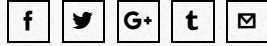


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## #621 Independent Sources of the Empty Tomb

March 10, 2019



Dr. Craig,

I want to commend you on these animated videos you've been posting. They are extremely useful and well done. The latest video, "Did Jesus Rise From the Dead," is especially compelling, but I had a question about it. In the part one video, you cite as evidence, the Gospels plus Acts and First Corinthians and you refer to them as "independent" and "unconnected" sources. But this isn't exactly true, is it? After all, two of these books were written by the same author, Luke, and so Luke and Acts are connected by authorship. Furthermore, isn't it true that much information relayed in Matthew and Luke were taken from Mark? This two facts would make it untrue to call the Gospels "independent" and "unconnected" would they not? Thank you for all the great work you do.

Sincerely,

Blake  
United States

### DR. CRAIG'S RESPONSE



I'm glad for your question, Blake, because this same objection has been raised by a YouTube video done in response to our [Zangmeister video](#). The objection is based on a simple misunderstanding. It assumes that the sources I'm referring to are the books of the New Testament. But that's not what I'm talking about.

Our Zangmeister video is just the tip of an iceberg, summarizing in a pithy way what I explain in greater depth in *Reasonable Faith* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2008), and even more extensively in my *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1989). There I explain that New Testament critics have identified a number of sources behind the New Testament, sources on which the New Testament authors drew. For example, Matthew and Luke drew not only upon Mark as a source but also upon a source which scholars designate "Q," which appears to have been a source containing Jesus' sayings or teachings. Thus, if you could show that a saying in Matthew or Luke appears in both Mark and Q, that would count as multiple, independent attestation.

Now what is amazing is how the burial and empty tomb of Jesus are attested in multiple, independent sources.

1. Mark's Gospel closes with the story of the women's discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. But Mark did not compose his account out of whole cloth. He appears to have drawn upon a prior source for Jesus' Passion, that is, the final week of his suffering and death. When you read the Gospel of Mark, you will find that it consists of a series of unconnected anecdotes about Jesus, rather like beads on a string, which may not always be chronologically arranged. But when it comes to the final week of Jesus' life, we do find a continuous, chronological account of his activities, arrest, trial, condemnation, and death. Scholars thus think that Mark drew upon a pre-Markan Passion story in the composition of his Gospel. Interestingly, this pre-Markan Passion source probably included the account of Jesus' burial by Joseph in the tomb and the women's discovery of the empty tomb. Since Mark is already the earliest of our Gospels, this pre-Markan Passion story is an extremely early source which is valuable for our reconstruction of the fate of Jesus of Nazareth, including his burial and empty tomb.

2. Matthew clearly had independent sources (designated "M") apart from Mark for the story of the empty tomb, for he includes the story of the guard posted at Jesus' tomb, a story not found in Mark. The story is not Matthew's creation because it is suffused with non-Matthean vocabulary, which indicates that he is drawing upon prior tradition. Moreover, the polemic between Jewish Christians and Jewish non-Christians presupposes a history of dispute that probably goes back before the destruction of Jerusalem to the earliest debates in that city over the disciples' proclamation, "He is risen from the dead."

3. Luke also has independent sources (designated "L") for the empty tomb, since he includes the story of the visit of Peter and another, unnamed disciple to Jesus' tomb to verify the women's report. This incident cannot be a Lukan creation because it is also mentioned in John, which is independent of Luke's Gospel.

4. John's Gospel is generally recognized to be independent of the other three, called the Synoptic Gospels. John also has an empty tomb narrative which some would say is the most primitive tradition of all.

5. The apostolic sermons in the book of Acts were probably not created by Luke out of whole cloth but also draw upon prior tradition for the early apostolic preaching. In Acts 2, Peter contrasts King David, whose "tomb is with us to this day," with Jesus, whom "God raised up." The contrast clearly implies that Jesus' tomb was empty.

6. In I Corinthians 15:3-5, Paul quotes an old Christian formula summarizing the apostolic preaching. The pre-Pauline formula has been dated to go back to within five years of Jesus' crucifixion. The second line of the formula refers to Jesus' burial and the third line to his rising from the dead. No first century Jew could have understood this in any other way than that Jesus' body no longer lay in the grave. But was the burial mentioned by the pre-Pauline formula Jesus' burial by Joseph in the tomb? A comparison of the four-line formula with the Gospels on the one hand and the apostolic sermons, for example in Acts 13, on the other allows us to answer that question with confidence. The pre-Pauline formula is an outline, point for point, of the principal events of Jesus' death and resurrection as related in the Gospels and Acts 13. So what corresponds to the second line "and he was buried"? It is Jesus' burial in the tomb. And what corresponds to the third line "and he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures"? It is the story of the discovery of the empty tomb! Confirmation that the third line of the formula summarizes the empty tomb account is found in the phrase "on the third day." Why on the third day? Why not the seventh? The most plausible answer is that it was on the third day after his crucifixion that the women found Jesus' tomb empty, and so the resurrection naturally came to be dated on that day. The third day motif is thus a time indicator for the discovery of the empty tomb.

Historians think they've hit historical paydirt when they have two independent sources for some event. If all we had for the empty tomb were just the pre-Markan Passion story and the pre-Pauline formula, that would be enough to convince most scholars of the historicity of Jesus' burial and empty tomb. But, in fact, we have at least six sources, some of which are among the earliest material in the New Testament. No wonder most scholars are convinced!

Now, of course, even here I am summarizing. Much more can be (and has been) said. There's no substitute for digging deeper and reading some good books on Jesus' resurrection. But I trust that this is enough to move the debate beyond simple misunderstanding to a new level.

**- William Lane Craig**

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TRANSLATIONS



