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Jeffery Jay Lowder has undertaken to discredit Dr. William Lane Craig's ten arguments for the historicity of the empty tomb of Jesus.¹ In this paper I shall not presume to rescue Dr. Craig from the criticism leveled against his conclusions by Jeffrey Lowder. Dr. Craig is a well-respected authority on the empty tomb and resurrection of Jesus who has convincingly debated the world's foremost exponents of a number of theories that leave Jesus either decomposed in a common grave, or (having resuscitated in the tomb) continuing his life elsewhere until a natural death. Rather, I shall explore several of Mr. Lowder's rejoinders² and expose the same as an exercise in erroneous assumption replete with double standard, straw man argumentation, and failure to realize the inseparability of a *physical* resurrection to an empty tomb. Finally, it will be concluded that Lowder's *reburial hypothesis* may be added to the virtual museum of ad hoc explanations, constructed over the ages by liberal theologians and their naturalist counterparts.

Reburial Hypothesis

Lowder is convinced that the non-burial hypothesis lacks the necessary explanatory force to overcome evidence found in Mark for the actual burial of Jesus. However, the same Markan texts that lead to that conclusion, Lowder argues, also compel us to accept two burials – a temporary one and a permanent one. His entire argument hinges on the person of Joseph of Arimathea, a man the scripture records as a

¹ http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/jeff_lowder/empty.html. Lowder cites several of William Lane Craig's writing throughout the essay.

² I encounter various details following Lowder's own outline.

pious Jew, well-respected member of the Jewish Sanhedrin or Council, a righteous man, and above all (for purposes of this discussion) a disciple of Jesus, though secretly for fear of the Jews.³ Lowder however finds “it much easier to suppose that Joseph was merely a pious Jew than it is to suppose that Joseph is a sympathizer of Jesus”.⁴ Lowder goes so far as to compare the likelihood of a Jewish Sanhedrist granting a favorable burial to Jesus to that of serial killer Ted Bundy receiving an honorable burial in Arlington National Cemetery by the judge that that sent him to his death. But of course this is silly straw man argumentation if for no other reason than that well agreed to historical understanding of Jesus as one who did good to everyone and taught about the kingdom of God. Furthermore, multiple independent attestations to the character and reputation of Joseph of Arimathea in the four gospels precludes any possibility of him merely burying Jesus’ body in obedience to a command to do the same by the council. Indeed, it is observed that Joseph was clearly at odds with the council (Lk. 23:51) He was, as is noted, a disciple of Jesus. He heard the teaching and saw the good deeds of Jesus; it is easily surmised Joseph of Arimathea held Jesus in highest esteem. Why Lowder resists the illation that Joseph was a “sympathizer of Jesus” is a mystery.

Lowder’s failure to excogitate the humility and meekness of Jesus is evidenced in his overemphasis on the common grave fate of crucified criminals. Over and again, he (undoubtedly the fruit of the same faulty reasoning as noted above) stumbles where otherwise sure footing is available to understand Joseph’s decision to provide an honorable burial for Jesus. In one of his twelve trademark “for all we know” statements,

³ Mt. 27:57, Mk. 15:43, Lk.23:50, Jn. 19:38

Lowder offers “Joseph may have formally buried the two thieves in the criminals graveyard on Friday and then ran out of time, forcing him to leave Jesus’ body in the tomb until Saturday night.”⁵ Ad hoc explanations based on “for all we know” induction are impotent, especially given the plethora of contrary textual witness. And two of those witnesses will suffice to checkmate Lowder while he attempts to bury the King with two pawns!

Jesus was, as Lowder concedes (though only temporarily), interred in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, bound in linen cloth with many spices, etc.⁶ according to Jewish custom. Luke and John also independently attest to that same burial linen having been left behind in the tomb as discovered by two disciples.⁷ Is it not remarkable to conclude that before reburying Jesus, Joseph (or anyone) would have endured the rather tedious and odorous process of unraveling that burial shroud?

Second, Jesus died before the two criminals crucified on either side of him did. Roman soldiers, at the behest of the Jews, went to break the legs of the crucified victims that they would lose the means of support that was prolonging their lives (John 19:32-33). Jesus though, had already died much to the surprise of Pilate. Mark records that a) Joseph asked for the body b) Pilate was surprised to hear the early report of Jesus’ death and sent a centurion to confirm that death and c) Joseph took down the body d) Joseph had a large stone seal the entrance of the tomb (Mark 15:43-45). Placing additional bodies in that tomb would have required Joseph to return to the Golgatha a second time

⁴ Lowder, 257.

⁵ Lowder, p/ 260

⁶ Mt. 27:59, Mk. 15:46, Lk. 23:53, Jn. 19:40

and also the removal of that large stone a second time. But this is problematic for any hypothesis that depends on a common treatment of all three crucified victims. Joseph of Arimathea was clearly predisposed to a special care for Jesus' body that he did not demonstrate at any point in the gospel narratives for the other two crucified that day. By that same finding, we have sufficient reason to dismiss Lowder's insistence that Joseph was hurriedly going about to see that all three bodies were buried before the Sabbath. Nothing in the narratives invites speculation as to whom was responsible for burying all three bodies; and it is further observed that Joseph was accompanied by Nicodemus (a teacher of Israel and leader of the Jews)⁸; John 19:39. How Lowder has ascertained that High Council members went about burying criminal bodies is unexplained.

Though Lowder does not interact at all with Old Testament prophecy (perhaps a result of his anti-supernatural prejudice), closing mention of the same is hereby offered to reinforce against his retort. It is commonly understood that Isaiah. 53:9 foresees the death of the Messiah with wicked ones, and his burial with the rich. To suppose fulfillment of that prophecy in the burial narratives presently under review requires far less imagination than Lowder imposes. He is selective with the scripture, and a poor exegete at that; neither can he overcome the evidence against his "reburial of Jesus" hypothesis.

⁷ Lk. 24:12, Jn. Jn. 20:6,7

⁸ This also succeeds in discrediting Lowder's unqualified determination that no one influential Jew would not have sympathized with Jesus.

Paul and the Empty Tomb

Paul delivered to the believers in Corinth what he first received; Christ died, was buried and was raised on the third day, referred to by Lowder as “Paul’s scant account of the resurrection of Jesus”.⁹ He contends that same account lacks evidential value for the empty tomb “story”. Here we find him shadowboxing, and trying to “weigh a chicken with a yardstick”.¹⁰

Can one believe in a resurrection without *knowing* the existence of an empty tomb? Intolerable as that may be, it is the basis for Lowder’s argument. He aspires to discredit the empty tomb story (and qualify the reburial hypothesis) by raising doubt about Paul’s knowledge of an empty tomb. Two corroborating witnesses shall suffice to establish Paul’s acceptance of the physical resurrection of Jesus, thereby nullifying Lowder’s assumptions.

Matthew records the rather extraordinary event of bodies coming forth from the graves at the time of Jesus’ resurrection, Matt. 27:52-53. Now Lowder will deny such a miracle took place, however the relevant feature is that the claim of those resurrections is obviously physical. That the claim is contextually juxtaposed to that of Jesus’ resurrection convinces against notions of spiritual resurrection only. Agreeing with Lowder on page 265, “the historical value of 1 Cor. 15:3-8 cannot be overemphasized”. And the “appearance of Jesus” to Paul referred to therein cannot be understood except as physical. The same Greek word translated “appeared” is used with respect to Cephas, the twelve, and James; and we know that those *appearances* included invitations by Jesus

⁹ Lowder, p.266

to touch his wounds as well statements by him that he was not spirit, but flesh. Jesus also ate fish with the disciples after his resurrection as independently verified in John 21:11-14 and Luke 24:42-43.

Jesus' own expectation was that he would be physically raised from the dead. His remark to the Pharisees that if they destroyed *this temple*, he would raise it again in three days, was referring to a *physical* resurrection as the context of John 2:19-22 and Mark 14:58 independently confirm.

For these reasons Lowder's determination on page 266 that "even if Paul believed Jesus burial place was empty, it is quite unlikely that he knew it was empty" must be rejected. Paul's belief in a physical resurrection includes by definition and certitude an *empty* tomb. Indeed, "It is very unlikely that the earliest Palestinian Christians could conceive of any distinction between resurrection and physical, 'grave-emptying' resurrection. To them an *anastasis* (resurrection) without an empty grave would have been about as meaningful as a square circle."¹¹

Legendary Developments

Lowder takes Dr. Craig to task for his argument that the Markan account of the tomb is simple and lacks legendary development, and therefore more likely true. He writes on page 274, "the angel is a typical *literary* motif used to introduce a desired divine message." Of course then, this is an "embellishment" which militates against the historicity of the empty tomb. Lowder seems to want it both ways in the discussion.

¹⁰ I borrow this fun analogy of a category error from Greg Koukl, President of Stand to Reason. www.str.org

¹¹ E. Earle Ellis, ed., *The Gospel of Luke*, New Century Bible, as quoted by William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Ill., 1994, p. 274

First, regarding the appearance of an angel as historical, he writes, "...historians who are deciding the issue will have to take into account their own *beliefs* about the existence of angels."¹² Yet it is only *disbelief* in the existence angels that serves as evidence of legendary accretion. Whether or not philosophical naturalism is a tenable position is outside the scope of this paper. Suffice it say that the idea of angels as merely literary devices is not a conclusion reached from an unprejudiced review of the scripture. On the contrary, scripture presents angels as divine messengers sent by a particular God who intends to convey a particular message – not (as Lowder says) a "desired divine message". Also, John independently testifies to the appearance of angels at the empty tomb, John 20:11-12.

Women Discover the Empty Tomb

While there would be nothing exceptional to women being the first witnesses of a resurrection today, Christians have often argued that it was peculiar given the status of women at the time of Jesus. On the one hand, Christians may find it quite fitting that Jesus would appear first to women, as the Satan first appeared to a woman and ushered in that rebellion (sin) which persists to this day. There is a rather appealing profundity therein that implies hope for restoration. On the other hand perhaps Christians sensationalize that first century, Jewish female testimony and the attendant *criteria of embarrassment* status attributed to it as a potential defeater against charges of legendary development of an empty tomb. Lowder commits to the latter and adds, "there is no evidence of any anti-Christian polemic that criticizes the church for having women serve

¹² Lowder, p. 271, italics mine.

as first witnesses."¹³ But here it seems that Lowder is sensationalizing. It is not necessary that such a polemic exist in order for the argument to be helpful. Regardless of the exceptions made for women to testify as legal witnesses, the fact remains that they were relegated in that role to a diminished capacity. The resurrection is certainly remarkable enough that contemporary, first century Jewish sexism would have made the narratives featuring women somewhat intolerable.

Did those same women keep silent about what the angel had told them concerning Jesus? Lowder insists that Mark 16:8 (arguably the ending of Mark) can only mean that the women kept silent and told no one about the resurrection. Therefore, that information was added later. But the text does not demand that. The women were instructed to tell the disciples that Jesus would go ahead of them and meet them in Galilee. The women left in astonishment and trembling and told no one anything. Perhaps we should understand that the women spoke to no one *along the way*. The text does not exclude this possibility and our common human experience bespeaks that need to tell of remarkable events.

Peter and John Investigate the Empty Tomb

Lowder is content to dismiss the biblical record of John and Peter entering visiting the tomb, given that they would not have known the location of Jesus' permanent burial site, and that there was no woman's story to checkout. This, he adds, he has already successfully demonstrated earlier in the essay under the correspondent headings. Of course he has in no way succeeded to the extent that he boasts, as this

¹³ Ibid., p. 275

paper has thus far indicated. But “for the sake of argument”, he proceeds to interact with the relevant texts.

After further conceding that certain interpolations in Luke may yet be maintained, Lowder once again denies the veracity of the biblical texts, finding it “doubtful that the disciples actually entered the tomb...[John 20:6-8]...that would be a crime under Roman law.”¹⁴ Rather, they must have simply peered in. Lowder takes back with one hand what he offers with the other. He assumes that the disciples would not have had permission to enter the tomb of Jesus. But since Joseph of Arimathea were was a disciple and follower of Jesus, it may well have been permissible; even as we observe in the same Markan narrative that some women were coming to the tomb to anoint Jesus with spices, etc. Neither does it advantage Lowder to return to his argument about the silence of the women. Here he repeats (281) that Mark must have made up that silence as a “wholesale fabrication...to suit his redactional purposes”; otherwise one would have to abandon the historicity of the disciples visit, since the women would have actually broken silence in contradiction to the Markan narrative. It has been argued here though that that silence need not include the very ones to whom they were sent (by the angel) to tell. Furthermore, Lowder accepts that in spite of the disciples’ abject fear after the crucifixion, they would have visited the tomb once they believed Jesus rose from the dead. However, he continues, the disciples are said to have entered the tomb before they *established* that fact. These men though, have spent three intimate years with Jesus and have seen amazing things. Lowder’s scenario leaves no room for emotion and

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 280

excitement and wonder – the human element. Shall we suppose it unreasonable to believe that upon peering into the tomb and seeing it empty, one would further investigate and so enter the tomb? The text corresponds with the kind of reaction we have come to expect when people encounter the astonishing. Christians peradventure may argue that the report is thereby more believable, for here the evangelist would be admitting to criminal activity by no less than “the disciple Jesus loved.”

Straw man arguments comparing the interest Romans would have in refuting a resurrection claim, to the twentieth century skeptics’ lack of interest in the Heaven’s Gate Cult are easily disposed of. The nucleus of the issue is the religious milieu from whence the narratives derive. And Lowder fails to convince of his proposition that the religious leaders in that setting were uninterested in refuting resurrection claims of the first Christians. Apparently, New Testament writers do not count as *Jewish sources*, despite their Jewish upbringing and anticipation of the promised Messiah’s first advent, as recorded in the entirely Jewish scriptures (Law and the Prophets) of their day. What’s more, the book of Acts affirms the disposition of unbelieving Jews towards those claiming Christ and their concern over the spreading of that faith. Gamaliel, a Jewish teacher of the law reminded his colleagues that other similar movements had been eradicated as their individual leaders were captured and or killed, Acts 5:35-39. Lowder simply asserts that the burden of proof is on Dr. Craig to demonstrate that Jewish leaders wanted the story kept quiet. The burden of proof might just as easily be laid on Lowder to bring forward Joseph of Arimathea that he may testify of his removal of Jesus

to a permanent burial place. This, since Lowder is so completely satisfied with his ad hoc *reburial hypothesis*.

Conclusion

Lowder's bold proclamation that "the reburial hypothesis is clearly superior to the temporary burial hypothesis according to other criteria...It is plausible; has much greater explanatory scope; it is not ad hoc; and it is not disconfirmed by accepted beliefs" is idle chatter. Rather than interact with the wealth of textual data available for serious New Testament inquiry, he contradicts multiple and independently attested written testimony and demands reasons why we should not accept the superiority of his conclusions. Conjecture is inadequate and does not rise to the level of scholarly debate. Admitting to his lack of "linguistic and theological expertise" does not liberate him from intellectual responsibility.

Lowder's final statement is among his most disingenuous. He writes, "In the absence of inductively correct arguments for or against the historicity of the empty tomb story, I suggest that the historian *qua* historian should be agnostic about the matter."¹⁵ Nothing in his arguments to that point can be construed as "agnostic"; neither are those arguments compelling, as has been the goal of this paper to set forth.

I also agree with him that if Jesus had merely been reburied, that would be an embarrassment; and perhaps Mark and would then want to deny that Christ remained dead. But the certainty of that empty tomb and resurrection is precisely why he and several others wrote contrariwise– then gladly died the martyr's death. *Soli Gloria Deo*.

¹⁵ Lowder, p. 293