‘Seated at the Right Hand of the Father’:
The Meaning of the Empty Tomb Narrative in Mark

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ABSTRACT

The following essay argues that Mark’s empty tomb narrative taps into broader Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultural assumptions in which the disappearance of a body might suggest that the person concerned had been taken up into the realm of the gods. The purpose of Mark 16:1-8, therefore, is not to prove Jesus’ physical, fleshly resurrection, but rather to show that he is now in the heavenly realm, ‘seated at the right hand of the Father’ (14:62).

KEYWORDS

ASSUMPTION, ELIJAH, EMPTY TOMB, MARK’S GOSPEL, RESURRECTION, ROMULUS, TRANSLATION

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My interest in theology – and New Testament in particular – was first stirred as a schoolgirl in Durham in the mid 1980s. David Jenkins, then Bishop of Durham, was caught up in a media frenzy over his unorthodox views of the empty tomb. Talking on London Weekend Television’s *Credo*, Jenkins argued that *resurrection* wasn’t one event (i.e. an empty tomb), but a series of experiences which gradually convinced Jesus’ first followers that he was alive again. The ensuing debate highlighted for me not only the centrality of a physical, fleshly resurrection for many Christians, but also the importance of the *emptiness* of the tomb as a demonstration of that fact. In the years since, there has been no real change in this position. Christians of a more conservative position go to great lengths to ‘prove’ the historicity of the empty tomb tradition, assuming (often with little argument) that an empty tomb alone will serve to verify Jesus’ physical resurrection.

But is this the purpose of the empty tomb narratives, particularly in their earliest articulation in Mark’s gospel? In this short essay I’ll argue that demonstrating that Jesus was raised physically was not Mark’s intention, nor was it the manner in which his earliest readers would have understood the scene. Before we turn to the account of the empty tomb, however, we’ll need to look at the earlier part of Mark’s Gospel.

**Mark’s Biography of Jesus**

The work we now know as Mark’s gospel is our earliest example of a biography of Jesus. Written in the long tradition of Greek philosophical biographies (or *bioi*), it charts the life, ministry and death of its central character, Jesus (Burridge 2018; Bond 2020). Like most ancient *bioi*, Mark’s work is moralistic: it aims to lay out the hero’s way of life for readers to admire and encourages them to model their lives on his (the call to ‘Follow me’ is strong in this gospel). Although the ending of the work is a little abrupt (‘for they were afraid . . .’;
16.8), there is nothing particularly strange about the general point at which Mark leaves his story. Ancient grammarians advised extending accounts to include ‘events after death’, which might include the subject’s burial, funeral speeches, games and so on (Martin 2008). It’s only when we compare Mark with the other gospels, all of which add appearance narratives, that his account seems incomplete (hence the addition of the longer ending at Mk. 16:9-20).

There are good reasons to imagine that Mark planned his work backwards, with Jesus’ shameful death on the cross very much to the fore. The opening chapters present Jesus as a confident, alpha male, recognized from the start as God’s beloved Son (1:11). Touring the country with his closest disciples, he attracts crowds, out-maneouvres opponents, and performs mighty deeds - even controlling the forces of nature and raising the dead. In these early chapters, Jesus has all the qualities of an elite Roman male: he’s moderate, pious, and a great benefactor. Although worthy of high honour, he refuses titles and public esteem, modestly referring to himself as nothing more than the ‘Son of Man.’

A new theme begins to emerge in the central body of teaching on the way to Jerusalem (Mk. 8:22-10:52). This section of the narrative is carefully composed around three passion/resurrection predictions (8.31; 9.31; 10.33-34), each of which is misunderstood by the disciples and requires further elaboration from Jesus. The block of teaching opens and closes with the only two stories in this gospel of Jesus restoring sight to blind people, hinting to the audience that the material contained in these chapters will heal ‘spiritual’ blindness. Now Jesus clearly articulates the need for his followers to deny themselves, to act as slaves to one another, and to shun all markers of prestige. They’re asked to give up everything; not only riches (10:17-22), but homes and families (10:23-30), and possibly even their lives (8:34-8). True honour and greatness in the community that Jesus forms around himself lie not
in courting the esteem of others, but in embracing a new understanding of honour based on ignominious service, suffering and disgrace.

This teaching isn’t only for his followers, but forms the basis of Jesus’ own exemplary life and – crucially – his death. Jesus’ crucifixion has theological implications for Mark: in some way that’s not fully worked out, it creates a (new) covenant with God and ransoms people from all that enslaves them (10:45; 14:24). Just as importantly, however, it provides a potential model for followers, some of whom may well be fearful of what the future might bring. Jesus submits to the will of the Father, accepting his cruel death in the full knowledge of the horrors to come (14:32-42). The crucifixion for Mark is the ultimate example of what it means to be a ‘slave of all.’

As the passion narrative proceeds, other people assert authority over Jesus’ body – arresting, beating, binding, scourging, and finally crucifying him. His lack of agency is emphasized by the word paradidomi, as he’s passed from one authority to another. Like a slave, Jesus endures it all, disempowered, humiliated, shamed and violated. He’s too weak even to carry his own cross and another has to be press-ganged into taking it for him (15:21). Throughout, Jesus is subjected to relentless mockery – from the Jewish leaders, Pilate, Roman soldiers, fellow prisoners and even bystanders. With the words of Psalm 22 on his lips, Jesus endures the full depths of human despair, until finally he gives up his life with a scream of anguish and abandonment. Having metaphorically drunk the cup that has been prepared for him, and remaining true to his teaching to the last, he gives up his spirit (15:37).

Yet this is not the full story for Mark. Already on the cross, a series of events begins to undercut the bleakness of the narrative. The earth is plunged into the darkness of a solar eclipse (signifying the death of a King), the veil of the Temple is ripped in two (signifying its impending destruction), and a hostile executioner undercuts the verdict against him by
acclaiming him ‘Son of God’ (15:38-9). Woven into these scenes at a deeper level are hints of the Roman triumph – the gathering of the whole cohort in the praetorium, the procession to the place of the skull (evoking the Capitoline Hill in Rome), the refusal of wine mingled with myrrh (aping the triumphator’s refusal of wine), Jesus’ ‘enthronement’ between two others (15:27), and the mingling throughout of the twin ideas of kingship and sacrifice (Schmidt 1995; Georgia 2013). There is a theatricality to Mark’s account, a setting of the narrative that encourages audiences to appreciate the deeper meaning of the images that confront them. Through the framing device of the Roman triumph, Mark shows that what looked to an outsider to be the depth of suffering, humiliation and even rejection, was – in reality – the triumph of God’s Son. Conventional ideas of power and kingship, even glory and shame, are turned on their heads. Mark is playing with the idea of Roman power here, offering highly subversive ways of what it means to be the King of the Jews. In the world of radically new values that the work creates, Jesus’ shameful death is indeed the triumph of the King – for those with eyes to see (Bond 2020).

All of this brings us to the final and most important post-mortem event: the disappearance of Jesus’ body.

The Empty Tomb

An ancient audience might assume that, as a victim of crucifixion, Jesus would not be buried. One of the horrors of the cross was that the body would remain suspended for several days, serving as a warning to the living and carrion for scavenging birds and animals. Yet there are indications that victims of crucifixion in Judaea were sometimes buried, and Paul’s brief allusion to burial in 1 Corinthians 15.4 does seem to suggest that Mark was working with a well-established tradition (Bond 2012, 162-5).
The account of the burial serves to underscore the fact that Jesus really was dead. Pilate is surprised at how quickly Jesus expired, but his death is confirmed by the centurion who witnessed his end (15:44–45). The scene also introduces us to Joseph of Arimathaea, a ‘respected member of the council,’ and three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome. The note that they have been with Jesus throughout his ministry shows that they know him well, and their presence at the cross, the burial and the tomb (15:40-41, 47; 16:1-8) provides a clear connecting line between these three events. There can be no doubt that the tomb to which they return on the Sunday morning is the one in which Jesus was buried. The shock, of course, is that they find it empty and run away in fear.

It’s important to note that an empty tomb would by no means suggest resurrection to Mark’s earliest audiences. Tombs might be empty for any number of reasons, not least because of grave robbers (as the chief priests falsely claim in Matt. 28:11-15) or simply because someone had moved the body (as Mary Magdalene supposes in Jn. 20:2). It’s often claimed that an empty tomb must be the necessary prelude to resurrection, that Jews of the first century expected a physical resurrection, and even that St. Paul who famously never mentions an empty tomb must have assumed one. Yet this ignores a great deal of evidence which suggests that Jewish ideas of resurrection were far from monolithic in this regard. Some people did hope for a restored, physical body (such as the author of 2 Macc. 7), but this was not at all the norm. Most people seem to have assumed that the resurrected were still recognizably the same individuals but that their bodies were transformed or glorified in some way, such that it was by no means clear that they were composed of flesh, blood, or bone. The texts use astral imagery (‘shining like stars’ Dan. 12:1-4) or talk of putting on a ‘garment of glory’ (2 Enoch 22:8; Apoc. Abr. 13:14; 2 Cor. 5:4) in an attempt to articulate their hopes for the afterlife (see Segal 2004; J. Collins 2009).
The author of Mark’s Gospel refers to resurrection at two earlier points in the narrative: first, and rather obliquely, at the transfiguration (9:2-8), and secondly, in Jesus’ response to a group of Sadducees (12:18-27). The transfiguration account has all the hallmarks of a theophany, an earthly appearance of a deity: we have the mountain setting, heavenly visitors, clouds and voices from above, terror on the part of onlookers, not to mention the bright and shining whiteness of Jesus’ clothing. On his way down the mountain, the Markan Jesus links the transfiguration with resurrection, commanding the inner group of disciples to remain silent about what they have seen until he is raised from the dead (9:9). Moreover, Elijah and Moses (as we’ll see in a moment) were both believed to be immortals, transferred to heavenly glory – in Elijah’s case even without death. Although Jesus’ body is still recognizable, the stress in this scene is on its transformation and glorification (nothing is said about its physicality); presumably this gives an indication of how our author imagines Jesus’ resurrected state. Similar themes emerge in the discussion with the Sadducees. In response to their hypothetical case of the woman who marries seven brothers, Jesus tells his priestly opponents that ‘when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven’ (12:27). Neither of these scenes would lead us to expect that ‘resurrection’ for the author of Mark’s Gospel would either require an empty tomb or that it could be demonstrated by one.

Translation to the Heavenly Realm

Mark’s narrative points instead to a complex of traditions linked with the movement of mortals or divine figures to the heavenly world, often known as ‘translations’ or ‘assumptions.’ Such stories were widespread throughout the ancient world (Talbert 1977, Robbins 1984, Smith 2003, A. Collins 2009, Miller 2010). When the hero finds his lover’s body has disappeared from her tomb in Chariton’s novel Chaereas and Callirhoe, he wonders whether a god has taken her away or whether she was in fact a goddess herself, now returned
to her heavenly home (Chaer. 3.3). The quintessential translation fable of the Roman world, however, was the story of Romulus, celebrated throughout the Empire on the Nones of July. Plutarch knew various versions of the tale, but the one he favours states that the king went missing after a great storm and a darkening of the sky. At his disappearance, the rulers declared that he had been taken up to heaven and was now to be worshipped as a benevolent god, a story confirmed by an eminent patrician who claimed to have met him ‘arrayed in bright and shining armour,’ and to have been told that he was now the god Quirinhus. From that day on, all honoured him not only as a former king, but as a god (Romulus 27.3–28.4; see also Livy 1.16.1-8; Ovid, Metamorphoses 14.805-28; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities 2.56.2-7; 2.63.4). Plutarch notes that he found many such fables in his reading, amongst Greeks as well as Romans (see Rom. 27.4-5 for more examples). Heracles, it seems, signalled his assumption into heaven by disappearing completely. According to Diodorus Siculus, he ascended a pyre in obedience to the Delphic oracle; once there, Zeus sent down a thunderbolt which completely consumed both the pyre and Heracles himself. When not a single bone from his body could be found, people assumed that ‘he had passed from among men into the company of the gods’ (Library of History 4.38).

So well-established was this tradition that some sought to use it for their own gain. Diogenes Laertius alleges that Empedocles tried to mimic the disappearance of Heracles by throwing himself into Mount Etna in the expectation that he would be acclaimed as a god. Unfortunately for the philosopher, one of his distinctive bronze sandals was thrown from the fiery crater, thus exposing the whole ruse (Lives 8.69). Arrian was scandalised by an author who claimed that Alexander the Great considered throwing himself into the Euphrates ‘so that he might disappear from the world and make more credible to posterity the belief that his birth was by a god and thus it was to the gods that he departed’ (Anabasis 7.27). And Lucian uses the topos for satirical effect in The Passing of Peregrinus, where his anti-hero similarly
steps onto a funeral pyre in the hope that he will be taken up into the divine realm
(*Peregrinus* 40). Although a number of authors show a degree of scepticism, it is clear that
for most ordinary people the disappearance of a corpse signalled both the translation of a
person into the heavenly realm and the appropriateness of offering him (or her) divine
honours.

Similar stories can be found in the Jewish world. Genesis 5:23-24 notes that Enoch was
taken up into heaven after 365 years, presumably because of his righteousness. More striking
is the account of Elijah who is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind in 2 Kings 2:11. Elijah is
mentioned a few times in Mark. In some places he is linked to John the Baptist (most clearly
at 9:13), but elsewhere it is Jesus himself who mirrors the prophet. Both Jesus and Elijah
receive their prophetic authority and miraculous abilities through a gift of the divine spirit,
and several of Jesus’ miracles recall those of Elijah before him (see 1 Kings 18:46; 2 Kings
2:9). Elijah’s presence at the transfiguration has already been noted, an appearance that may
suggest that Jesus will similarly be taken up into the heavenly presence of God. Intriguingly,
by the first century Moses was also believed to have been assumed into heaven. Although
Deuteronomy 34 records his death, Josephus recounts what seems to have been a popular
version in which Moses disappeared into a cloud and returned to the deity – a scene highly
reminiscent of Romulus’ departure (*Ant.* 4.315-31; Feldman 1998). Philo offers a similar
account: already exalted and at the threshold of heaven, Moses was filled by the spirit and
prophesied his own death before being buried by immortal hands in a tomb no one has ever
seen (*Mos.* 2.288-91). The implication, once again, is that Moses has already been taken up
into heaven. Perhaps, like Elijah, he was expected to return to earth before the ‘great and
terrible day of the Lord’ (*Mal.* 4:4-6).
Confronted with an account of a disappearing body, Mark’s audience – both Jewish and Roman – would assume one thing: that Jesus had been taken up into the heavenly realm. The empty tomb narrative, then, provides the fulfilment of Jesus’ words at his Jewish trial, a scene that in many ways forms the Christological climax to the gospel. With great irony, the High Priest offers the most all-embracing articulation of Jesus’ identity: ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ Jesus’s answer is clear and forthright: ‘I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven’ (14:62). Despite his apparent powerlessness and rejection, Jesus assures the supreme pontiff that he will soon be taken up into the heavenly realm and seated at the right side of his heavenly Father, there to await the hour of his return (13:24-27). With the empty tomb, the first part of this promise has come true.

Onto this assumption scene, Mark superimposes the distinctively Jewish idea of resurrection, or anastasis. As the passion predictions have already made clear, Jesus’ death will be followed by his resurrection on the third day (8:31; 9:31; 10:34). While most people will be raised only at the eschaton (see Jn. 11:24), the angelic young man at the tomb declares to the terrified women that Jesus has already been raised (16:6). His promised appearance to the disciples in Galilee doesn’t undermine his heavenly presence. People who had been translated to the heavenly world were quite capable of appearing again on earth, as we saw with the archetypal story of Romulus. Presumably some kind of epiphanic appearance is intended here, such as Matthew relates at 28:16-20.

Of all the evangelists, only Luke has a particular interest in underscoring the physical nature of Jesus’ resurrected body. Despite his ability to appear and to disappear at will, Luke makes it clear that Jesus is no ghost; he meets with his disciples and can eat and be touched (Lk. 24:36-43). The physicality of Jesus’ body, however, fits into a particular Lukan interest:
the evangelist wanted to re-establish the connection between the risen Jesus and his disciples. For forty days, according to the first chapter of Acts, Jesus continued to teach his followers, at the end of which time he was taken up into heaven (Lk. 24:50-51, Acts 1:6-11). It is at his ascension rather than resurrection that the Lukan Jesus is assumed into heaven, after which he has no further need of a body. Subsequent appearances, whether to Stephen at his martyrdom or to Paul on the way to Damascus, take the distinctly unphysical form of a blinding light (Seim 2009).

Conclusion

Unlike the author of Luke-Acts and the lively debates that preoccupied the Church Fathers from the late second century onwards (Lehtipuu 2009), the Markan author seems to have no particular interest in the nature of Jesus’ resurrected body. What his account of the empty tomb shows is not that Jesus has been physically raised but that Jesus is now in heaven, seated at the right hand of God. This for Mark is the climax of his biography, the final vindication of God’s obedient Son. And this for Mark is what Jesus’ ‘resurrection’ means. God’s son is now exalted to the right hand of the deity, ready to return to the earth in the very near future with the clouds of heaven.

References


