The empty tomb story in Mark: its origin and significance

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ABSTRACT

Mark's gospel displays features characteristic of the oral tradition and of its interplay with a literate culture. This environment affects the notion of resurrection as it is depicted in the gospel. Introduced into Judaism relatively late, the concept of being 'raised from among the dead' had various connotations, was widely the subject of public debate, and is never clearly defined either in Paul's letters or in Mark's gospel. The empty tomb story in Mark is based in oral tradition, is based on eye-witness accounts, and has a core of historicity. After some years of silence, and after accusations about Jesus' death began to be circulated, the women who were at the tomb were prompted to recall their experience. Mark has pared the story down to a minimum of detail, emphasising the fear in the women's minds and reflecting the uncertainty in his own. Mark has left it to his audience to imagine for themselves the implications of Jesus' having been raised.

1 INTRODUCTION

The origin and significance of the empty tomb stories in the synoptic gospels continue to be a source of disagreement among scholars, largely because of the ambiguous nature of the evidence and the many inconsistencies in the accounts themselves. Many critics have approached the question from a tradition versus redaction perspective, but it appears that there is little further advance to be made in this way at present. I wish to propose a new approach, while focusing on Mark as our earliest version of the story.

I see Mark as the first written textualization of material previously orally transmitted, and I shall suggest that there is a link between the oral tradition on the one hand and the changes in the concepts of resurrection on the other. If we can understand these two processes and establish a relationship between them, we may be able to throw some light on the nature of Mark's account of the discovery of the empty tomb and on the reason why he ends his gospel as he does. I shall look first at relevant aspects of the orality/literacy question, then at the Jewish and early Christian notions of resurrection and the origin of the belief in Jesus' resurrection, and finally relate this inquiry to a study of Mark 16.1-8.
2 JESUS AND THE ORAL TRADITION

It is almost certain that Jesus communicated his message entirely by speech and debate, and that he never committed a word to writing. Literacy was very limited in first century CE Palestine, especially in rural areas such as Galilee, and oral communication was predominant. As itinerant preacher Jesus made full use of the traditional instruments of the saying and the parable, and his followers took over these modes when themselves repeating verbally to others what he said. Similarly stories about Jesus (miracles, exorcisms, etc) were communicated verbally to others and were shaped in simple, memorable form. These elements formed the basis of the gospel tradition.

2.1 Oral tradition parallels

In trying to understand the nature of this oral tradition and its role in the formation of the gospel narratives some scholars have sought parallels in other cultures and literatures. Both Homeric and classical Greece have provided evidence for the nature of orality and its interplay with literacy (see e.g. Henaut 1993:75-119; Aune 1991). But such comparisons should be made with caution, because of the obvious differences. The Homeric poems are certainly the culmination of a long period of oral transmission, but they are heroic epics of monumental proportions, transmitted in a pre-literate society and performed as songs accompanied by music (with a highly structured metre and rhythm). However, the prodigious feats of memory required for their transmission do point to a similar capability, on a smaller scale, in a culture with a strong oral tradition, such as Israel.

In classical Athens the interplay between orality and literacy was more akin to the situation in first century Palestine, but there were striking differences as well, such as (in Greece) a closer involvement of the citizen body in activities of the polis (elections, law-making, dramatic festivals, etc.) requiring a fairly high level of literacy, an absence of any concept of sacred texts, religious doctrine or gospel kerygma, little notion of permanent archives (see Thomas 1992), and a more secular view of the writing of history. One important similarity was the public readings and recitations of texts in both cultures, indicating the oral element in the composition of written texts. For example, in 5th century Athens there is a link between the public recitations of Homer (by

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1 We are dealing with a culture in which 'much more was heard and circulated orally than was ever read in private by individuals' (Fox 1994:144).
2 Henaut well recognises the main differences between the Greek and Jewish/Christian oral traditions, but he goes too far in dismissing the oral phase of the Jesus tradition as 'now forever lost' to us (1993:295), as I shall demonstrate.
then established as texts transmitting the myths of the past) and the composition of plays (re-dramatizing the same, and other, cycles of myths) for the festivals. Both had an educational function, as dramatizing the national ethos (see Havelock 1980:63) for public consumption. For the new plays each year the writers were also the producers and the chorus-trainers, and it is very likely that parts of each play were orally composed during rehearsals, the play being finally written as a text only at (or even after) its once-only production at the festival. This in turn provides a real parallel with the oral proclamation of the gospel of Jesus in 1st century Palestine and beyond, the re-telling of the 'myths' of his life taking the form of 'performances' of the story in various places with a view to educating the public about the good news and preserving the tradition in which it was enshrined. It is tempting to see the author of Mark's gospel as an itinerant preacher, continuing the kind of movement which Jesus had started (cf Botha 1993), memorising the sayings and stories handed down to him and using them as the basis of his public deliveries, and finally committing the text of his performances to writing when the need was felt for a standard 'institutionalized' version for regular public reading. So if we can speak of the 'oral composition of Greek drama' for public performance (as Havelock 1980), we can contemplate the possibility of the oral composition of Mark's gospel for public reading.

2.2 Some implications of the oral tradition for the formation of the written gospel tradition

When we study our written version of the gospel in the light of this tradition, there are important implications to bear in mind, the most relevant for our purpose being the following:

(a) The conviction of Jesus that the coming of the kingdom of God was imminent gave his kerygma a particular urgency, to the extent that a written version, even if it had been considered as a possibility, would have been thought to be largely irrelevant as a rapid means of communication. This in turn suggests that his followers did not make notes at the time, as they would not have had it in mind to compile a written version later. It was only when the kingdom was seen to be delayed that a written version was thought to be necessary in order to crystallize the tradition into a more permanent form and to amend the message to reflect the new situation.

(b) Because of the lack of written records from Jesus and his immediate followers, the reliability of the accounts of eye-witnesses and of their transmission becomes crucial for us. However, the many inconsistencies in the gospel accounts indicate either that this transmission was faulty, or that the writers had no qualms about changing details to suit their purpose, or both. The existence of fictional material in the gospels, such as the virgin birth narrative
(cf Abel 1971:274), strongly suggests that neither eye-witnesses nor writers were intent on presenting an historically accurate account. This is consistent with the ancient Hebrew idea of history, which was based on the conviction that there is one God who is working out his own purpose for the good of his chosen people: history and religion were indistinguishable, so that the evangelists were recording not only an account of fact but also a confession of faith.

(c) Any text that was written for public consumption was meant to be read aloud, so that written texts themselves retained those rhetorical features which had previously been transmitted orally, aimed at making an impact on the audience. But committing an oral text to writing can effect subtle changes in it. While in oral transmission it is the force and impact of language which are more important than its precise meanings, in a written version of oral material there is a greater consciousness of the meanings of words. That is, with a literate mentality words have a meaning per se, a 'dictionary definition' out of any context, which is not a feature of orality. 'In the written gospel words acquire a new authority....unobtainable in oral life' (Kelber 1983:105). We shall see an example of this feature in Mark, in the context of a definition of resurrection. Further, a written text is capable of combining into a single unit a cluster of heterogeneous materials which individually might have previously been in separate oral 'cycles' (see Kelber 1983:106 on Mark 4.35-8.21), so that a new arrangement of stories already begins to hide their oral origins.

2.3 Identifying oral features

Several critics have tried to identify those features in gospel narratives which indicate a previous oral transmission. Theissen (1983:189-195), for example, points to the recurrence of typical motifs and of compositional sequences—familiar themes and forms are an aid to the memory of the narrator and to the receptiveness of his audience (e.g the repetitive style of Mark 1.40ff; 5.25ff; 6.45ff; 14.32ff). Kelber (1983:66-67) emphasises the importance of repetition in oral transmission. Botha's (1991) study of Mark is particularly helpful in this context, and he details the repetitions, stock phrases, similarity of structures and paratactic style found in the gospel (e.g the repetition of names 15.40; 15.47; 16.1; the use of καί sixteen times in 15.40-16.8).

2.4 Miracle stories in oral and written transmission

Miracle stories are a part of this interplay of orality and literacy. The empty tomb stories describe the events surrounding a miracle experienced by Jesus and show characteristics common to many New Testament miracle stories: a singleness of purpose (showing God at work through his involvement in the
natural world), an economy of detail and a concentration on essentials. Harvey (1982:110) points out that 'the extraordinary restraint in the accumulation of any kind of detail' shown in the gospel miracle stories in general goes against the normal trend ('more than any other stories, miracle stories grow in the telling') and that this renders them unique in ancient literature. This suggests that the writers of the gospels edited the detailed accounts of Jesus' miracles which would have been handed down in the oral tradition in order to suit the new genre of gospel writing. But after Mark we see this feature being reversed as far as the resurrection narratives are concerned, as Luke, Matthew and John all embellish their accounts of the resurrection and of Jesus' appearances with more detail. Mark's empty tomb story is therefore exceptional in its narrative restraint.

3 ORAL TRADITION AND THE CONCEPT OF RESURRECTION

Looking at the empty tomb story as an example of the miracle-story form is in line with form criticism, which assumes an oral tradition behind the gospels. Narrative criticism is less appropriate here, as it is concerned with the text per se, and, as Smith (Smith 1996:33) concedes, is not concerned with the gospel's original orality. But within the miracle story form it is necessary to recognise the distinctive nature of the empty tomb story: as with other miracles, it can originally have been told only by those directly involved in it, the immediate eye-witnesses, but at the same time there is the further factor of the potentially momentous implications of the event and the resultant possibility that strong emotions might have distorted the accuracy of their report. ‘The context within which we experience an event will determine how that event is encoded and hence retained’ (Baddeley 1987:464), and a different context could dramatically affect the reliability of its recall.

The fact that nothing was recorded in writing at the time of the events is indicative of the strength of the oral tradition and of the strength of the belief in the imminence of the kingdom. As the latter also involved belief in resurrection we need to establish what this belief was if we are better to understand the distinctive nature of the story, and its significance, and the peculiar ending of Mark's gospel. And because the gospel message of the coming of the kingdom and its associated communal resurrection depended for its effective communication on the predominant orality of first century CE Israel culture, we also have to see whether there had already been attempts to define the meaning of resurrection in the Jewish tradition, which would have been absorbed into the oral process, and whether there were attempts to define it more clearly in the process of committing the gospel to writing. There is a strong possibility that, as discussion of the meaning of words is a feature more of written textuality than
of orality, the writing of the gospels prompted their authors, and the early Christians in general, to look more closely at their ideas of resurrection, and that the general concept of resurrection underwent some changes in tandem with the change from oral to written gospel.

4 THE JEWISH AND EARLY CHRISTIAN CONCEPTS OF RESURRECTION

The notion of resurrection was introduced into Jewish thought at a relatively late stage: Ezekial 37.1-14 and Isaiah 26. 17-19 are to be taken as visions rather than real events, and the first explicit reference is Daniel 12.1-3 (dated about 168 BCE). This refers to a corporate rather than an individual raising, the resurrection of the chosen people of God at the end of time to a new mode of existence, and including both the righteous and the unrighteous. But in the following two centuries Jewish literature reflects a wide range of ideas on the nature of life after death and many different concepts of resurrection. The basis of resurrection was always eschatological—it always related to a final judgement and to participation in a new Messianic Kingdom. But it could involve the righteous only, or both the righteous and unrighteous; it could involve a physical body, a transfigured body, or a ‘person’ without a body; it could involve an earthly kingdom or a heavenly kingdom. The language, however, was always theocentric: while there was a range of meaning in the terms ἀνάστασις and ἐγείρειν, the subject was always God.

One of the earliest forms of resurrection belief involved the idea of persecution and martyrdom: the hope of those Jews who were martyred for their faith that their earthly bodies would be restored to them so that they would be able to participate in God's kingdom on earth (see 2 Macc.7.14-38.).

Later, in the first century CE, there is an absorption into Jewish writing of some Greek ideas on the immortality of the soul—for example, the idea of the soul receiving a new body on the last day (Josephus Jewish War 2.163), or of the souls of the righteous going to God as immortal (cf Wisdom 3.1).

In some writings there is an emphasis on God's final judgement as being the reason why people are raised; they are given new bodies, or restored to their old bodies, for the purpose of identification; and the righteous will live like angels (1 Enoch 51; 2 Bar 50-51).

A single, clear understanding of ‘resurrection’ never emerged, and it continued to be a source of controversy, sometimes of heated argument (as Acts 23.6-10 indicates). ‘The notion of life after death had become very popular in

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3 For a useful list of references in the Jewish and Christian literature see Holleman 1996:85-87.
Israel' and 'was still being fiercely fought in first century Judaea' (Segal 1997:108).

At this point we need to look at the evidence for the earliest specifically Christian views (all taken over directly from the Jewish tradition). But it is similarly difficult to establish what these views were with any precision. Segal (1997:109-110) argues that the common belief among Jewish sectarian groups was that they would be resurrected in their bodies, and that Josephus was among the first to try to merge with this view the seemingly incompatible Greek notion of the immortality of the soul. He suggests that Paul too is attempting a kind of amalgamation of the two strands of belief when speaking of a 'spiritual body' in his response to the Corinthians' question about the nature of resurrection (1 Cor. 15.12-58). Holleman (1996:2) also sees Paul's idea as a 'fusion of two different concepts of resurrection stemming from two distinct traditions'. So what can we glean from Paul's writings about the early Christian view of resurrection?

In 1 Cor. 15.12-58 Paul tries to answer those members of the Church at Corinth who 'say that there is no resurrection of the dead' (αὐτὰ ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν ὡς ἔστιν, 15.12). He can point to Jesus as the first example of a resurrection already taken place, which, he says, will be followed 'at his coming' by 'those who belong to Christ' (15.23), and then followed by 'the end' (τὸ τέλος) and the establishment of God's kingdom (15.24-28). He is impatient with the questions 'How are the dead raised?' (πώς ἐγείρονται οἱ νεκροὶ;) and 'With what kind of body do they come?' (ποῖο υἱὸ σώματι ἔρχονται, 15.35); for him it is obvious that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (15.50) and that the 'physical body' is raised a 'spiritual body' (15.44). His only explanation of this is that 'the dead will be raised imperishable' (οἱ νεκροὶ ἐγείρθησονται ἀφθαρτοὶ) and 'we shall be changed' (ἡμεῖς ἀλλαγθήσομεθα, 15.52). Paul therefore appears to believe in a kind of physical resurrection of the dead before the establishment of God's kingdom, but he does not elaborate on this.

Apart from the speed at which this transformation from corpse to imperishable body takes place (15.52) Paul's explanation therefore adds little to our understanding of the early Christian view of resurrection. In fact there is still confusion among modern critics on what he means: for example, Goulder (1994:166-180) states that Paul believed in the resurrection of the physical body, while Collins (1992:124-126) argues that Paul's understanding of resurrection does not involve the physical body. This simply reflects the ambiguity of Paul's evidence, and we have to conclude that in general it 'hardly provides a fixed point from which the rest of the resurrection tradition may be assessed' (Evans 1970:56).

The main point here is that the Corinthians' scepticism and Paul's heated response underline the fact that 'resurrection' was a source of debate both
among traditional Jews and also in the new Christian Church. It had a particular relevance for those Thessalonians who were grieving for fellow Christians who had recently died (1 Ths 4.13–18). And it sparked off public debate between Pharisees and Sadducees (Acts 23.6–10) and between Jesus and Sadducees (Mark 12.18–27).

We have seen that in 1 Cor 15 Paul refers to Jesus’ resurrection as part of his ‘proof’ of the general resurrection. So we need to look at the origin of the belief in the resurrection of Jesus as an individual, then relate this to Mark’s gospel.

5 PRE-MARKAN BELIEF IN THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

Because of our general uncertainty about Paul’s concept of resurrection, it is unsafe for us to assume, as does Craig (1985:40), that the empty tomb is implied in Paul’s ‘death and appearances’ formulae in 1 Corinthians 15.3–5. Paul makes no reference to the physical body of Jesus (his references to Jesus’ resurrection concentrate on his appearances, but his statements about the nature of these appearances are ambiguous). Is it then possible that, if there was an orally transmitted empty tomb story, it eluded him altogether? This is unlikely, as Paul had close contacts with the Jerusalem Christians (Acts 11–15; Gl 1–2), among whom such a story would have circulated. Even more significant is Paul’s reported association with Mark (Acts 12.25; 15.36–41; Col 4.10; 2 Tim 4.11) (assuming that this is the John Mark of Acts 12.12, who is traditionally identified as the author of the gospel). It is possible that Mark himself was also unaware of an empty tomb tradition at the time of his association with Paul, and this would clearly have implications for our theory about the tradition’s origin and transmission.

In spite of the ambiguities, Paul’s references only to the ‘appearances’ of the resurrected Jesus, and not to his physical body, are significant. Emphasis on the physical evidence of the resurrection comes much later, in Luke and John. Goulder (1994) has convincingly argued that this difference is one of the many indications of two separate missions in the early Church—one under Peter and James and based in Jerusalem, and the other inspired by Paul and based at various other centres. The former, he argues, propounded a spiritual (non-physical) resurrection view, derived from an Ebionite-type ‘possession Christology’ (‘Christ’ entered Jesus the man at baptism and left him on the cross), while the latter supported a physical-resurrection doctrine, of the kind we have seen vaguely intimated in 1 Corinthians 15, and elevated Jesus to divine status as Son of God. The suggestion is that the basic outline of Mark’s gospel is derived from a pre-Pauline Jerusalem church tradition, but that Mark edited his material to make it more Pauline. Goulder allows for the earlier version to be either written or oral. It is quite feasible that Mark retained in his memory the
stories told by Peter and others in Jerusalem in the 30s and early 40s, developed them as far as he could into a Pauline version of the gospel, during and after his contacts with Paul and during his years as an itinerant preacher, and finally committed the whole to writing in the late 60s after Paul’s death.

In this scenario oral transmission would have been an important formative factor in that it allowed for more flexibility (than did written texts) in the presentation of concepts or stories: the ‘composer’ could more easily introduce variations in his narrative each time he delivered his text to his audience. At the same time it also allowed for some confusion or inconsistencies, in the sense that ‘old’ and ‘new’ could co-exist in the same narrative (as we find in Homer, although there deriving from a much longer time scale). This may account, to some extent, for the existence in Mark’s final text of different versions of the same story or idea (e.g., two feeding miracles, 6.31–44; 8.1–10; three summaries of Jesus’ activity, 1.32–4; 3.7–12; 6.56). It may also partly account for the uncertainty in it about the precise nature and significance of Jesus’ resurrection. For it seems that having taken over, through the oral tradition, the ‘Ebionite’ view of Jesus as the second Elijah or Elisha (and as successor to John the Baptist as leader of the baptist movement), Mark in his written gospel has promoted Jesus to a full divinity (along Pauline lines), a concept requiring that his body could not be found in a tomb after death. We can see, then, that here there is a link between the oral basis of Mark’s gospel and the way in which he presents Jesus’ resurrection.

What, then, are the notions of resurrection presented in Mark’s gospel?

6 MARK AND RESURRECTION

The empty tomb story seems to imply a bodily resurrection (and a reappearance on earth); alternatively, it might imply a direct ascension to God (after which no body is to be found in the earth, as Elijah in 2 Kings 2.11). The notion of the physical body of Jesus having been raised, while beginning to be emphasised in Matthew’s account, appears most strongly in Luke and John. But in Mark we have only the empty tomb, and no bodily appearance, so that we need to look at all his references to resurrection to see what he had in mind.

Mark’s first reference to a dead person being restored to life is the raising of Jairus’ daughter (5.21–43; cf Mt 9.18–26; Lk 8.40–56), where Jesus uses the Aramaic command translated as ἐγείρε (‘rise’, ‘get up’, 5.41). According to

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4 ‘The conviction that Jesus had been raised and exalted to divine glory might suggest to a first century Jewish audience that there was no body to be found’ (Perkins 1994:437).
Mark's account, the onlookers believed the child was dead, and not simply in a coma, as they were said to be 'utterly astounded' (ἐξεστησαν ἐκτάσει μεγάλη, 5.42). It seems that this kind of restoration from recent 'death' is here presented as being previously unheard of and unexpected. On the other hand the story may have been inspired, or even created, by the current belief held by some that Jesus was Elijah or Elisha returned (see 6.15), since these are recorded as having performed similar miracles (1 Kings 17.17-24; 2 Kings 4.18-37); and in that case the onlookers' amazement may have been also at the striking similarities with the stories in Kings.

According to Mark another current belief held by some (including Herod Antipas, 6.16) was that Jesus was 'John the Baptist who has been raised from the dead' (ἐγείρεται ἐκ νεκρῶν 6.14; cf 6.16, ἡγερθή). This is Mark's second reference to 'resurrection'. On this Hooker (1991:159) comments that 'the idea of an individual being raised from the dead was presumably not incredible in popular imagination'. This seems to be inconsistent with the 'utter amazement' at the raising of Jairus' daughter. But there are obvious differences between the two cases: in Mark's story John had earlier been beheaded by Herod, and his 'corpse' (τὸ πτώμα) had been buried by his disciples in a tomb (6.29). His resurrection would therefore have implied the physical restoration of a dismembered body, an emergence from a tomb, and a return to active life. The phrase ἐκ νεκρῶν, 'from among the dead', emphasises the difference; apart from the notion of being 'clinically dead' (as opposed to the case of Jairus' daughter) it also seems to imply a special treatment, a premature resurrection of an individual before the general rising up of all the dead at the eschaton. As such, and with ἐγείρειν, the phrase is a formulation which often appears in Paul's letters (1 Ths 1.10 is the earliest example) and which probably represents the earliest statement we have about resurrection in the New Testament (see Lüdemann 1994:24). But this in turn raises a major problem, for 'the notion of an individual resurrection before the general resurrection was unparalleled in Judaism, as far as we know' (Barclay 1996:26). The formulation applies only to Jesus' resurrection: ἐκ νεκρῶν ...indicates that Jesus has been taken away from the realm of the dead....Other dead do not, or not yet, share in Jesus' fate, the resurrection to a new life' (Holleman 1996:142). If Jesus' resurrection was unique, there was no room for a belief that John the Baptist had been raised. It is possible that Mark was trying to point out their mistake to those of his con-

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5 Davis is surely mistaken to define resuscitation as the 'restoration of clinically dead or nearly clinically dead human beings to their previous lives', as a clinically dead human being cannot be medically revived. What we have here is either resurrection or resuscitation. As it is not the former, which would have to be ἐκ νεκρῶν (see below), it can only be the latter enhanced into a miracle story (cf Davis 1997:132).
temporaries who did believe this, and also that, in line with the Pauline movement, he was elevating Jesus’ status and depressing John’s. Mark could believe that John was Elijah returned (9.13) (not raised, because he never died), but Jesus was much greater and not merely a resurrected John. This motive may account for Mark’s repeating the rumour (repeated also by Matthew, 14.2, but omitted by Luke at 9.7) that Jesus had miraculous powers because he was John the Baptist resurrected; Mark seems to be saying that the rumour must be false since such powers were not attributed to John during his life.

It appears that the account of John’s death has been rather artificially inserted at this point as a unit from the oral tradition, as an interesting story in its own right, and using 6.14-16 as a ‘feed’ to introduce it. It may also be intended to prepare Mark’s audience for his account of Jesus’ own death. But the rather bizarre context in which resurrection from the dead is here mentioned (burial in a tomb, revival of a beheaded corpse, and a return to earthly life with a different identity) prevents us from drawing from it any firm conclusions about Mark’s own view of its nature.

In Mark’s third reference to ‘resurrection’, at 8.31, Jesus foretells his own rejection, death, and rising again (ἀνάστησιν) after three days. As the notion of resurrection is still not clearly defined, it is difficult to see how this was regarded as ‘plain speaking’ (παρρησία, 8.32) without further explanation. Perhaps this is one reason why Peter is said to rebuke him. In fact at 9.9 when Jesus refers again to his resurrection, ὅταν... ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀνάστησιν, the three disciples ask among themselves what the phrase means (9.10), and at 9.32 ‘they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him’. It is possible that Mark is trying to account for the fact that Jesus’ contemporaries failed to recognise him as Messiah, and that his true identity became clear only after his resurrection. But it is probable also that there was genuine confusion about the idea of ‘being raised from the dead’, and this uncertainty could itself have created fear (see further below on the women’s fear at 16.8).

Jesus’ third reference to his own resurrection (ἀνάστησις), at 10.34, still omits any explanation of its nature. His final reference, shortly before the event itself, contains a sequel: ‘But after I am raised (μετὰ τὸ ἐγερθῆναι με) I will go before (προάγειν) you into Galilee’ (14.28). This seems to hint at some kind of physical presence (which will either ‘go on ahead’ of the disciples to Galilee or ‘lead’ them there).

At this point we should return to 12.18-27, the reported discussion between Jesus and the Sadducees, ‘who say that there is no resurrection’ (λέγουσιν ἀνάστασιν μὴ ἔσονται—cf Josephus AJ 18.16; BJ 2.165). We have already seen Paul’s attempt to persuade the sceptical members of the Church at Corinth on this point. One possible reason for Mark’s including the passage is to enlighten his contemporaries about the nature of resurrection, by using
Jesus' reported teaching as a basis. But this discussion similarly takes us only a small way forward. The Sadducees' question in 12.23 about marriage in the after-life implies that belief in a material or physical life after resurrection (such a belief, as we have seen, being a relatively recent idea) is an absurdity. Jesus' reported reply, which is tantalisingly brief, agrees with this implication: life after resurrection (\(\text{εταν γαρ} \ \text{εκ νεκρου} \ \text{αναστωσιν}\)) is indeed non-materialistic—in it there is no such thing as marriage, and the resurrected ones are 'like angels in heaven'. But this reply can relate only to the righteous, and tells us nothing about the fate of the unrighteous (it cannot be assumed that all seven of the brothers were righteous). Also it does not explain what it is to be 'like an angel' (\(\text{αγγελοι}\)), angels being a concept which Sadducees are also said to have denied (Acts 23.8). In the rest of his reply (Mk 12.26-27) Jesus seems to imply that the patriarchs had also been raised to a new life, as 'proof' of the general resurrection to come, and Holleman (1996:80 n 4) sees here a similarity between this 'proof' and Paul's in 1 Cor. 15.12-19 (i.e., both, he suggests, refer to the resurrection of an individual or individuals as isolated incidents in advance of the general eschatological resurrection). But the argument in Mk 12.26-27 is obscure (see Hooker 1991:358), and there is little to suggest that the passage refers to the resurrection of the patriarchs. In the event these verses increase, rather than reduce, the confusion over the precise nature of resurrection. And the passage 24-29 as a whole does not explain the connection between the physical body raised from the dead and the 'spiritual' body in heaven with which it is somehow united, a query at which the Sadducees' question seems to be directly aimed.

The nearest we come to an answer to this last question is outside the New Testament, in Josephus War 2.163, where the Pharisees' view of resurrection is described: 'Every soul, they maintain, is imperishable, but the soul of the good alone passes into another body, while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment'. This seems to mean that our earthly body is corruptible, and that the souls of the righteous pass into a new incorruptible body—presumably after the general resurrection, but again this is not clear. Perhaps the important point is that the Pharisees' view of resurrection was the result of oral transmission, public discussion of the meaning of the written law, and so not necessarily regarded as a definitive, unchangeable definition. But Josephus' passage provides a useful background to the controversy which comes through in Mark's gospel.

In the end the nature of the reunion of physical and spiritual body remains an enigma to modern ways of thought. Jesus' answer to the Sadducees does not resolve the problem; and it can even be said to anticipate the uncertainty about the nature of his own resurrection, already predicted.
6.1 Mark 16.1–8

Having looked at the references to resurrection in Mark, we come to his own account of the resurrection of Jesus. He has introduced the women at the crucifixion (15.40–41), described Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathea (15.42–46) and stated that the women 'saw where he was laid' (15.47). He has fully prepared his audience to expect Jesus' miraculous rising from the dead at this point (8.31; 9.9; 10.34; 14.28), but without specifying the precise nature of this event. And it is to be a unique resurrection of an individual, of the person whom he has proclaimed to be the Messiah (1.1), therefore presumably in advance of the corporate rising up at the final Judgement.

Several queries might have occurred to members of Mark's audience at this point of their reception of his text. While the notion of a suffering Servant would be recognisable to them (cf Isaiah 53.5, 10, 12), that of his dying before the kingdom of God had been established would seem to make little sense. His being raised from the dead would partly solve this problem, but it would still leave the coming of the kingdom of God as a future event, whether imminent or not; and the raising of an individual in this way, as a self-contained event, would be a major departure from Jewish ideas. On the other hand, it is possible that they would see Jesus' resurrection as an indication that the kingdom of God was imminent. As Wilson points out, 'Even the Resurrection of Jesus is not, in their [the disciples'] teaching, a sign of anything particularly special about Jesus: for in the Jewish teaching the rising of the dead is a sign of the beginning of the Messianic age. Jesus is only the first to rise' (Wilson 1997:63). But alternatively, if Jesus was divine, his resurrection could be seen as a stage towards his exaltation to heaven, in anticipation of his final coming (14.62). And, if so, what was meant by 'After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee' (14.28)? Were they to expect the raising of the body of Jesus, who would then 'travel' to Galilee? Would this be his 'transformed' body? Would his body be unaffected by remaining buried for three days? How would all this be described and explained? For those hearing or reading the gospel for the first time, the wide range of possibilities would have created a feeling of suspense and anticipation.

The three main features of 16.1–8 are: (a) it has a basis in oral tradition, (b) it has a core of historicity, and (c) it stirs the imagination.

(a) Its oral features indicate that it is not Mark's own invention (contra Collins 1992:119–148), point to its basis in an early tradition, and probably are an indication of its essential historicity: we have already noted the repetition of

6 'The nucleus behind the tomb traditions appears to be in the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb by some women disciples, who then left perplexed' (Perkins 1984:94).
names (the women are identified three times) linking this passage with that of
the burial but also showing a typical oral inconsistency; the frequent use of
καί; and the double negative in verse 8. And Botha lists other similar features
(Botha 1989:204).
(b) Its essential historicity also derives from the presence of the three women as
the sole witnesses, a feature which Mark would have avoided if it had been
entirely his own composition. It is a miracle story originally told by those
directly involved in it, and, as we would now expect, it has been pared down to
essentials, and also changed in some basic details, in the re-telling.
(c) The conciseness of the account, as well as being consistent with its miracle
story form and with its oral background, is preserved by Mark as a narrative
device to create an emotional effect—so much is left unsaid that the listener's or
reader's imagination is stirred to complete the picture for himself or herself. In
addition, the language used is emotive, and, as Collins (1992:137) comments on
16.8, 'It seems appropriate to see this ending as deliberately provocative and
open-ended'. In the end the possible queries of Mark's audience referred to
above remained largely unanswered when they heard or read these last few
verses of the gospel.
What are the implications of these conclusions? Some will emerge as we
briefly go through the text.
In 16.1-2 we are given, in story-telling fashion, the time, a list of names, and
a reason for the action described. This narrative style indicates both a live
audience to receive it and a previous history in oral transmission. Assuming that
at a later time the women did relate their experience on that day, the reason for
their visit to the tomb is not particularly important. However, although they
were no doubt engaged in excited conversation, the words attributed to them
are 'clearly illogical' (Hooker 1991:384), and are a device used by Mark to
point his audience to the first part of the miracle—the rolling away of the
stone. And they stir the audience's imagination to wonder how this will be
done. Yet the women's surprise when they see that the stone has been moved is
only implied, not directly stated. Mark is using restraint here in order to make
his final ending more effective. But what is not directly described in 16.1-8 is
important: the location of the tomb, the actual moving of the stone, the resur-
rection itself. The story in its re-telling in the oral tradition seems to have been
reduced to an absolute minimum of detail. Also perhaps the women could
recall only a hazy version of the story, because of their confusion and fear at
the time of the events. The main point is that Mark's restraint and his 'omis-
sions,' combined with a degree of unreliability on the part of the eye-
witnesses, leave much of the story wide open to his audience's imagination.
One illustration of Mark's minimalist approach is appropriate here. When
(v 4) the women saw that the stone had been rolled back, Mark simply says,
‘For it was very large’ (ὅν γὰρ μέγας αφόδρα). Compare this with Homer’s long description of Hector’s seizing a huge rock and hurling it against the massive gate in the Greek wall to smash through it (*Iliad* 12.445-462), in which four lines are devoted solely to the size, shape and weight of the rock. The description of the episode is so vivid in its detail that the audience seem to be witnessing the event themselves. The contrast between oral gospel and oral heroic epic is in this respect complete, and it underlines Harvey’s statement (above) about the former’s uniqueness in its restraint.

Mark’s next ‘omission’ is that there is no expression of surprise when the women find the tomb to be empty (v 5). Their amazement comes rather at seeing a young man inside the tomb dressed in white. It is possible that they originally saw a man in or near the tomb who told them it was empty, but Mark has implicitly made him an angel, at the sight of whom the women are said to be terrified (ἐξεθαμβήθησαν) rather than merely surprised. Mark is using ordinary language (e.g. νεανίσκος) to describe what is numinous and mythical—he has cleverly taken his audience into the realm of the mysterious and unknown, and the angel’s message is an essential part of this move: ἦγέρθη, οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδε (‘he has been raised, he is not here’). In view of the uncertainty surrounding the idea of resurrection, it is not surprising that the women are said to be still afraid—the angel’s telling them μὴ ἐκθαμβεῖσθε (v 6) has no effect. In their original story the women no doubt reported that they did see ‘the place where they laid him’ (v 6, cf 15.47) and the sudden possibility that he was still alive would have had a shock effect. If it was known that all the other disciples had gone back to Galilee, this might account for the rest of the angel’s message as devised by Mark (v 7).

The main point here is that the women are described as being absolutely terrified (ἐξεν γὰρ αὐτὰς τρόμος καὶ ἐκστάσεις...ἔφοβούντο). They have no idea what to make of this astonishing situation. Their fear would have been the main feature in their re-telling of the story; and this brings us to 16.8.

In the literature on 16.8, and on the empty tomb stories in general, insufficient attention has been paid to the implications of the concept of ‘resurrection’, both in the minds of the women discovering the empty tomb and in the mind of the author of the gospel. And yet the idea of what ‘he has been raised’ actually meant for all these people is crucial. It is unlikely that those women who followed Jesus during his ministry had any clearer idea on this than those disciples who asked among themselves what it meant (9.10; 9.32). I suggest that the author of Mark’s gospel was equally unclear and that he is projecting his own uncertainty into his reported questioning of the disciples and into the fear of the women at the empty tomb.7 In the end he leaves it to

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7 Cf Perkins 1984:123: ‘The restraint of the Markan story makes it evident that the
his audience and his readers to decide for themselves what they think it meant. Although he was convinced that Jesus was the Christ (1.1), at the time of writing his gospel he still did not know, from all the strands which he had received through the oral tradition, what the final outcome had been or would be after Jesus' death.

The discovery by the women that the tomb was empty, and their assumption that Jesus had been restored to life, could therefore have opened up a wide range of possible alternatives in their minds: (a) If Jesus had been raised, this might indicate that the communal raising from the dead, in preparation for the the final Judgement, had started. This possibility alone could have been a terrifying thought. (b) Jesus might have been immediately exalted, to be with God, without an intermediate state, in preparation for the final moment (which was imminent) of his parousia (to coincide with the final Judgement). (c) The bodily resurrection of Jesus, which an empty tomb seemed to imply, might indicate that the communal raising would also be bodily. As we have seen, this would conform with the earliest resurrection belief in Judaism, that the earthly body of the martyrs would be restored so as to participate in God's kingdom on earth. (d) Jesus' bodily resurrection on earth could be a temporary state before he assumed, as the Christ, his new identity with God. A bodily resurrection would suggest that he might re-appear on earth. (Mark's inclusion of the angel's message that he would be seen by the disciples in Galilee, where they had gone, is consistent with this, but may be derived from a different tradition, i.e. it is possible that the same tradition of an appearance to the disciples was handed down to Mark by oral transmission as it was to Paul).

Any of these, and other similarly awesome, possibilities could have occurred to the women at the tomb. They were potentially terrifying in the momentousness of their significance. The women's fear was fear of the unknown, and totally plausible; if for the immediate present (and even for several years) 'they said nothing to anyone', this was also understandable, as they were in a state of shock. Eventually they reported their story, and eventually this was handed down to Mark by oral transmission. Mark found himself sharing the women's uncertainty and so ended his gospel on this note.

The ending is therefore effective in that it opens up this range of awesome possibilities as the culmination of the Εὐαγγέλιον (1.1). The questioning in the gospel about the nature of resurrection suggests that it was not intended to be a 'surprise' ending—we have been prepared for the uncertainty. Therefore, while empty tomb itself is ambiguous and that it is not immediately viewed as evidence for resurrection'.

8 Perkins (1984:20) daws a careful distinction between the traditions of exaltation and resurrection.
it is a mistake to argue, as Hester (1995:81), that 'the narrative inconclusion comes in an entirely surprising fashion, leaving the story incomplete,' he is right to state that 'the actual reader' is forced 'to enter into the story to finish it'. But the concepts of modern narrative criticism are not strictly relevant here. We are not dealing with 'a highly sophisticated level of narrative dynamics' (Hester 1995:62). Rather we are dealing with a fairly unsophisticated level of evangelistic writing, based upon orally transmitted stories emanating from somewhat unreliable eye-witnesses, in which the author finds himself finally having to describe an event which, although proclaimed in the early Christian church, had never been clearly defined. Although widely debated, the concept of resurrection remained elusive. In the end perhaps this was inevitable. For in terms of human biology and consciousness 'there is no limit to what we can believe' (Dennett 1996:44). The human mind can be receptive to a wide range of associations and beliefs when confronted with an expansive notion such as resurrection. Therefore we can accept that the women at the tomb were terrified when confronted with all the possibilities that Jesus' resurrection presented to them. We can also accept that Mark understood their predicament, and shared it himself, and so ended his gospel in the way he did.

7 CONCLUSION

Finally, using my suggestions in this article as a basis, I wish to summarise what I believe to be the most probable origin and development of the empty tomb story, in the following stages:

1. It is reasonable to assume that the women visited Jesus' tomb and found it to be empty, and that in their confusion and fear for some time they said nothing to anyone.

2. Soon after Jesus' death Peter had a vision of him, and this was followed by 'appearances' of Jesus to other disciples and followers (1 Cor 15.5-7). These visions were probably the result of mourning, and of feelings of guilt, on the part of the disciples, who had deserted Jesus at his arrest (Mark 14.50).

3. One of the earliest messages to circulate about Jesus after his death was that he had been exalted or translated to heaven direct from the cross, on 'Ebionite' lines. An alternative early message was that Jesus' earthly body had been resurrected into a new, transformed body. The latter implied a belief in his full divinity as Son of God (a belief later taken up by Paul after his own vision), heralding the communal resurrection and the eschaton. Both these views were consistent with the possibility of his followers having visions of him.

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9 Here I am following the (convincing) arguments of Lüdemann 1994: 97-100, 113-114.
4. During the 30s these messages/traditions were 'preached' and handed down in various parts of the country (Peter in Jerusalem), later in different parts of the world (Paul), first in Aramaic then in Greek (Dibelius 1971:18-22).

5. As these traditions gathered strength, accusations arose that Jesus' death was in fact his end and that he was not the Messiah. The authors of these stories pointed to the absence of a known tomb and suggested that his body had been stolen.

6. At some time in the 40s these accusations prompted the women who had been at the tomb to recall and report their experiences, in order to substantiate Jesus' 'resurrection'. Their story began to be circulated after Mark's association with Paul—it does not appear in Paul's letters, and it was handed down to Mark at a later date.

7. Circulation of this story increased the confusion in people's minds about the nature of resurrection—the discrepancies between bodily resurrection, direct exaltation, and non-corporeal visions, and the relationship between individual and communal resurrection, and the relationship between resurrection, parousia and eschaton. These topics were now being frequently debated in public, and the controversies were reflected in the orally transmitted stories.

8. Mark received the oral reports and discussions during his period as an itinerant preacher. While still believing in the imminence of the kingdom of God (1.15) he tried to integrate the empty tomb story into his own oral gospel, but did not attempt to resolve the discrepancies when he finally committed his version of the gospel to writing. At the same time the writing of his text did allow him more easily to present the definition of resurrection as a problem still to be resolved. And as his gospel was essentially an oral composition, he may have had it in mind to produce a new version at a later date (e.g. if new evidence relating to the risen Jesus emerged)—but this possibility can only be speculative.

9. In order to 'prove' Jesus' resurrection the later gospel writers embellished, and gave greater emphasis to, the empty tomb story and to the reports of Jesus' appearances. The only effective way to elaborate on these stories was to emphasise the bodily nature of Jesus' resurrection. The empty tomb story thus acquired an increasing prominence in the resurrection narratives, with an elaboration of physical detail which was not justified by the evidence of the early tradition as received by Mark.

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