

Item #38 (The Empty Tomb Narratives)

This was Entry #44 on my previous website.

The present article presents the my approach to the empty-tomb narratives in Mark and John. It contains my own view of the narratives. Much has written about these narratives. My own view is based on my own set of presuppositions, just as contrasting views are based on contrasting suppositions.

Operative Presuppositions

From the outset it is necessary to allude to some of the basic presuppositions that underlie the argumentation of the present note. Many of thm are to be found in Entry #37 above, which presents my views about the nature and the purpose of the Gospels. Needless to say, what is being attempted here is the elaboration of views that are plausible, not views that are probative.

Mark 16,1-8

The empty-tomb narrative in Mark would seem best approached in the context of the request of the adversaries of Jesus for a sign (Mk 8,11-13; Mt 16.1-4; Lk 12.54-56). In Matthew and Luke the adversaries of Jesus are told that no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah; in Mark the adversaries are told that no sign will be given. The “sign” in question, of course, is an indication from God vindicating Jesus and thus testifying

to the legitimacy of all He said and did. (Note the emphasis on legitimation—or, if one wills, “justification”—in my views of the purpose of the Gospels in Item #37.) In Matthew and Luke the “sign of Jonah” would seem to be the risen Jesus, that is, “of Jonah” is an explanation of “sign”—the “sign which is Jonah”. God’s raising of Jesus and the risen Jesus who abides is God’s sign indicating that all that Jesus said and did has His approval. Thus the resurrection appearances of Jesus in Matthew and Luke have the value of God’s sign.

In Mark the statement by Jesus that no sign will be given contradicts the statement by Jesus in Matthew and Luke. This is a classic problem for interpreters. I take it as a deliberate editing of the words of Jesus by Mark. The reason for this is that in Mark Jesus Himself gives the sign of divine approval, not God. In Matthew and Luke, when asked by the high priest if He is the Son of God, Jesus evades a direct answer (“You say that I am”—Mt 26,63-64; Lk 22,70). In Mark, however, he answers directly: “I am” (Mk 14,62). (The words “I am” in the Greek Old Testament are a standard designation of divinity.) If only God can give a sign stamping Jesus with divine approval, then if Jesus Himself gives this sign using a standard designation of the divinity then Jesus partakes of the divinity of God—He is truly the “Son of God” (Mk 1,1).

It is in this context that the empty-tomb narrative in Mark is to be situated. The narrative’s purpose is not to show that Jesus did not rise but that His resurrection has no legal witnesses and thus that the risen Jesus

has no sign value *in the Gospel of Mark*. (This, of course, is done to focus attention on the contrast between the words of Jesus to the high priest in Mark and the words of Jesus to the high priest in Matthew and Luke.) The statement giving the fact of Jesus' rising is made by a young man inside the empty tomb. The fact that the heavy tombstone has been rolled back would seem to imply that something extraordinary had happened. Thus the addressees envisioned by Mark may plausibly believe that for him, Mark, Jesus really rose. But, also according to Mark, this resurrection cannot be validated legally according to the standards of Mosaic Law: there is only one man (not two or more needed in the Mosaic Law); he is young (age is an advantage when it comes to witness according to the Mosaic Law); the women who have come, however numerous, have no legal value whatsoever as witnesses according to the Mosaic Law; in any event, the women do not give witness to anyone, saying nothing to anyone because of their awe. This is the end of the original text of Mark's Gospel.

The statement that the women said nothing because they were filled with "awe" implies that they were well aware that what the young man had told them about the resurrection of Jesus was true, with the implication that the addressees of Mark should also believe in it. But the addressees should not regard resurrection as a sign from God. Jesus Himself has given that sign and this is sufficient for the purpose of Mark's Gospel in the eyes of that Gospel's author. Mark believes in the

reality of the resurrection and wants others to believe. But he considers the resurrection irrelevant for the immediate legitimation purpose of his Gospel.

John 20,1-10

The empty-tomb narrative in John offers more challenges than that of Mark for the simple reason that John is trying to make more theological points.

The principal point that John wants to make, the point of his whole Gospel in fact, is that Jesus is Divine and all should believe this (cf. John 20,31). John makes his point by looking at everything that Jesus says and does from the standpoint of His Divinity. This is in contrast to the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke), who view Jesus from the standpoint of His Humanity. John, of course, believed that Jesus was Human; and the Synoptics believed that He was Divine. It is a question of adopting a viewpoint to stress something. John was approaching Jesus “from above”, so to speak. He wants to show that what Jesus revealed by His words and deeds opened up the world of Father, Son and Holy Spirit to the believer. The Synoptics were approaching Jesus “from below”, so to speak. They want to show that what Jesus revealed by His words and deeds opened up the world of redemption from sin resulting in the foundation of the Church. The two views are not meant to be contradictory, but complementary. They show that already in the time of the very first

Christians that belief in the Christ who was Human and Divine was explicitly held.

An example will illustrate this point. In the Synoptic Gospels the climax of the crucifixion is the death of Jesus. In John, on the other hand, the climax of the “raising up” of Jesus (as the crucifixion is often called in John) is Jesus’ handing on of the Spirit to His mother at the foot of the cross. (God *as God*, of course, cannot die. Jesus *who is God* dies in the Synoptics, but Jesus *as God* does not die in John. Cf. Bibliography §156, “Bestowal of the Spirit in the Fourth Gospel”.) In receiving the Spirit the mother of Jesus becomes the mother of the Church. (By becoming a symbol of Rome, just as she had been a symbol of Jerusalem as “Daughter of Sion” and thus being a symbol of Israel?) The “disciple whom Jesus loved” is of course John the apostle, but in the Gospel that he writes he assigns himself the role of beloved disciple because that is the role Jesus assigns him. He is beloved because he believes, and he believes because he is given the Spirit through his new Mother, the Church, which Jesus here founds “from above”, that is, not through His death and resurrection as man, but through His being lifted up and being glorified as God with the accompanying bestowal of the Spirit.

The narrative of John 20,1-10 opens with an indication that it is the “first day of the week”, that is, Sunday. This introduction indicates the liturgical relevance of Chapter 20, for Sunday was the day in the early Church when the Eucharist was celebrated. Four scenes follow: Peter and

the beloved disciple visit the empty tomb (vv. 1-10), Jesus and Mary Magdalene meet at the empty tomb (vv. 11-18), Jesus bestows the Spirit on the disciples (vv. 19-23), Thomas sees and believes (vv. 24-29). Vv. 30-31 are comments of the author of the Gospel giving the purpose of his work.

A detailed presentation of Chapter 20 in its entirety would result in an article needlessly long. But some observations about the chapter as a whole are necessary for indicating John's perspectives when he speaks of the empty tomb in vv. 1-10. Chapter 20 is designed in the perspective of John's Gospel to complement Chapter 17. Chapter 17 is a presentation of the divine Christ as exalted Son to announce the Father's name in the liturgy (cf. Item #1 of this website, and Chapter 20 is a presentation of the divine Christ as the matching exalted liturgical victim who gives meaning to the revelation of the Father's name by freeing from sin. These two categories correspond to the standard categories which the Church uses to understand the two functions of the risen Christ with regard to the Eucharist: 1) the Risen/Exalted High Priest who is at God's right hand and who presides at every Mass, and 2) the Risen/Exalted Victim who is present in the visible Eucharist of the consecrated host. This complementary liturgical perspective (signaled as being operative by the introductory mention of the first day of the week), and the presumption that it is to be taken into consideration in the exegesis of the chapter, results from Chapter 20's being subsequent in the narration to Chapter 17.

Another perspective in which John 20 is to be viewed is that of the beloved disciple, that is John as the pre-eminent believer. John, the author of the Gospel was obviously aware of his calling as apostle. (John does not mention his name in connection with his authorship of the Fourth Gospel because the name “John” in the Fourth Gospel belongs pre-eminently to the Baptist whose role in the Gospel is Old Testament witness to Jesus. John the apostle also acts as New Testament witness in the Fourth Gospel—thus constituting, with the other John, the two witnesses needed for validity in the Mosaic Law—but again this is secondary to his assigned role as believer.) An apostle is one who by definition is a witness to the fact that the earthly Jesus is the risen Jesus, but John the evangelist wishes to avoid as much as possible any allusion to the resurrection, for the resurrection of Jesus implies His Humanity. In place of “resurrection” the evangelist prefers to speak about the “glorification” or “exaltation” of Jesus. The glorified Jesus is, of course, one and the same as the risen Jesus, but two separate formalities are involved: the formality of Jesus as God (John’s Gospel) and the formality of Jesus as Man (the Synoptic Gospels).

With these clarifications about the presuppositions at work, the following understanding of the empty-tomb narrative in John 20 suggests itself.

The introductory wording about the first day of the week hints at the liturgical relevance of the scene by referring to the day of the week—

Sunday—on which the Eucharist was celebrated in the early Church. This alerts the addressees of the Gospel to the fact that what is to follow has relevance for the liturgical world they were living in. The appearance of Mary Magdalene as the one who is portrayed as first discovering the empty tomb signals that the resurrection is to have no legal standing as a sign in what follows, but the appearances of Jesus in the chapter clearly show John's belief in it as a fact.

Peter and “the other disciple whom Jesus loved”, that is, the one whose role is to believe as a disciple of the Church, run toward the empty tomb. The beloved disciple shows by his actions that he recognizes the pre-eminent role of Peter by ceding him the right to enter the tomb first, but not before he sees some of the burial cloths in a way which does not result in his believing. Peter then enters, sees the burial cloths carefully arranged, but is not said to believe. Then the beloved disciple enters the tomb, sees presumably what Peter saw, and is said to believe. This carefully constructed account is not to be colored “anecdotal” but “theological”. It presents an interplay between the role of apostle as witness to the resurrection and the role of disciple as one who believes. Peter (the apostle) is not able to act as witness to the resurrection on the basis of seeing the burial cloths, even when they are arranged; that is to say, the empty tomb is not sufficient to ground the witness of an apostle to the resurrection. John (the disciple) is not able to believe on the basis of burial cloths in an empty tomb, but he is able to believe on the basis of

burial cloths which have been carefully arranged. This is the first presentation of the disciple who has been designed as one who believes in the act of believing. It is a crucial moment for the entire Gospel.

And what did the disciple believe? John 20,31 gives the answer: the disciple believes that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God. The fact that the burial cloths are carefully arranged suggests that the coming to life of Jesus was essentially different from the coming to life of Lazarus, who was encumbered by the burial cloth (John 11,44). The burial cloths of Lazarus suggest that his coming to life was the work of another; the burial cloths of Jesus suggest that his coming to life was the work of Jesus himself. Only a divine power can raise from the dead. Jesus (John inferred with the help of the Spirit) must have this power at His beck and call, that is, Jesus must be as claimed, Son of God in a unique sense. In John 17,1, the complementary and introductory chapter of John 20, “son” is used in the prayer of Jesus to the Father for “glorification”. When the disciple infers from the arrangement of the burial cloths that Jesus raised Himself through divine power, the inference is that as God He never really died but instead had been glorified. Thus the external circumstances of the disciple’s coming to believe that Jesus was “Son of God” are presented.

The added element indicated in John 20,31 about Jesus is “the Christ” is foreshadowed in 17,3. It adds the element of liturgical relevance, for in John’s Gospel divine life comes through the liturgy

centered on the Eucharist. (See John 1,14 and John 6.) Thus, with the object of the beloved disciple's belief being specified as "Christ as Son of God" the focal point of John's Gospel is honored: the first official act of belief of the beloved disciple is presented.

Further, the fact that Peter does not exercise his function as witness to the resurrection on the basis of the arrangement of the clothes in the empty tomb suggests that the empty tomb is not sufficient evidence to ground witness to Jesus' resurrection from the dead, as was remarked above.

Summary

A close reading of the empty-tomb narratives in Mark and John thus indicates that in neither Gospel is the claim justified that the portrayal of the empty tomb is evidence of lack of belief in the resurrection.

In Mark the tomb is portrayed as empty to ground the assertion that—for the purposes of Mark's Gospel—legal proof of the resurrection of Jesus is not available. And this assertion is made to prevent the risen Christ from being the sign given by God to authenticate all that Jesus said and did: Jesus Himself gives that sign thereby showing that He is God's Son.

In John the tomb is presented as being empty to show indirectly that the empty tomb is not sufficient for the witness of an apostle to the

resurrection and to show directly that the empty tomb together with the careful arrangements of the burial cloth were the basis for the belief of the beloved disciple that Jesus was Divine and that He was the Christ.

The reader may notice that the above interpretation is based on a *very* close reading of the text. And he/she is right to do so. Macroexegesis is plausible only insofar as it is based on plausible microexegesis. (1

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