, but only when he applies it metaphorically to Christian believers being identified with Christ, by being buried with him in baptism (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12).¹³

The extremely early dating of the creed in 1 Cor 15:1-5 cannot be underestimated. It gives us the earliest constitution or statement of faith about what early Christians

⁶ Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 102-103.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸ A. M. Hunter, *Jesus Lord and Savior* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 99-100.

⁹ The quip by C. H. Dodd on the fifteen days Paul spent with Peter is notable here, “We may presume they did not spend all the time talking about the weather.” C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 16.

¹⁰ Paul mentions the appearance of the risen Jesus to Cephas in 1 Cor 15:5, a detail Cephas most assuredly would have shared with Paul. The appearance to Cephas or Peter is also attested in Luke 24:34. It is also interesting that Paul mentions meeting James the Lord’s brother, whom he also lists as one of the witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15:7).

¹¹ The arguments for a Greek original to the creed and a rebuttal to Jeremias’ position on a Semitic original can be found in Joseph Kloppenborg, “An Analysis of the Pre-Pauline Formula 1 Cor 15:3b-5 in Light of Some Recent Literature,” *CBQ* 40 (1978): 351-367.

¹² Kloppenborg, “An Analysis of the Pre-Pauline Formula 1 Cor 15:3b-5 in Light of Some Recent Literature,” 357.

¹³ On baptism as identification with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, see Costa, *Worship and the Risen Jesus in the Pauline Letters*, 219-221.

believed about Jesus. James Dunn states that, “This tradition [1 Cor 15:1-5], we can be entirely confident, was formulated as tradition within months of Jesus’ death.”¹⁴ Gerd Lüdemann places the *terminus ad quem* of this creed at, “not later than three years. . . the formation of the appearance traditions mentioned in I Cor.15.3-8 falls into the time between 30 and 33 CE.”¹⁵ N. T. Wright similarly concurs, “This is the kind of foundation-story with which a community is not at liberty to tamper. It was probably formulated within the first two or three years after Easter itself, since it was already in formulaic form when Paul ‘received’ it”.¹⁶ Paul clearly does not take ownership of this creed as he claims that he “received” and “delivered” it to the Corinthians, language indicating the formal passing on of traditional material.¹⁷

Why is the burial tradition then preserved in this ancient Christian creed, which appears to have originated with the early Jerusalem disciples? Gerd Lüdemann suggests that, “the burial belongs to the death [of Jesus] in order to show that he really died. So the burial reinforces the death [of Jesus].”¹⁸ This burial of Jesus is extremely important for two immediate reasons. First, the burial of Jesus certifies that Jesus was indeed clinically dead. This would dismiss the so-called ‘swoon theory,’ that Jesus did not truly die on the cross but merely swooned, and then subsequently, was revived back to consciousness in the tomb, from which he later escaped. The swoon theory is no longer seriously considered in scholarship and indeed was laid to rest by the famous critic David Friedrich Strauss author of the 1835 work, *Das Leben Jesu* [“The Life of Jesus Critically Examined”].¹⁹ Strauss later argued that the swoon theory would never have given early Christianity the impetus it needed to grow and expand, especially given its high view of Christ as the cosmological Lord.²⁰ Secondly, the burial of Jesus also certifies the

¹⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 854-855 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵ Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 171-172 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God Vol. 3; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 319. On the early dating of the creed in 1 Cor 15:1-5 see also Michael Goulder, “The Baseless Fabric of a Vision,” in *Resurrection Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 48; A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 113-114.

¹⁷ Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 101; William F. Orr and James A. Walther, *1 Corinthians: A New Translation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 320; Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 80.

¹⁸ See Paul Copan & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Jesus’ Resurrection, Fact or Figment? A Debate Between William Lane Craig & Gerd Lüdemann*. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 44; Ulrich Wilckens, *Resurrection-Biblical Testimony to the Resurrection: An Historical Examination and Explanation* (trans. A. M. Stewart; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 7.

¹⁹ David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (Vol. 1; Osiandersche Buchhandlung, 1835).

²⁰ David Strauss, *The Life of Jesus for the People* (Vol. 1; 2nd ed.; London: Williams and Norgate, 1879), 412 argued,

location of the tomb where Jesus was interred. The location of the tomb was known, as the tomb is identified as belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, at least in Matthew's account. Joseph who was also a disciple of Jesus (Matt 27:59-60; Mark 15:45-46; Luke 23:50-53; John 19:38-42). The gospels also attest that the burial of Jesus was witnessed by his female followers as well (Matt 27:61; Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55). What Lüdemann does not point out however, is that the resurrection and post-mortem appearances of Jesus are also connected to his burial. They demonstrate the reality of the empty tomb, i.e., the buried body of Jesus is no longer interred in the tomb. In this respect, the reality and certainty of the burial of Jesus would appear to do double duty. It solidifies the reality of his death on the one hand, and on the other hand, it reinforces the belief in the resurrection of Jesus as a *bodily* resurrection. The body of Jesus according to the Easter gospel narratives is discovered to be absent from the tomb, thus the empty tomb discovery is a significant factor in prompting the early disciples to eventually confess Jesus as risen from the dead. The co-ordinate clauses in the creed of 1 Cor 15:3-5 further reinforce a cumulative argument used with the conjunction *hoti* which indicates a sequential order, Jesus died, and then was buried, and then was raised the third day, and then appeared. The burial tradition appears to be taken as one of the sequences.

The burial of Jesus as it appears in this early creed in 1 Cor.15:1-5, constitutes one of the oldest pieces of tradition,²¹ and does not seem to be a later creation of the early church. Of all the clauses in 1 Cor.15:1-5, the burial is unqualified in that it is not accompanied with the phrase "according to the scriptures". The burial of Jesus is also multiply attested in the gospels and Acts, including 1 Cor.15:1-5, and its testimony appears very strong and convincing.²² A number of critical exegetes have come to the same conclusion that the burial of Jesus is historically accurate and undoubted.²³ It is considered from a historical perspective "one of the earliest and best-attested facts about Jesus."²⁴ One of the compelling reasons for the acceptance of the burial tradition is that the narratives of

"It is impossible that a being who had stolen half dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill and wanting medical treatment... could have given the disciples the impression that he was a conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of life: an impression that lay at the bottom of their future ministry."

²¹ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 781.

²² William D. Davies and Dale. C. Allison. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew. Vol.3.* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 647-648.

²³ Raymond Brown. *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus.* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 113-114; Raymond E. Brown. *The Death of the Messiah* (2 vols.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1994), 2:1240–1241

²⁴ John A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 131

the burial of Jesus lack any theological or apologetic import, and are presented as simple accounts, a fact that even Rudolf Bultmann admitted.²⁵

2. The Burial of Jesus and Pre-Markan Passion Narrative

One of the arguments for the early tradition of the burial of Jesus is based on the idea of Markan priority, the idea that Mark was the first gospel to be written. This view remains to be held by the majority of NT scholars today. The account of the burial of Jesus in Mark is *prima facie*, simple and straightforward, and shows no apparent signs of embellishment. The other gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, critics claim, reveal further developments of the material in their parallel accounts of the burial of Jesus, but the historical core of the burial story they argue is still sound. Too much in my estimation is made of these differences. It is quite possible that some of the gospel writers had access to certain details about the story of Jesus than the others.²⁶ Some scholars have also suggested that prior to the writing of the gospel of Mark, there was a pre-Markan Passion Narrative, an account which is believed by some to date before 37 C.E. and is believed to have covered the materials found in Mark 14-16. There is some dispute about the exact parameters of the materials that are part of the pre-Markan Passion Narrative in Mark 14-16. Some hold that the pre-Markan Passion Narrative also included the narrative of the burial of Jesus. If this is the case, then there is further evidence of an even earlier source that existed before Mark completed his gospel.²⁷

As already noted, if the gospel narratives are reliable in their record of the death and burial of Jesus, then it can be safely assumed that the burial place of Jesus was known to his followers, particularly his women followers and especially Joseph of Arimathea who owned the tomb. The ‘wrong tomb’ theory that suggests the female disciples of Jesus went to the wrong tomb on Easter morning cannot be sustained in light of this understanding. The location of the tomb was a matter of common knowledge, by both friend and foe of the Christian movement. If the burial place of Jesus was known to his early followers, then the empty tomb discovery is closely linked to this. Hence, the

²⁵ Rudolf Bultmann. *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (2nd ed. trans. John Marsh; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), 274.

²⁶ I would tend to agree with the findings of Lydia McGrew that the differences in the gospel accounts are not due to the writer’s imaginative creation or redactional ingenuity but rather to their selective use of reliable source materials at their disposal that they individually utilize as they write to their respective communities. See Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts* (Chillicothe, OH; DeWard Publishing, 2017).

²⁷ On the pre-Markan Passion Narrative and the 37 C.E. date see Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (2 vols.; Freiburg: Herder, 1977). See also Kirk R. MacGregor, “1 Corinthians 15:3b–6a, 7 and the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus,” *JETS* 49, no. 2 (2006): 225–234; Marion L. Soards, “The Question of a Pre-Markan Passion Narrative,” in Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:1492-1524; Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

reference to the burial of Jesus in the early creed of 1 Cor 15:1-5. The fact that the gospels also record the women as not only the witnesses to the burial of Jesus, but also the first witnesses in the discovery of the empty tomb is significant in terms of the criterion of embarrassment. Women in first century Jewish jurisprudence had no legal recognition as witnesses as Josephus,²⁸ and the Mishnah note.²⁹ The absence of the eyewitness testimony of the women in Paul's list of witnesses to the resurrection in 1 Cor 15 which all appear to be male (with the possible exception the 500 brothers which may have included women; 15:6) is also telling. It is very possible that as Paul is trying to argue a polemical case for the resurrection, which the Corinthians seem to be struggling to grasp, he doesn't want to sabotage his argument by appealing to the women's testimony as recorded in the gospels. The temptation on the part of the evangelists would have been to create a resurrection story with the male disciples as the first witnesses to the empty tomb. That women are described as the first witnesses of the empty tomb heavily argues for the authenticity of the gospel Easter accounts.

3. Jewish Funeral Customs and the Burial of Jesus

Considering the careful marking of grave sites in Jewish funeral practices especially when the person was considered a holy man, further buttresses the position that the tomb of Jesus would have been known to his followers. The women followers of Jesus would have quite possibly shared this knowledge with the male disciples who later came to examine the tomb after it was found empty.

What is also of particular significance is the absence of any devotion or piety being expressed at the burial site of Jesus, a common Jewish practice at grave sites, particularly those of prophets and holy men.³⁰ Jesus of Nazareth would have met this category as the gospel evidence seems to indicate that he was considered a prophet. (Mark 8:27-28; Matt. 16:13-14; Luke 9:18-19). The absence of any tradition of Jewish prayers being said at Jesus' tomb seems to buttress the position that the tomb of Jesus was not revered because it was believed to be empty.³¹

²⁸ "But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex...since it is probable that they may not speak truth, either out of hope of gain, or fear of punishment". Josephus, *Ant.* 4.219.

²⁹ These are considered unfit [witnesses]: gamblers with dice, those that lend with interest, pigeon racers, those who trade in the produce of the Sabbatical year, and slaves. This is the rule: *all testimony that a woman is not fit to give, these [above] are also not fit to give.*" *m. Roš Haš.* 1:8. The Jerusalem Talmud, *y. Soṭah.* 3:4. states, "The words of Torah should burn rather than be taught to women." See comments in Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, 132-133 where he states regarding the women's testimony, "The evidence suggests indeed that it was very early tradition."

³⁰ An example of this can be seen in *The Lives of the Prophets* 2:4, "those who are God's faithful pray at the place [the tomb of Jeremiah] to this very day." See also 1 Macc 13:27-30.

³¹ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 837-838.

Veneration at the tombs of holy men such as prophets was practiced by some Jews and later by some Christians. There is implicit evidence of this Jewish devotion at least in the gospel of Matthew which places this practice within the first century and current in the time of Jesus. In his denunciation of the Pharisees, Jesus states, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous” (Matt 23:29). The tombs of righteous Jewish ancestors, and prophets were considered sacred areas and they were frequented by the faithful, particularly disciples of the deceased leader. Such tombs of the prophets were considered holy and auspicious places because of the remains of the revered person. They were also elaborately decorated according to Matt 23:39, which seems to indicate they were treated with special care. Later evidence in the Mishnah reveals that Jewish piety at the graves of prophets, rabbis and holy people was a continued tradition.³²

The concept of the sacredness of the burial areas of prophets and holy men is traced to an old tradition which also appears in the Hebrew Bible in the story of the prophet Elisha’s tomb. In the process of a hasty interment due to enemy invasion, a body was speedily buried in the tomb of Elisha. When the body touched Elisha’s bones, the deceased person revived (2 Kgs 13:20-21). What is of particular importance here is the mention of Elisha’s “bones”. The bones of the deceased were a matter of meticulous care as is evidently reflected later in the use of ossuaries by the Jews in the first century C.E.³³ This practice was also adopted by early Christians who buried the bones of their martyrs in caves and catacombs.³⁴

The significant silence of the treatment of Jesus’ tomb as a place of devotion and prayer is for the most part ignored by some scholars. It is vital in understanding not only the origin of the Christian movement and its faith in the risen Jesus, but also in understanding the reason for the worship of Jesus within early Christianity. While it was customary for Jews to pray at gravesites of revered leaders, it is important to note that there is a conspicuous silence of this practice in the early Jewish Christian movement. The tomb of Jesus did not become a place of prayer for his followers and there is no record of it ever being so. There are indications in the gospels of the funeral customs of weeping and visiting the tombs of the deceased (Matt 9:23; John 11:31). In the Easter narratives the women disciples come to visit the tomb of Jesus and discovered it to be

³² *m. ‘Erub. 5:1; m. ‘Ohal. 7:1*. These Mishnaic passages even indicate that provisions and accommodations were made to provide chamber for visitors.

³³ J. B. Green, “The Burial of Jesus,” in *DJG*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove / Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 89.

³⁴ Wright. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 579.

empty. It is the emptiness of the tomb itself that rendered it superfluous as a place of prayer.

There is also good reason to believe that the empty tomb of Jesus was never denied by the Jewish opponents of Jesus. The reaction of the opponents on hearing of the empty tomb was not a denial of it, but rather an attempted explanation as a tomb robbery by the disciples. An early Christian apologetic for this allegation is recorded in Matt 28:11-15. This passage even if it is believed some to be a redaction by Matthew's hand clearly presupposes the admission of the emptiness of the tomb by the opponents of the Christian movement.³⁵ What it also indicates is that up until the time of the writing of Matthew's gospel, this story of a tomb robbery (or conspiracy theory), by the disciples was still being circulated. The conspiracy theory is the first known attempted explanation for the empty tomb. This theory also presupposes that the location of the tomb of Jesus was also known to the opponents of the Christian movement, but also the followers of Jesus.

Much like the first century Jewish practices of venerating the tombs of holy figures, Christian pilgrimages and prayers at sacred sites, such as graves and tombs of martyrs and saints, did in fact develop in the course of Christian history. However, this was a much later development which fully blossomed in the fourth century C.E. Even if Christians in the fourth century alleged to have discovered the location of the "empty tomb" of Jesus, it would still be considered merely a sacred site because of its believed association with Jesus.³⁶ This later type of Christian thinking is completely the reverse of the first century setting. Tombs were deemed sacred because of its occupants. It was the tomb with the human remains of a saint that it gave its significance. In the case of Jesus, his tomb never became a sacred site prior to the third century C.E. It is generally acknowledged by scholarship that the precise location of the tomb of Jesus today is virtually unknown.³⁷ While knowledge of the tomb of Jesus would have been known to his immediate followers, no importance seems to have been attached to it as time progressed. Such negligence seems supported by the understanding that the tomb was indeed empty as the tradition seems to strongly support. It follows that the sacrality of the tomb was insured by its occupation with the body of a holy person and not its converse, that is was vacant. This case however was very different than the Jewish practice of

³⁵ What is of particular interest is that the Jewish allegation recorded by Matthew in Matt 28:11-15, that the disciples stole the body of Jesus in the night thus accounting for the emptiness of the tomb, is also found in a medieval Jewish tractate called *Toldoth Yeshu*. For an edited version of *Toldoth Yeshu* see M. Goldstein, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 148-154.

³⁶ On the precise location of the tomb of Jesus today, there are two possible sites in Jerusalem. See Green, "The Burial of Jesus," 91.

³⁷ Pieter F. Craffert. *Meeting the Living Among the Dead: Burials, Tombs and the Afterlife* (Pretoria: Biblia Publishers, 1999), 101.

praying at tombs and graves, where the physical remains of revered prophets and rabbis were resting. Christians later adopted the view of sacred spaces and relics, but they never believed the physical remains of Jesus were available since they believed in his resurrection.

The absence of prayers and religious devotion at Jesus' tomb has not gone unchallenged in scholarship. A few scholars have tried to argue that such Jewish devotion at the tomb of Jesus was indeed practiced by his disciples. This view has been advanced primarily by Edward Schillebeeckx.³⁸ It is the contention of Schillebeeckx that the Easter liturgy generated the empty tomb stories.³⁹ Schillebeeckx has not been alone in this view, Gregory Riley⁴⁰ has argued along the same lines as has Trevor Williams.⁴¹ Williams proposes the theory that Joseph of Arimathea offered an unused tomb to the early Christians so that they could participate in their cult.⁴² The positions of Schillebeeckx, Riley, and Williams are untenable for a number of reasons. The empty tomb narratives are well attested and contain as we have seen, a strong traditional core in which the tomb was indeed discovered to be empty. This tradition also appears very early. It is multiply attested in the gospels, Acts, and by implication in the earliest creed in Paul (1 Cor 15:4). This discovery coupled with the post-mortem appearances of Jesus gave rise to the origin of the faith of the disciples in the resurrection of Jesus. Rather than the Easter liturgy giving rise to empty tomb stories, it was rather the contrary, it was the empty tomb discovery that gave rise to the Easter liturgy. Schillebeeckx, Riley and Williams have virtually placed the cart in front of the horse. Even if there was a tomb cult in which Christians gathered for worship at the tomb of Jesus, Schillebeeckx, Riley, and Williams have failed to satisfactorily explain how an empty tomb tradition could have arisen and that quite quickly and early, while the tomb was occupied with the body of Jesus. In addition, the gospel narratives are consistent that the body of Jesus was not in the tomb. Luke 24:3 makes the concrete statement that "they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus." What also remains unexplained is why an Easter liturgy would have arisen if the tomb was occupied, i.e., Jesus' body was still buried there? The early tradition behind the empty tomb narratives are simply too weighty to be easily dismissed. Thus, a case can be made that the tomb of Jesus was discovered to be empty, and this by implication argues for the burial of Jesus in the same tomb. Moreover, the absence of prayers and religious devotion at his tomb by his followers serve as a formidable argument to the position that

³⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 331, 334, 336, 702.

⁴⁰ Gregory Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 67.

⁴¹ Trevor S. M. Williams, "The Trouble with the Resurrection," in *Understanding, Studying and Reading: New Testament Essays in Honour of John Ashton*, ed. Christopher Rowland and Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 219-235.

⁴² Williams, "The Trouble with the Resurrection," 232.

the tradition behind the gospels is convincingly strong. Jesus died, was buried, and his body disappeared from the tomb on the third day.

4. The Burial of Jesus and the Gospels

The burial tradition as found in the gospels has not been without its critics. It has been questioned in the past decade mainly by John Dominic Crossan.⁴³ Bart Ehrman in his early years argued for the reliability of the burial accounts in the gospels,⁴⁴ but now has abandoned this position and believes the burial accounts were invented and crafted later by the gospel writers.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Ehrman employs an argument from silence in asking why Joseph of Arimathea is not mentioned, nor the empty tomb for that matter in the creedal material in 1 Cor 15:1-5.⁴⁶ A creed by nature is a summation of a statement of faith, that are usually “terse and minimalistic”.⁴⁷ Why would it have to contain every single detail of the events surrounding the burial of Jesus in this case? As a Jew, how else would Jesus have been buried in the first century, but in a tomb? To mention all of these extra details would be redundant and unnecessary. The creed of 1 Cor 15:1-5 and following also does not mention the women as witnesses to the empty tomb, whereas the gospel accounts do. Ehrman in my estimation is not convincing on this point. Arguments from silence are rarely sound in the investigation of evidence. Ehrman assumes that Paul should have mentioned Joseph of Arimathea by name if he was indeed the one who was responsible for the burial of Jesus.⁴⁸ Crossan categorically denies the gospel narratives of the burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea and argues that Mark, the earliest gospel writer invented Joseph and the other gospel writers simply followed suit.⁴⁹ This is based

⁴³ John Dominic Crossan. *Who Killed Jesus?* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1995).

⁴⁴ Ehrman argued in 2003, “the earliest accounts we have are unanimous in saying that Jesus was in fact buried by this fellow, Joseph of Arimathea, and so it’s relatively reliable that that’s what happened. We also have solid traditions to indicate that women found this tomb empty three days later.” Bart Ehrman, “From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity,” in Lecture 4: “Oral and Written Traditions about Jesus,” (The Teaching Company, 2003): <https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/from-jesus-to-constantine-a-history-of-early-christianity.html>

⁴⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 7, 142, 151, 165.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 141-142.

⁴⁷ Evans, “Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right,” 90.

⁴⁸ Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 153.

⁴⁹ Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* 172-177. Also John Dominic Crossan. “The Resurrection of Jesus in its Jewish Context,” *Neot* 37.1 (2003): 20 n1. Crossan does make a point that the presentation of Joseph of Arimathea in Mark is gradually developed through the other gospels. In Mark, Joseph of Arimathea is described as a member of the council (Sanhedrin), who was awaiting the kingdom of God (15:43); in Matthew, he is then presented as a rich man and a “disciple of Jesus” (27:57); Luke borrows Mark’s designation of Joseph as a member of the council who was waiting for the kingdom of God, but also adds that he was a good and righteous man including his exoneration from the council’s decision to condemn Jesus (23:50-51), in John, Joseph is also a disciple of Jesus, but he is accompanied by

on the conviction that in the Roman practice of crucifixion, convicted criminals would usually remain on the cross to be consumed by animals of prey, including canines as a warning and deterrent for crimes against the Roman state.⁵⁰ The Roman historian Tacitus (56 C.E. – c. 120 C.E.) noted that the convicted and condemned criminals were barred from being buried and forfeited their estate.⁵¹ The Roman writer Livy (59 B.C.E. – 17 C.E.) also mentions the denial of proper burial to convicted criminals who were crucified.⁵² To the Jews, burial was a sacred obligation and one of the greatest indignities was to leave a body unburied (Tob 1:16-2:10), a point Philo also notes.⁵³ Even convicted criminals according to the Mosaic law who were deemed to be cursed of God and were hung on a tree, had to be granted burial on the same day of their execution (Deut 21:22-23). The notion of hanging on a tree in Deut 21:22-23 in the first century came to be used among Jews as a euphemism for crucifixion,⁵⁴ and was viewed as such by the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls (11Q19 64:7-13a). While burial was permitted to condemned Jewish criminals, the burial of said criminals was different in that they were not permitted to be buried in their family tombs as seen in OT passages such as Josh 7:25-26, 1 Kgs 13:21-22, and Jer 26:23. Josephus also argues this was the practice in the first century among the Jews.⁵⁵

Crossan takes the view that the body of Jesus most likely was left on the cross, and was perhaps ravaged by dogs or carrion fowl or possibly that Jesus was buried in a common criminal's grave.⁵⁶ If this was the case with the burial of Jesus, then this would imply that the burial place of Jesus would not have been possibly known to his followers. There would be no empty tomb because Jesus' final resting place would have been a common criminal's grave. Secondly, if the body of Jesus had been deposited into a common criminal's grave, such a grave would have had other bodies interred there as well as Crossan admits.⁵⁷ One can see how such a scenario would seriously call into question the Easter narratives set out in the gospels. It should be noted that the crucial point of contention here is precisely the burial of Jesus. The empty tomb narrative is inextricably tied to it. If the location of Jesus' burial is unknown, then one can see how

Nicodemus who brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about 100 lbs (19:38-39)!

Notwithstanding these developments, there is a traditional core behind them that Jesus was given an honourable burial by Joseph of Arimathea. See Green, "The Burial of Jesus," 90-91.

⁵⁰ Green, "The Burial of Jesus," 89. Ancient writers also attest to crucified victims being prey to carnivorous birds. See Horace, *Epistles* 1.16.48; Suetonius, *Augustus* 13.2; Juvenal, *Satires* 14.77-78.

⁵¹ Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.29.

⁵² Livy, 29.9.10; 29.18.14.

⁵³ Philo, *Flacc.* 1.83-84.

⁵⁴ Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 2:1209.

⁵⁵ Josephus, *Ant.* 5.1.14; cf. 4.8.6.

⁵⁶ Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* 169, 188.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

the next step would be to argue for fictional creation of the empty tomb and the Easter story. While Crossan argues emphatically for this position, his arguments are not persuasive. The multiple attestation of the gospels in regards to the burial of Jesus militate against Crossan's theory. While it is true that the Romans often did leave the bodies of crucified victims on the cross, this was not always the case. There were exceptions to this rule.⁵⁸ The burial traditions of Jesus are very early as already noted and predate the conversion of Paul which took place within the first three years of Jesus' death (AD 33- AD 36). In dismissing the burial accounts of Jesus in the gospels as authentic, Crossan as we have seen also seeks to reject the Easter narratives including the empty tomb discovery.

5. The Archaeological Factor

Archaeology has helped shed some light in this area. Archaeological evidence surfaced in 1968 with the discovery of the remains of a Jewish male victim named Yehohanan ben Ha'galgol, with an 11.5 cm nail still embedded in the ankle bone, including a piece of olive wood from the cross or a piece which functioned as a washer. The remains were discovered in an ossuary from a family tomb, dated to the first century C.E., in Giv'at ha-Mitvar, just north of Jerusalem.⁵⁹ The discovery of these remains in an ossuary indicate this person was buried twice. First in a tomb, and then following the decomposition of the flesh after a year, the bones would be collected into an ossuary and buried a second time, a practice known as ossilegium and attested in rabbinic writings.⁶⁰ The dating of the remains and ossuary are in the late 20's C.E.⁶¹ which places it in the time of Jesus and the governorship of Pilate. Prior to this time, it was the contention of some within scholarship that crucified victims were simply fastened to the cross with ropes,⁶² and that nails were not used. Martin Hengel has argued that nails were always used in crucifixion and that the use of ropes would generally be the exception.⁶³ This discovery refuted such a generalized claim, but it also refutes Crossan's claims above. This discovery demonstrates contra Crossan,⁶⁴ that in some cases, crucified victims were indeed given to their families for burial. Crossan is well aware of this archaeological discovery. In fact he admits that in some cases crucified victims were given to their

⁵⁸ James. D. G. Dunn. *Jesus Remembered*, 782.

⁵⁹ J. Zias and E. Skeles, 'The Crucified Man from Giv'at ha-Mivtar: A Reappraisal,' in *IEJ* 35 (1985), 22-27.

⁶⁰ Evans, "Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right," 87-88.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶² Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 223; Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (2nd ed., rev. and ed. by T. A. Burkill and Geza Vermes; Berlin / New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 95.

⁶³ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 31-32. Also see J. W. Hewitt, "The Use of Nails in the Crucifixion," *HTR* 25 (1932): 29-46.

⁶⁴ Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* 167.

families for burial. Crossan claims, “a crucified person could receive honorable burial in the family tomb in the early or middle first-century Jewish homeland.”⁶⁵ This is a fantastic claim given the fact that Crossan expends so much energy in trying to disprove this was the case with Jesus of Nazareth who also lived and died in the first century C.E. Crossan further states, “with all those thousands of people crucified around Jerusalem in the first century alone, we have so far found only a single crucified skeleton, and that, of course, preserved in an ossuary. Was burial, then, the exception rather than the rule...?”⁶⁶ At this point Crossan seems quite hastily dismissive of the evidence. Even though “a single crucified skeleton” has “so far” been found, who is to say that there are not others which have not yet been discovered? Absence of evidence at this point does not seem to be the same as evidence of absence. The fact that one has been found does call Crossan’s theory into serious question. Crossan’s dismissive attitude in this regard is again noticeable in his comments,

“I keep thinking of all those other thousands of Jews crucified around Jerusalem in that terrible first century from among whom we have found only one skeleton and one nail. I think I know what happened to their bodies, and I have no reason to think Jesus’ body did not join them.”⁶⁷

Once again, Crossan is simply asserting this and down plays the importance of the skeletal discovery. He asserts that he is certain that he knows what happened to Jesus’ body without any convincing evidence, even though it is contrary to the gospel narratives which he distrusts. The archaeological evidence in this case is rather consistent with the gospel accounts that the crucified victim was given to family or at least in the case of Jesus, his close friends. In addition, the description of Jesus’ pre-burial attention by Joseph of Arimathea is fully consistent with known burial practices by the Jews in the first century C.E.⁶⁸ As noted above, condemned criminals were not permitted burial in their family tombs, but since Joseph was not a family member of Jesus (at least biologically), but rather a disciple of Jesus (Matt 27:57; John 19:38), placing Jesus in his tomb would not seem to violate this principle. I noted that Joseph of Arimathea is recorded in the gospels as the one primarily responsible to bury Jesus (Nicodemus is also introduced as partner with Joseph in John 19). Interestingly, this is consistent with Jewish law in the first century as the council or Sanhedrin, which Joseph was a member of, was

⁶⁵ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁷ Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* 188. Also, John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 391-394.

⁶⁸ Green, “The Burial of Jesus,” 90. Josephus even mentions the perfuming of the deceased body and even using spices on the body to retard decomposition. See Josephus, *Ant.* 15.61; 17.196-199. This accords with John 19:39-40.

responsible for the burial of executed Jews in Jerusalem.⁶⁹ However, Luke in Acts 13:28-29 also records the preaching of Paul where he states regarding the crucifixion of Jesus, “And though they [those in Jerusalem and their rulers; 13:27] found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.” What is interesting in this passage is that no mention is made of Joseph of Arimathea and his involvement in the burial of Jesus.

Rather, mention is made of the fact that “they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb” (Acts 13:29). The plural participle is used here to describe the action of the rulers in Jerusalem. It would seem odd that Luke who appears to be extremely meticulous in his recording of events, would not appear to correct Paul’s sermon at this point since Luke in his gospel account does show Joseph of Arimathea as the primary figure responsible to bury Jesus (Luke 23:50-53). It would seem that Luke’s use of the plural participle in Acts 13:29 would be to associate the involvement of the Jewish Sanhedrin in the death of Jesus, while in the gospel of Luke, Joseph of Arimathea although a disciple of Jesus, acts as a member of the Sanhedrin, although he did not consent with the majority in condemning Jesus to death (Luke 23:50-51). Luke alone describes Joseph as “a good and righteous man” (Luke 23:50). Luke alone of the evangelists also notes that Joseph was both a member of the council and did not consent to the council’s decision to condemn Jesus to death. It would seem that the best way to harmonize the gospel of Luke with Acts 13:28-29 would be to see Joseph as representing the Sanhedrin council. John 19:38 however notes, that Joseph took it upon himself to give Jesus a burial but secretly “for fear of the Jews” (the Jewish leaders). There also appears to be a Lukan theme in Luke-Acts where the Jewish leaders are cast as the opponents of Jesus and the early Christian community,⁷⁰ and in this light the language in Acts 13:28-29 seems to reflect this view. Ehrman has argued that the absence of Joseph’s name in Acts 13:28-29 is significant and poses a discrepancy in that here it is the whole council that has Jesus buried, and not an individual like Joseph.⁷¹ This argument however is unconvincing for the reason I have enumerated above. It would appear inconceivable that Luke would write one thing in his gospel that Joseph buried Jesus, and then write a completely contradictory account in Acts.⁷² As I have argued above, Luke and Acts can be harmonized here. Ehrman is of the opinion that Jesus was not buried as the gospels

⁶⁹ Evans, “Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right,” 88.

⁷⁰ Green, “The Burial of Jesus,” 90.

⁷¹ Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 154.

⁷² Similar tensions in Luke also appear especially in regards to the ascension of Jesus in Luke 24 and Acts 1 where the latter text informs the reader that Jesus ascended 40 days after his resurrection. The 40 day interval is not mentioned in Luke 24. The same writer Luke authored or is believed by the vast majority of scholars to have authored both the gospel of Luke and the Acts.

record, but rather according to Roman practice, his body was left on the cross to decompose and serve as food for scavengers.⁷³

There has been some debate as to whether Jesus was given an honorable burial or not in the case of Joseph of Arimathea. Whether the burial can be described as honorable or not, Raymond Brown sees the action of Joseph in tending to Jesus' burial as "an honor rendered by one who came to believe that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law."⁷⁴ It appears that on an archaeological level, the accounts of the burial of Jesus in the gospels are sound and do not betray anything out of the ordinary. Jodi Magness notes that the, "Gospel accounts of Jesus' burial are largely consistent with the archaeological evidence...the Gospel accounts describing Jesus' removal from the cross and burial are consistent with archaeological evidence and with Jewish law."⁷⁵

6. *The Reliability of the Burial Narratives*

There does not seem to be any good reason that Crossan or Ehrman for that matter, has advanced for dismissing the burial narratives in the gospels. Even if Crossan argues that Matthew, Luke and John further developed the description of Joseph of Arimathea, it does not follow that Mark invented him as Crossan alleges. The Markan burial account can have a historical core, to which Matthew, Luke and John later expanded with the additional details they possessed. The death of Jesus for instance, is taken by the vast majority of scholars as a historical event, as Crossan readily admits,⁷⁶ but the gospel accounts and the Pauline letters in particular, *later* develop this event into soteriological categories. This development stems from the understanding the early disciples had that Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), and that Jesus interpreted his own death in soteriological categories (Mark 14:22-24). The multiple attestation to the burial of Jesus within the NT and its straightforward simplicity devoid of any theological embellishment in the earliest gospel of Mark, the extra-biblical textual and archaeological evidence thus renders Crossan's theory highly implausible and unconvincing. The evidence surveyed thus far does not seem to warrant it. The case for the burial of Jesus rests on good historical grounds. The often claimed argument that the Romans left the bodies on the cross to rot and be consumed by scavengers is overstated by some like Crossan and Ehrman. There are examples where crucified victims were taken down from the cross and given to their families for burial. An important example of this is seen in Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.E. - 50 C.E.),

⁷³ Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 157, 159.

⁷⁴ Brown, "The Burial of Jesus (Mark 15:42-47)," 245.

⁷⁵ J. Magness, "Jesus' Tomb: What Did it Look Like?" in *Where Christianity was Born*, ed. H. Shanks (Washington, DC; Biblical Archaeology Society, 2006), 224.

⁷⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 145.

*I have known instances before now of men who had been crucified when this festival and holiday was at hand, being taken down and given up to their relations, in order to receive the honors of sepulture, and to enjoy such observances as are due to the dead; for it used to be considered, that even the dead ought to derive some enjoyment from the natal festival of a good emperor, and also that the sacred character of the festival ought to be regarded.*⁷⁷

In this passage, Philo relates cases in which men who were crucified were taken down from the cross, and given to their families for burial during a Roman festival such as the birthday of the emperor. While there are differences here with what we see in the gospels concerning Jesus, there are similarities. Philo is relating what happened in the Roman jurisdiction of Egypt during a Roman holiday. No such holiday is mentioned in regards to the burial of Jesus.⁷⁸ However, the fact remains that there were cases where the crucified victims were taken and given to family members for burial under Roman jurisdiction. On this point there is similarity. Josephus himself attests that Jews were scrupulous even of the burial of fellow Jews who were crucified, “although the Jews used to take so much care of the burial of men, that they took down those who were condemned and crucified, and buried them before the going down of the sun.”⁷⁹ Josephus also recounts a situation when he saw three acquaintances crucified and begged for clemency:

*I saw many captives crucified, and remembered three of them as my former acquaintance, I was very sorry at this in my mind, and went with tears in my eyes to Titus, and told him of them; so he immediately commanded them to be taken down, and to have the greatest care taken of them, in order to their recovery; yet two of them died under the physician's hands, while the third recovered.*⁸⁰

What is significant in this case is that Josephus, being a respected figure by the Roman authority, went to the Roman general Titus and made an emotional appeal on

⁷⁷ Philo, *Flacc.* 1.83.

⁷⁸ Three of the gospels mention a Passover tradition of releasing a criminal as seen in the case of Barabbas (Matt 27:15; Mark 15:6; John 18:39), but this was before crucifixion. The later reading of Luke 23:17 is not attested in the earliest MSS of Luke but seems to have been a scribal addition based on Matt 27:15 and / or Mark 15:6. The Roman practice of granting clemency to convicted criminals, even crucified criminals is attested in the first and second century C.E. See Evans, “Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right,” 75. The Mishnah (*m. Pesachim* 8:6) also makes reference to releasing a prisoner during the Passover. See also J. Blinzer, *The Trial of Jesus* (3rd ed.; Cork: Mercier, 1961), 218-221; J. A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 261.

⁷⁹ Josephus, *J.W.* 4.317.

⁸⁰ Josephus, *Life* 1.420-421.

their behalf. Titus grants Josephus' request and has the crucified victims taken down. While this is a case where the crucified victims were taken down alive, two of which later died, one point of contact with Jesus here is significant. Joseph of Arimathea who was a respected member of the Sanhedrin council, went to Pilate, the Roman governor, and asked for the body of Jesus, a request which Pilate granted (Matt 27:57-58; Mark 15:43-45; Luke 23:50-52; John 19:38), in keeping with Jewish sensitivities.

Craig Evans argues that during peacetime administration in Israel, the Romans respected "Jewish burial sensitivities."⁸¹ This seems to be further substantiated by Josephus who notes that Romans do not demand their subjects to violate their own national laws, in this case Jewish laws.⁸² One of those Jewish national laws included never leaving body unburied.⁸³ Notwithstanding the tensions between the Romans and the Jews, the issue of not burying the bodies of convicted criminals does not appear to have been a point of contention. It would be inconceivable for the Romans to crucify criminals in the land of Israel, especially outside the walls of Jerusalem and then leave them on the cross in violation of Deut 21:22-23 and thereby defile the land (especially at Passover), without any serious opposition. The one exception to the rule seems to have taken place during times of war, especially with the besieging and rebellion of Jerusalem in 66 C.E. – 70 C.E. where the Romans had thousands of Jews crucified and very few were given burial and the intent was clearly to terrorize and subdue the Jewish resistance.⁸⁴

Another significant Roman source text is the *Digesta* which is a compilation and summary of Roman law:

*The bodies of those who are condemned to death should not be refused their relatives; and the Divine Augustus, in the Tenth Book of his Life said that this rule had been observed. At present the bodies of those who have been punished are only buried when this has been requested and permission granted; and sometimes it is not permitted, especially where persons have been convicted of high treason. Even the bodies of those who have been sentenced to be burned can be claimed, in order that their bones and ashes, after having been collected, may be buried. ..The bodies of persons who have been punished should be given to whoever requests them for the purpose of burial.*⁸⁵

⁸¹ Evans, "Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right," 77.

⁸² Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.73.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2.211.

⁸⁴ Evans, "Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right," 80.

⁸⁵ *Digesta* 48.24.1, 3. Cited in Evans, "Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right," 76.

The burial of Jesus is an extremely important aspect of the Easter story. It is usually overlooked because of the strong emphasis that is generally placed on the two foci events of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the NT. The burial of Jesus is with no pun intended, the middle-ground between the death and resurrection of Jesus. The reality of the burial establishes what comes *before* it, the death of Jesus, and what comes *after* it, the resurrection of Jesus. The attack on the reliability of the burial account of Jesus as outlined in the gospels inevitably calls into question the empty tomb account. The empty tomb discovery rests on the understanding that the burial site of Jesus was known as to its location by a group of his female disciples, and also to the owner of the tomb, Joseph of Arimathea, himself a disciple of Jesus. The position taken by those like Crossan and Ehrman that the body of Jesus was taken and buried in a common grave with others, undermines not only the gospel accounts of the burial of Jesus, but immediately calls into question the veracity of the empty tomb account and by extension the resurrection of Jesus. It seems in my opinion gravely inconsistent to argue and accept the details about the crucifixion and death of Jesus in the gospels, but then call into question the details concerning his burial in the same gospel accounts. It would seem that such an approach would be guided not by the evidence, but rather by one's philosophical presuppositions.⁸⁶

7. Conclusion

The burial of Jesus as we have seen while appearing inconsequential in the Easter narrative is of tremendous importance as it serves as the gateway between the death and resurrection of Jesus. The recent challenges to the burial account of Jesus by scholars such as John Dominic Crossan and Bart Ehrman has prompted a response such as this among others. The reliability and soundness of the burial of Jesus has been established through a number of considerations. The earliest reference to the burial of Jesus is found in what is acknowledged to be the earliest Christian creed known to us in 1 Cor 15:1-5. This creed is extremely early and believed to date within months of the death of Jesus and no more than three years thereafter. The creed itself is also believed to be pre-Pauline, that Paul received it as he states and passed it down (1 Cor 15:1-3). The creed appears to be traced to the earliest disciples of Jesus like Peter who would have communicated that information to Paul which would have included the burial tradition.

⁸⁶ A point that was acknowledged by D. H. van Daalen, "It is extremely difficult to object to the empty tomb on historical grounds; those who deny it do so on the basis of theological or philosophical assumptions." D. H. van Daalen, *The Real Resurrection* (London: HarperCollins, 1972), 41.

We also considered the Pre-Markan Passion Narrative. While this is a speculative idea, scholars who are wedded to this argue that the burial of Jesus was a part of this very early narrative which Mark later used as a source in composing his gospel account. We also examined the Jewish funeral customs in the first century and noted that the burial of Jesus appears to be consistent with such customs. When we examined the accounts of the burial of Jesus in the gospels we noted that there was nothing *ad hoc* about them and nothing out of the ordinary. Even if one was to grant a development in the burial accounts in the four gospels this still does not negate the historical core that Jesus was buried. This burial was executed by a member of the Sanhedrin who was also a disciple of Jesus, namely Joseph of Arimathea who along with the female followers witnessed the burial. When we considered the archaeological factor we noted that the remains of a first century crucified Jew in Jerusalem with a nail still fastened to his ankle bone bore witness to the fact that crucified victims were permitted burial. We also noted that this victim's remains were found in an ossuary in a family tomb. When then investigated the reliability of the burial narratives in light of Roman legal practice in the first century. We saw that at least in peacetime in Judea the Romans did in fact respect Jewish sensibilities concerning the burial even of convicted criminals. All of this harmonizes with what we see in the gospel accounts regarding the burial of Jesus. The burial of Jesus is fundamental in establishing both the death of Jesus and his resurrection.