The Gospel of Mark, Homeric Mimesis, and the Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea

The empty tomb of Joseph of Arimathea has long posed both a literary and historical problem for studies in the Gospel of Mark, the canonical Gospels, and the New Testament more broadly. Mark is where we first learn of Jesus’ burial in the tomb and where an empty tomb is described as the first indication of the resurrected Messiah. The earliest author to write about the resurrection, the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 15:1-11), makes no mention of Joseph of Arimathea and likewise does not record that any tomb was found empty.¹ Instead, Paul records how Jesus ὠφθη (“appeared”) to his followers and stresses that such appearances of Jesus were the basis of faith in the resurrection. The author of Mark, however, being chronologically the second author to write about the resurrection in great detail, provides a very different account of the resurrection. There are no post-mortem appearances of Jesus

¹ Paul does say that Jesus ἔτάφη (“was buried”), but he does not identify a specific tomb nor does he even specify a precise means of burial (e.g. “tomb” or “shallow grave”). For a more detailed account of Paul’s views on the resurrection, see Mánek (1958); the bulk of the article discusses whether Paul believed in a two-body view of the resurrection (i.e. Jesus received a new body and his old body remained in its burial place) or a one-body view (i.e. Jesus’ same body resurrected). This distinction, however, is irrelevant for the purposes of the present study. While Mánek (1958: 280) favors the one-body hypothesis and argues that Paul believed Jesus’ burial place was empty, he acknowledges that there is no indication in Paul of an “opened tomb” being discovered. Another, rather speculative, argument about Paul’s view is whether his use of the phrase ἐγήγερται τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς (“he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures,” 1 Cor. 15:4) indicates that an empty tomb was discovered on the third day. But Crossan (1976: 137) notes that this detail is far more likely due to “prophetic and/or eschatological symbolism” and the text says absolutely nothing about an empty tomb with these words. In fact, the note about “according to the scriptures” suggests a symbolic reading of this detail. Accordingly, Paul neither corroborates Joseph of Arimathea nor a discovered empty burial place. As such, Paul does not provide a pre-Markan version of the story and thus does not interfere with the hypothesis that the author of Mark invented these details.
in Mark, and instead the absence of Jesus’ body in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb at the end of Mark (16:1-8) signifies the resurrection. The other canonical Gospels – Matthew, Luke, and John – likewise write about the empty tomb, but they are not strictly independent and all derive substantial portions of their material from Mark. Does Mark’s story of the empty tomb derive from earlier historical fact, or are Joseph of Arimathea and the empty tomb literary inventions of the author of Mark designed to complete his narrative of Jesus’ resurrection? Based on the most recent literary studies in the Gospel of Mark, as well as the interrelationship of the empty tomb story between the canonical Gospels, this paper will argue that the most probable explanation is that Mark’s empty tomb is a literary creation of the author.

More specifically, this paper will draw upon recent research of Dennis

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2 This analysis, of course, excludes the multiple alternate endings in Mark that appear in later manuscript traditions (e.g. the “shorter ending” of 16:8 and the “longer ending of 16:9-20). These attempts to add a fuller ending to the gospel (which include post-mortem appearances) do not appear in our earliest manuscripts and, as Horsley (2010: 1824) explains, these endings are “clearly different from the rest of Mark in the style and understanding of Jesus.” Interesting enough, these later redactions perhaps indicate the need to harmonize Mark’s lack of post-mortem appearances with other traditions.

3 In terms of parallel passages, sayings, and even *ipsissima verba* the Gospel of Matthew borrows from as much as 80% of the verses in Mark, and the Gospel of Luke borrows from 65% of Mark’s verses (Kaniarakath 2008: 25). While the Gospel of John has a very different chronology of Jesus’ ministry, a number of stories not found in the Synoptic Gospels, and does not copy the *ipsissima verba*, the fourth gospel is still almost certainly aware of Mark’s material. In fact, Louis Ruprecht (2008) has written a complex analysis of how John in many respects is written as an anti-Mark, altering Jesus’ portrayal at many key scenes in the narrative. For the purposes of the present paper, however, it is sufficient to suppose that all of the later gospel authors were familiar with Mark and thus each could have derived their familiarity of Joseph of Arimathea and the empty tomb from Mark’s earlier narrative.

4 For those familiar with holy sites in Jerusalem, there are two locations that are regarded to be the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, as well as Golgotha, the hill upon which Jesus was crucified – the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Garden Tomb. Both of these sites, however, were established as part of later traditions and neither has been archeologically confirmed in any capacity. Interesting enough, a tomb was excavated in the Garden Tomb location, but the interior features dated to the 8th-7th century BCE with no indications of
McDonald in *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* to demonstrate how Mark modeled the empty tomb story partly on anti-Homeric archetypes, as well as Hebrew stories from the Old Testament, to create a unique blend that was both Jewish and Classical in its narrative symbolism.

To begin with: who is Joseph of Arimathea? The mysterious member of the Sanhedrin appears only very briefly in Mark, solely in the scene of Jesus’ burial (15:42-7), and no mention is later made of him in the post-burial sections of the four Gospels or in Acts. Once he has provided a tomb for Jesus’ body, Joseph simply disappears from the narrative, despite his own tomb later being reported empty, even as an alleged site of grave robbery in the Gospel of Matthew (28:11-15). Could Joseph have simply remained passive and out of sight if such events had actually occurred? Likewise, no knowledge of such a figure exists outside of the New Testament, and the character appears to serve a highly convenient role in Mark’s narrative. Given these problems, many New Testament scholars have been suspicious of the historicity of Joseph of Arimathea and his tomb.

One of the most prominent scholars to doubt the historicity of the tomb, John Crossan, provides a detailed analysis in *The Passion in Mark* for how Joseph and his tomb could be literary creations of Mark. Crossan (1976: 135) offers a “tripodal” argument for the ahistoricity of the empty tomb: “First, there are no versions of the ET before Mk. Second, those after Mk all derive from him. Third, the ET in Mk is completely consistent later usage. For the purposes of the present study, it is sufficient to suppose that neither site confirms any historicity behind the empty tomb story, and if Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb was in fact a literary invention, as this paper will argue, the traditions around these sites are purely derived from legend. Likewise, the Talpiot tomb, which Tabor and a fringe team of archeologists claim to be Jesus’ tomb, is irrelevant, since that tomb would not be the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea and it certainly was not found empty. The present author does not regard the Talpiot tomb to be authentic even beyond the purposes of this study.
with and required by the Mkan redactional\textsuperscript{5} theology.” In terms of the first leg of the argument, Crossan is correct that there are certainly no surviving accounts of Joseph of Arimathea prior to the Gospel of Mark. The author of Mark likewise identifies no earlier source from which he learned of this figure, and modern efforts to identify such an earlier tradition in Mark resort to rather speculative methods of source analysis and are generally inconclusive, if not simply insufficient.\textsuperscript{6}

The presence of Joseph and the empty tomb in the other canonical Gospels could provide a stronger case for an earlier tradition, if the Gospels actually provided multiple attestations. As noted above, however, the Gospels are not independent accounts. To argue, therefore, for corroboration of the story without collaboration, there would have to be sufficient grounds for believing that the other authors received part or all of the stories about Joseph and the empty tomb from a source other than Mark. Efforts to demonstrate this are likewise insufficient, however, and generally just stress how there are a few details

\textsuperscript{5} Mark’s empty tomb clarifies a one-body resurrection, as I will discuss below.

\textsuperscript{6} For example, apologist William Craig (Strobel 1998: 297) has argued that Mark’s passion narrative and empty tomb story derive from a source prior to 37 CE. However, this argument is based on the small detail that the high priest in Mark (i.e. Caiaphas) is not identified explicitly by name. The underlying logic is that one does not refer to “the president” unless it is the current president in office. But this is a very weak argument: the Old and New Testament alike frequently refer to figures of authority solely by title (e.g. “Pharaoh” or “Caesar”) and it is quite possible that the author of the first gospel may not have known his identity (the authors of Matthew and John later had to fill in this detail). Speculative quellenforschung of this type, attempting to identify specific dates and sources on scant evidence, is based mostly on wishful thinking. Consider an alternative example in the case of Titus Livy. Livy does in fact name many of his earlier sources (e.g. Valarius Antias) and we also possess fragments of their lost works (unlike any pre-Gospel source). Yet as early as the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, classicists like Albert Howard (1906) in his article “Valerius Antias and Livy” were warning scholars to not be over-confident in claiming which specific sources Livy retrieved his information from due solely to speculative quellenforschung. The situation with Livy’s sources is exponentially better than that of the Gospels, so the caution should likewise be much greater in New Testament Studies when dealing with speculation over Mark’s sources.
in the other accounts not found in Mark. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, is the only Gospel to mention guards being stationed to protect Joseph’s tomb (27:62-66; 28:11-15). Does this additional detail derive from a source other than Mark, or is it an invention of the author of Matthew? Once more, any argument for an earlier tradition must rely on speculative *quellenforschung*. In contrast, it is easy to see how the author of Matthew may have invented the detail to fill in a plot hole in Mark (i.e. “Could Jesus’ body have been stolen? Certainly not, for there were guards stationed at the tomb!”). While the empty tomb story is not identical between the Gospels, small deviations are hardly solid proof of an independent pre-Markan source.

A more compelling argument would be to find a source that is likely independent of Mark and yet corroborates the existence Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb. Interestingly enough, however, one such source that we do possess like this actually provides a different account of Jesus’ burial. The Apocryphon of James (5:17), a second century Coptic text, instead records that Jesus had a disrespectful burial in a shallow sand pit. More intriguingly, Cameron (1984: 130) after extensive form criticism of the Apocryphon of James argues that the text could very well be independent of both the Synoptic Gospels and John and was likely “based on independent sayings collections that were contemporary with other early Christian writings.” Kirby (2005: 248) even argues that it would be more likely that later Christian legends would develop towards a respectful burial, as in the case of Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb, and thus that this preserved mention of a shameful burial in the Apocryphon could likely derive from an “earlier tradition” than the Gospels. To apply my earlier cautioning about *quellenforschung* evenly, however, I will have to argue that this conclusion is likewise untenable. What can be said with greater confidence is that the
Apocryphon of James is far more likely to be independent of Mark than the other Synoptics and John. Likewise, this account records a different version of Jesus’ burial than the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. I do not mean to claim by this historically that Jesus was in fact buried in a sand pit;\(^7\) however, the Apocryphon of James does indicate that there were multiple versions of Jesus’ burial circulating, which casts doubt on the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea being a historically remembered event.

With little evidence of an earlier tradition either provided in Mark or found in the other gospels’ versions of the empty tomb story, it is quite plausible that Joseph of Arimathea and his tomb may have been solely a Markan literary invention. But what would serve as the motive for such an invention? It is on this point that much of the criticism of Crossan’s thesis has been raised. Even Crossan (1976: 15) saw the problem when he asked, “Why did [Mark] compose [his resurrection narrative] in this format and not some other possible one?” Staunch critics of Crossan’s thesis, O’Collin and Kendall (1994: 240-1), pose three questions for Crossan: First, “was Mark ready to create an entire episode, invent its central protagonist, give him a name and assign him an origin from a relatively obscure city?” Second, “do the redactional changes introduced by Matthew and Luke show that these two evangelists found some special problem in the story of Joseph of Arimathea?” Third, “is there anything historically so suspicious about Mark’s burial story centering on an ‘in between figure,’ someone ‘within the Jewish elite’ and ‘still connected with Jesus?’” These are issues that must be addressed by one wishing to defend Crossan’s thesis. A critical reader should note, however, that these are primarily literary questions: how does

\(^7\) As I will conclude later in this paper, the location of Jesus’ burial is almost certainly irretrievable to history.
it make sense within the narrative to invent such an episode and character? Crossan’s observation that there is very thin evidence Joseph of Arimathea’s existence (virtually only the Gospel of Mark) still stands. If a viable literary interpretation can be offered for why Mark would invent such a character and if this literary reading is more probable than a historical one, then Crossan’s thesis remains very strong for Joseph’s empty tomb being an invention by the author of Mark.

Where does one begin, however, in searching for a literary motive to invent such a character? Such an investigation cannot begin by analyzing this episode in isolation. Instead, a greater literary paradigm for Mark’s entire Gospel must be employed to evaluate how Joseph of Arimathea and the empty tomb would fit into the narrative. Furthermore, the Passion scene in particular of Jesus’ crucifixion, burial, and resurrection in Mark must be scrutinized to see how the author fashioned other aspects in this portion of the narrative. Do any of the details go back to historical sources, or can it be shown that other characters and details beyond Joseph of Arimathea are literary creations? A careful analysis of Mark’s narrative will show that many of the other characters are shaped out of literary rather than historical interest, that many of the details in the Passion are almost certainly ahistorical creations designed for symbolism, and that Joseph of Arimathea and his empty tomb betray the same traits as these other ahistorical aspects of the story.

Curiously, the answers to O’Collin and Kendall’s objections to Crossan’s thesis can almost all be worked out by applying the new research and observations made by Dennis MacDonald in *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*. Although MacDonald (2000: 154-

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8 The third question can be treated literarily by asking, “is there any narrative reason why Mark would invent an ‘in between’ figure ‘among the Jewish elite?’”
168) does not take an explicit stance on the historicity or ahistoricity of Joseph of Arimathea and the empty tomb, he does perform a literary analysis in his chapters “Rescued Corpses” and “Tombs at Dawn” that is highly relevant to defending Crossan’s original thesis. Furthermore, by applying MacDonald’s literary paradigm of the Gospel of Mark, in which he demonstrates that the gospel author frequently makes illusions and fashions literary parallels to Pagan heroes through mimesis of the Homeric epics, a greater appreciation can be obtained of the formation the Gospel as a whole. As surprising as it may seem initially, Joseph of Arimathea is very likely a literary creation designed to parallel Priam in book 24 of the Iliad, where a father figure begs for the burial rights of a slain hero. To defend this somewhat surprising thesis, an analysis of ancient mimesis of the Homeric epics during the time in which the Gospel of Mark of written, as well as the evidence of such mimesis in Mark, will be necessary to demonstrate how this type of literary illusion is, in fact, not unlikely at all nor surprising given the context. In fact, as MacDonald demonstrates, it is our own modern preconceptions about the works of the New Testament somehow belonging to a different category than other Classical works from antiquity that causes surprise in recognizing an otherwise clear parallel.

We shall begin by asking a critical question relevant to the Gospel: who was the author of Mark? Although the Christian writers of the second century claimed that the author was John Mark – an attendant of the disciple Peter – modern scholars widely dismiss this later attribution, as well as the traditional attributions of the other three gospels.⁹ This does not mean, however, that we cannot reasonably infer anything about the

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⁹ Strictly speaking, the canonical Gospels are each anonymous and were not identified with their current names until Irenaeus (c. 180 CE) in Adversus Heresies (3.1.1). There are both
author’s background. One obvious, but important, detail that we can know was that the
author of Mark was literate in Koine Greek. Not only was the author literate, but he was
also able to construct highly complex and elegant Greek prose. Very few people were
literate in antiquity and those who could write underwent special training. According the

internal and external reasons for doubting their traditional attributions. Internal reasons:
the Gospels are written in complex Greek prose, yet the early followers of Jesus were
illiterate Aramaic-speaking Jews. John, for example, in Acts (4:13) is even described as
ἀγράμματος (“illiterate”). Matthew was supposedly a disciple of Jesus, but as discussed
above, the Gospel of Matthew derives 80% of its material from the Gospel of Mark. John
Mark, however, was not a disciple or eyewitness of Jesus, so it makes little sense why
Matthew, an eyewitness, would be so dependent on the other’s narrative. Luke was
supposedly a companion of Paul, but the author’s description of Paul frequently shows a
lack of direct knowledge of Paul; for example, the author never mentions that Paul wrote
letters and the theological themes of Paul’s teachings are lacking from Acts. External
reasons: in the face of many internal problems, there is very weak external evidence for the
attributions. Irenaeus based his attribution of Matthew and Mark on an early statement of
Papias (c. 140 CE), available to us in a fragment preserved in Eusebius (Hist. Eccl. 3.39.15-
16). In the fragment, Eusibius claims that Matthew authored a collection of Jesus’ sayings in
Aramaic and that Mark made an unchronological recording of Peter’s teachings about
Jesus; however, Papias does not note these works or link them to the texts that we have.
There are good reasons for thinking that Papias is not referring to our Gospels: our Gospel
of Matthew is a Greek, not an Aramaic, text based on another Greek text (i.e. Mark).
Furthermore, the Gospel of Matthew is far more than a collection of Jesus’ sayings. Nothing
in our Gospel of Mark comes off as a report of Peter’s teachings and the work is
chronological and based on a very orderly narrative. Irenaeus’ attribution to John appears
to be little more than a guess based on a reference to a “beloved disciple” at the end of the
attendant of Paul appears to be a guess based on a few sections in Acts were the author
however, have found that the “we” passages far more likely derive from stylistic concerns;
cf. Macdonald (2000: 13), for example, where the author shifts to the first person plural to
mirror the vocabulary in a passage of Homer. For these reasons, along with many others,
mainstream scholarship almost universally rejects the traditional attributions of the
Gospels. To quote a good representative of the mainstream scholarly consensus, The Oxford
Annotated Bible (Perkins 2010: 1744), the Gospels “do not present eyewitness or
contemporary accounts of Jesus’ teachings” and “neither the evangelists nor their first
readers engaged in historical analysis.” For the purposes of this paper, therefore, it will
reasonable to assume that the Gospels were written by anonymous persons who were not
eyewitnesses to the events they narrate. Accordingly, Joseph of Arimathea and his tomb
would not be derived from the direct knowledge of the author.
estimates of William Harris in his classic study *Ancient Literacy* (1989: 22), “The likely overall illiteracy of the Roman Empire under the principate is almost certain to have been above 90%.” Of the remaining tenth, only a few could read and write well, and even a smaller fraction could author complex prose like the Gospel of Mark. Literacy was not equally dispersed and those who could write far more often lived in wealthy and urban areas. The ability to write, especially for those who could write well, was a skill that was taught from early childhood. From this we can gather that the author of Mark most likely came from a wealthy-born, highly-educated, and urban-dwelling background.

We can also know many of the works that the author was familiar with and even imitated. For example, the author in several passages quotes the Greek Septuagint (rather than the Hebrew scriptures directly). In the few places where the author does quote the Jews’ native tongue (e.g. Jesus’ last words in Mk 15:34), it is only very briefly and translations are provided for the reader. This indicates that the author of Mark wrote his gospel for a primarily Greek-speaking audience and he himself could quite possibly have had only a limited understanding of Aramaic. Mark likewise appears to have a limited understanding of Palestinian geography,10 and his lack of familiarity with certain Jewish teachings may indicate that he was born a gentile who later converted to Christianity.11

10 Just one brief example: in Mk 7:31 Jesus is described to have traveled out of Tyre through Sidon (north of Tyre) to the Sea of Galilee (south of Tyre). In the words of Hugh Anderson (1976: 192), this would be like "travelling from Cornwall to London by way of Manchester." I am not from the United Kingdom, but I am sure that this analogy aptly describes the error.

11 The considerations and passages that are relevant to this hypothesis are numerous, but a good example is sufficient to provide here: in Mk 7:10 the author quotes the Ten Commandments as Moses’ laws, while the author of Matthew (15:4) changes this to correctly label the commandments as the laws of God (as any good Jew should know). Passages like this indicate that the author of Matthew (who was probably Jewish) redacted
These considerations, coupled with his Greek audience, indicate that Mark very likely wrote his Gospel outside of Aramaic-speaking Israel.

More interesting, however, is that we can also reasonably infer that the author was familiar with other works besides the Septuagint. As MacDonald (2000: 1-14) points out, students in antiquity were taught to write Greek by studying previous Greek classics and imitating their writing through mimesis. A variety of texts were employed in these scholastic exercises, but the most common were the Homeric epics. Homer was the most read author in Pagan antiquity, the most copied, and the most available in ancient libraries and bookstores. Students learning Greek would use Homer as a textbook even on other subjects, and rewriting epic verses in prose using different vocabulary was a common exercise. Accordingly, if one were to guess whether a particular person knew Homer, based solely on the fact that they lived in the 1st century CE in the Roman Empire and could write in Greek, this estimate would be both probable and reasonable. There is certainly a higher probability for the author knowing Homer than any other Pagan author. This consideration alone does not mean that Mark imitated Homer, but it is important to note that the prior probability that the author was familiar with Homer is very high. If evidence of mimesis can then be found within the work through parallel passages, echoed themes, and similar vocabulary, and these signs are too numerous to be a mere coincidence, a strong case can be made that the author of Mark did imitate Homer.

MacDonald performs such an investigation, and his discoveries are impressive. First, considerations of genre are important for understanding how Mark composed his gospel.

passages in Mark that deviated from Jewish teachings, which may indicate that the author of Mark was less familiar with such teachings and perhaps a gentile.
Previous attempts to interpret the Gospels as biographies of Jesus have been far from satisfying. Ancient biography was a diverse genre, but as Momigliano (1993: 11) in *The Development of Greek Biography* explains, an ancient *bios* was at least minimally “An account of the life of a man from birth to death.” Immediately, the Gospels of Mark and John are problematic for this criterion, since they do not even feature the birth or childhood of Jesus (in fact, Mark’s gospel only covers a single year in Jesus’ life!). While Matthew and Luke each have their own advent narratives of Jesus birth,¹² these passages are brief and primarily symbolic, rather than focusing on the subject’s early development as would be the case in a historical biography. Furthermore, the issue of audience casts much doubt on the notion that the Gospels are historical biographies. As Perkins (2010: 1743) explains, “Greco-Roman biographies were addressed to a social and literary elite, which may explain why the Gospels, addressed to a much broader audience, do not match them very closely.” Perkins instead argues that “laudatory biographies,” such as Philo’s *Life of Moses* may provide a better model for understanding the Gospels. MacDonald, however, argues that the Gospels most closely align to the genre of the ancient novel. This may be seen as especially true in Mark, which focuses only on a single year in Jesus’ life (hardly a comprehensive biography), and instead provides an adventure-like narrative of a messianic hero, his teachings, journeys, trials, suffering, and escape from death via the empty tomb. MacDonald (2000: 7) describes this type of narrative as a “prose anti-epic,”

¹² Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts contain many contradictions, starting with two entirely different genealogies of Jesus, different explanations for Joseph and Mary’s presence in Bethlehem (they originally lived there in Matthew, but arrived there by an uncorroborated worldwide census in Luke), and diverge in the details following the birth (in Matthew, an uncorroborated slaughter of infants by Herod causes Joseph and Mary to flee into Egypt, while Luke has the family return to their native home in Nazareth).
that depicts “Jesus as more compassionate, powerful, noble, and inured to suffering” than previous Pagan heroes.

The most obvious Homeric hero to model Jesus against was Odysseus.13 As MacDonald (2000: 17) points out, both heroes “faced supernatural opposition....Each traveled with companions unable to endure the hardships of the journey, and each returned to a home infested with rivals who would attempt to kill him as soon as they recognized him," and, not the least noteworthy, "both heroes returned from Hades alive.” Identifying parallels between Jesus and Odysseus solves many of the problems that scholars have longed recognized in the Gospel of Mark. For example, Mark is the harshest Gospel towards the disciples, who repeatedly fail to grasp the meaning of Jesus’ teachings and all flee in terror upon his arrest. Why depict Jesus’ companions in such a negative light? If Jesus is modeled on Odysseus, MacDonald (2000: 23) points out that depicting the disciples as "greedy, cowardly, potentially treacherous, and above all foolish” parallels Odysseus’ frustration and setbacks with his companions. The Gospel of Mark likewise has more nautical scenes than any other Gospel, which is odd for a hero who journeys in a region with only the small sea of Galilee, but makes perfect sense in paralleling Odysseus’ travels.

Scholars have long recognized that the author of Mark modeled Jesus in part based on the “Suffering Servant” in Isaiah 53.14 A perfect blend of Jewish and Pagan traditions, however, became possible in Mark by likewise combining the suffering servant motif with Odysseus, who

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13 This is very common in ancient literature outside of Mark as well. Odysseus and his Odyssey were the most commonly mimicked character and story in later Greek epics and novels. Furthermore, Odysseus was likewise one of the most heavily analyzed heroes in ancient Greek philosophy (cf, Montiglio 2011).

14 Nevertheless, there is no mention of the Jewish messiah in this passage and Is. 49:3 even explicitly identifies the suffering servant as “Israel” instead.
was a man who suffered many hardships. Furthermore, is it any mere coincidence that Odysseus happens to be a carpenter? An Odyssean model may at last explain the peculiar profession ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels. Another problematic motif in Mark is the first recognition scenes of Jesus as the messiah. Obsolete figures who are generally from the outskirts of the narrative, for example, the anointing woman at Simon the Leper’s house (Mk 14:3-9), are the first to recognize Jesus’ importance. Likewise, Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, is recognized by the maid EURYCLEIA who anoints him. It has puzzled scholars why such obscure figures are the first to recognize Jesus as the Son of Man, but the trope is very well explained by the parallels of Odysseus’ return in the guise of a beggar, where obscure figures, such as Odysseus’ poor dog ARGUS, recognize the hero before more prominent characters such as even his wife Penelope.

MacDonald documents such parallels above in a book-length project that is too lengthy to elaborate further on here. Suffice it to say that the parallels above are not only thematic but MacDonald likewise provides diagrams showing similar sequences of events in parallel passages, as well as echoed use vocabulary. Such is the case in the scene of JESUS OF ARIMATHEA’S burial of Jesus and the woman discovering the empty tomb at dawn.

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15 As MacDonald (2000: 16) notes, a combination of the Greek words πάσχειν (“to suffer”) and πολλά (“many things”) appears throughout the Odyssey (5.223; 7.224; 8.155; 10.465; 15.401). Likewise, Mark writes in so-called “Passion predictions” (8:31; cf. 9:30-32 and 10:32-34) that the Son of MAN πολλὰ παθεῖν (“will suffer many things”). This could be written off as mere coincidence, but as MacDonald (2000: 16) points out, “the phrase never appears in the Septuagint.” The author of Mark does not appear to have derived such vocabulary from his translations of Hebrew scripture, but if he were drawing upon the Homeric epics it could easily explain how the vocabulary used with Odysseus was combined with that of the suffering servant.

16 A clear parallel between the NIPTRA in Odyssey 19 and the anointing woman in Mk 14.
MacDonald (2000: 159) demonstrates how these passages parallel Hector's death and burial in the *Iliad*:

**Iliad 24**

Priam, king of Troy, set out at night to rescue the body of his son, Hector, from his murder, Achilles.

The journey was dangerous. He entered Achilles' abode, and asked for the body of Hector.

Achilles was amazed that Priam dared to enter his home.

Achilles sent two soldiers to get the ransom, and summoned maidservants to "wash and anoint him."

Hector's body had been saved from desecration.

"so when the maids had bathed and anointed the body sleek with olive oil and wrapped it round and round in a braided battle-shirt and handsome battle-cape, then Achilles himself lifted it and placed it on the bier."

[Hector's bones would be placed in an ossuary, buried in the ground, covered with stones.]

[Priam left the body at night and brought it to Troy for a fitting burial.]

Cassandra was the first to see Priam coming with the bier in the wagon.

Three women led in the lament: Andromache, Hecuba, and Helen.

After elaborate preparations, they burned Hector's body at dawn.

**Mark 15:42 – 16:2**

When it was late, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a distinguished member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, dared to go to Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus.

Then Pilate was amazed that he might already be dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked them whether he had been dead for some time. [A woman earlier had anointed Jesus.] When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph.

[Jesus' rapid death and burial saved the corpse from desecration.]

Then Joseph brought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth and placed it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock.

He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.
Between these two passages, the parallels between Jesus’ and Hector’s burials are two numerous to be a coincidence.\(^{17}\) In the *Iliad*, Hector’s father pleads for the body of his son, just as in Mark, Joseph of Arimathea who has the same name as Jesus’ father, Joseph, pleads for his body.\(^{18}\) In fact, Joseph of Arimathea in later Christian traditions is even identified as Jesus’ uncle.\(^{19}\) As MacDonald (2000:155) notes, both figures begin their “journey at nightfall” and face risks in daring their journey.\(^{20}\) Both of the persons from

\(^{17}\) Admittedly, after all of the noted Odyssean parallels above, it is a bit awkward for this paper to focus on a parallel with Hector. As MacDonald (2000: 17) notes, “For Jesus’ crucifixion and burial, Mark abandoned the *Odyssey* and borrowed instead from Books 22 and 24 from the *Iliad*.” The objection may arise that MacDonald is too loosely applying Homeric archetypes. The death and burial scene, however, is the only major section where Mark breaks from the Odyssean motif. So while an exception to the rule, it is the only major exception and the strong parallels between the two passages is sufficient to identify a switch in the epics. Furthermore, it makes sense that the author of Mark would have to rely on a motif outside of the *Odyssey*, as Odysseus neither died nor was buried in the narrative, but Hector’s death and burial in the *Iliad* – one of the most famous scenes – provided a ready substitute. Furthermore, as MacDonald (2000: 124-130) notes in his chapter “Last Supper before Hades” the crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb is bracketed by a broader Odyssean motif of a journey to the underworld, so the parallels with Odysseus do not entirely stop.

\(^{18}\) Jesus’ father is not named as Joseph until the later Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but MacDonald (2000: 155) argues, “Mark surely could have known this tradition.” Another possibility for the name, noted by Carrier (pers. comm.), is a parallel with Joseph the Patriarch who in Gen. 40:4-6 asks Pharaoh for permission to bury Jacob (symbolizing Israel) in a cave tomb. Another possible parallel of the story is from Josephus in his autobiography (*Vita* 75), where he discusses how, with the permission of Titus, he had three men taken down who had been crucified after the fall of Jerusalem. Two of the men still died, but one recovered. Could “Josephus Bar Matthias” relate to Joseph of Arimathea? The order in which Josephus’ *Vita* and Mark were written is not certain and furthermore it is difficult to know whether any of the Gospel authors were familiar with Josephus. Mason (1992: 185-229) makes a good case for the author of Luke and Acts being familiar with Josephus, but he also acknowledges how Josephus as a source is uncertain. Mark using Josephus would be even more speculative. Nevertheless, the case for Mark’s parallel with Priam provides a sufficient literary inspiration, and parallels with Joseph the Patriarch in Genesis and Josephus could have been possibly have also influenced the author.

\(^{19}\) For a discussion of how this tradition emerged, see Dobson (1936: 15-19).

\(^{20}\) MacDonald (2000: 155) indicates how both passages have multiple variations of the Greek verb τολμάω (“to dare”).
whom they request the body – Achilles and Pontius Pilate – are surprised. Later three women go the tomb to care for the body.\textsuperscript{21} The end of the story, however, is reversed. Rather than die permanently like Hector, the author of Mark concludes his anti-Homeric novel by having Jesus instead resurrected. For the purposes of this analysis, I will agree that MacDonald’s interpretation is sound and that there are good reasons to believe that Mark modeled his empty tomb story on the \textit{Iliad} 24.

This paper, however, is not meant to merely repeat MacDonald’s observations, but to furthermore apply them to the historical issue of whether Joseph of Arimathea existed or was a literary invention of the author of Mark. Crossan has provided a plausible case for how the author of Mark derived the story from no earlier source and O’Collin and Kendall’s objections have questioned the likelihood that such a character would be an invention. Applying MacDonald’s interpretation of Joseph of Arimathea as a Priam figure, I will now answer O’Collin and Kendall’s (1994: 240-1) questions:

\textit{“Was Mark ready to create an entire episode, invent its central protagonist, give him a

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{21} As MacDonald (2000: 158) further points out, “The women who mourned the death of Hector in the \textit{Iliad} were his mother (Hecuba), his wife (Andromache), and a promiscuous beauty (Helen).” In Mark we have Mary, the mother of James, Jesus’ most intimate female follower Mary Magdalene, and Salome, who in later traditions is associate with promiscuity (cf. Clement of Alexandria \textit{Stromateis} 3.9.63). MacDonald (2000: 158) concedes, “Mark provides virtually no information concerning the identities of the three women at the tomb, and one cannot know how much the earliest evangelist knew of later traditions about these women.” Nevertheless, a plausible literary parallel exists for each of these women. Furthermore, the later gospel authors rearrange and freely alter the scene of the women at the tomb. Luke (24:10) adds Joanna and other women to the party. John (20:1) has only Mary Magdalene go, where she is the first person Jesus appears to at the tomb. Mark (16:1), of course, does not have Jesus appear to the women at the tomb and instead the women flee upon seeing a young man inside the tomb who proclaims Jesus’ resurrection. The conclusion to draw from this is that none of the authors are drawing from a historically remembered event and each change the narrative for their own narrative purposes.}
name and assign him an origin from a relatively obscure city?” As MacDonald has demonstrated, many of the episodes in Mark are derived from allusions to previous Homeric episodes. The invention of Joseph of Arimathea as an allusion to Priam, therefore, would not be unusual in such a context. The invention of the name “Joseph” makes sense as an allusion to a father figure. The origins of the city name is not answered by MacDonald’s hypothesis, but Richard Carrier (pers. comm.) theorizes that the name could very well be a pun on the Greek prefix ἀρι- (“best”) and μάθη, μάθησις, μάθημα, μάθητής (“teaching/disciple”) with the addition of the suffix -αία as a standard indicator of place. Hence, Joseph came from Ἄριμαθαία 22 (“the place of best doctrine”). The objection about Mark assigning Joseph to an obscure city can be answered by pointing out that there is no evidence outside of the New Testament for Arimathea ever being a historical city in the first place. 23 Accordingly, the city was quite possibly invented as a pun, very likely indicating that Joseph was the “best disciple” when all of Jesus’ other disciples had fled.

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22 A possible objection to this reading is that some manuscript variants have a rough breathing mark with Ἄριμαθαία. As Carrier (pers. comm.) notes, however: “There are few to no breathing marks in the original manuscripts (in Cod. Vat. breathing marks were added by another hand, possibly in the middle ages; Cod. Sin. by contrast has none, nor are any usually found in earlier papyri or even other early uncial). So when any editor gives this name a rough breathing mark, they are speculating (usually based on the assumption that the town “Ramathaim” is meant and the Hebrew definite article “ha” was mistaken as part of the name (hence, Ha-Ramathaim). The town is given a soft in some editions and a rough in others (ironically, in the Aland edition, it is strong in the text and soft in the appended dictionary). This is because some scholars are unwilling to speculate that “Ha-Ramathaim” was meant (as there are problems with that identification, as well as no definite reason to adopt it). Also, no rough breathing was retained in any Latin translations, so that Jerome just saw "ari-" rather than "hari-" and likewise the Bezae translator.”

23 Various modern guesses have been postulated for a historical location of Arimathea, some identifying the city as another name (noted above) for Ramathaim-Zophim in Ephraim, others with Ramlah in Dan or Ramah in Benjamin. As Hoover (2000: 133) notes, however, “the location of Arimathea has not (yet) been identified with any assurance; the various “possible” locations are nothing more than pious guesses or conjectures undocumented by any textual or archeological evidence.”
Accordingly, the episode, the protagonist, the name, and the city can all be explained by literary motives.

"Do the redactional changes introduced by Matthew and Luke show that these two evangelists found some special problem in the story of Joseph of Arimathea?" The author of Mark appears to have created an odd contradiction. In Mk 14:62 all of the members of the Sanhedrin vote to condemn Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea in Mk 15:43 is identified as a εὐσχήμων βουλευτής ("a prominent councilmember"), but as Carrier (pers. comm.) notes that the phrase can also mean "one who makes good decisions," which follows from the pun of "the place of best doctrine." Did the author of Mark realize that he had created a contradiction? If the author's motive had been literary rather than historical, then it is not hard to imagine that an unwitting error occurred in creating a figure "who makes good decisions" who also happens to be identified as a councilmember from the group that condemned Jesus. Nevertheless, the later gospel authors recognized a problem. The author of Luke (23:51) adds a redactional note that Joseph had not supported the decision to execute Jesus, and the author of Matthew (27:57) eliminates the contradiction altogether by instead describing Joseph as ἄνθρωπος πλούσιος ("a rich man").

So the redactions to this character show that his background was problematic: Mark likely invented a figure with authority and prestige like Priam, but the necessity of having the Sanhedrin condemn Jesus in the earlier chapter caused a contradiction that the later gospel authors had to correct.

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24 This also, as is discussed in the next paragraph, allowed the author of Matthew to draw an allusion to Isaiah 53:9 where it is said of the suffering servant was buried with a rich man.
“Is there anything historically so suspicious about Mark’s burial story centering on an ‘in between figure,’ someone ‘within the Jewish elite’ and ‘still connected with Jesus?’” This question is best rephrased to ask whether there would be any literary motive to invent an ‘in between figure’ who was ‘within the Jewish elite’ and yet ‘still connected with Jesus.’ The answer to all three of these attributes is ‘yes.’ The ‘in between’ figure is explained by the Priam motif, and his connection to Jesus is explained by the role of a father figure requesting burial. Why make Joseph of Arimathea a member of the Jewish elite? Part of the explanation could be that the author of Mark needed someone with enough social standing to persuade Pilate. Another element probably influencing his decision was a deliberate allusion to Isaiah 53:9 where it is said of the suffering servant: בְּמֹתָיו שִׁיר עָא-אֶתְו, קִבְרוֹ רְשָׁעִים אֶתוֹ ("he put his tomb among the wicked and with a rich man in death"). The Sanhedrin are the wicked who condemn Jesus, but Joseph – a prominent and, no doubt, wealthy man (as Matthew later adds) – buries Jesus in his tomb. These are clear literary inventions, connecting Jesus with the suffering servant motif in Isaiah. They are further coupled with the motif of Priam’s burial of Hector, making for a beautiful blend of earlier Jewish and Pagan literature. Nevertheless, each of these details can be shown to have a literary, rather than a historical, point of origin.

Accordingly, the objections to Crossan’s thesis can be explained through a literary analysis of Mark and the absence of an earlier source for the Joseph of Arimathea story prior to Mark could indicate that the author himself invented this episode and character. There are also theological, beyond purely literary, reasons for inventing the empty tomb account. One possibility, noted by Carrier (2005: 105), is that pre-Markan Christianity may have had a two-body, rather than a one-body, view of the resurrection, where “Christ’s
'soul' was taken up to heaven and clothed in a new body, after leaving his old body in the grave forever.” Even if this view was not ubiquitous among Christians prior to Mark, it need only belong to certain adherents or sects known to the author with whom he wished to dispute this theological view and substitute his own. There is certainly evidence that pre-Markan Christianity had a variety of diverse views on the Resurrection that the authors of the New Testament sought to influence and control through their writings. The apostle Paul, for example, in 1 Cor. 15:12 addresses a group of Christians in Corinth who deny that there is a post-mortem resurrection. This group appears to have had a third view of the resurrection, in which the resurrection occurs during this life, through the cleansing of the spirit, rather than through a post-mortem resurrection. Before the canonization of scripture and the establishment of church orthodoxy, early Christianity had a variety of views about Jesus, the resurrection, and the afterlife. The author of Mark likewise had his own view, and the empty tomb makes clear that this was a one-body view of the resurrection. Mark’s narrative indicates that Jesus left no shell behind, but had physically resurrected with the same body, hence the empty tomb.

If Mark invented the story, how could the author explain to his audience why they had never heard of it before? This problem is not greatly serious.25 As was discussed above,

25 Apologist William Craig (Strobel 1998: 282), for example, argues that the author “wouldn’t make up a specific member of a specific group, whom people could check out for themselves and ask about this.” But this objection is trivial. To begin with, the date of Mark’s composition agreed upon by scholars (c. 70-75 CE) would be after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (or, at the absolute earliest, during the siege of the city itself). Any such records would be destroyed or virtually impossible to access. Furthermore, as was discussed above, Mark’s audience was Greek speakers in foreign lands, the vast majority of whom could hardly be expected to drop their business and go searching for a lost record of which members were on the Sanhedrin. As was discussed earlier, the author of Mark himself may not have even known who the high priest had been, since the authors of
Christianity by the late 1st century CE was dispersed in many foreign lands outside of Palestine, many decades had elapsed after the events depicted in Mark, and early Christian writers regularly invented stories in forged epistles, the other Gospels – both canonical and uneconomical – and later Acts of the disciples. Nevertheless, an invention of the author could explain a problem that has long troubled interpreters of the Gospel: after the young man in the tomb proclaims Jesus' resurrection (Mk 15:5-8), why do the women run away in fear and tell no one? The answer could very well be for Mark's readers that the women did in fact tell no one, hence why the empty tomb story had not been heard before. Mark uses the women as silent witnesses to provide narrative space for a new detail about an empty tomb, which completed his narrative and conveyed his own theological message about Jesus' resurrection.

If Jesus was not buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, then what happened to his body? I do not mean to imply by this paper that there was no burial at all. It would be difficult to imagine faith in his resurrection emerging, if Jesus had remained on the cross. As Crossan (1976: 152) explains, however, “It is most probable that Jesus was buried by the same inimical forces that had crucified him and that on Easter Sunday morning those who

Matthew and Luke had to later specify that it was Caiaphas. Ultimately, the ‘people would have checked’ objection can be disregarded as highly improbable. The author of Mark (15:33) invented the sun going dark for three hours at midday and his readers apparently had no problem with this far more extraordinary creation. The invention of a symbolic character in a narrative pales by comparison.

26 For a good discussion of these inventions, particularly the forged epistles, see Ehrman's (2011) Forged: Writing in the Name of God.

27 The ending of Mark 16 troubled readers and scribes even in antiquity, as there are multiple redactions added on to the narrative between later manuscripts. Likewise, the authors of Matthew, Luke, and John felt the need to add post-mortem scenes to their own Gospels and not leave off their narratives, as Mark did, with the women running away.

28 Except, perhaps, under a two-body view of the resurrection, but that need not be speculated here.
knew the site did not care and those who cared did not know the site.” Crossan’s thesis remains strong that there is no pre-Markan tradition about the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, and the Apocryphon of James even demonstrates that there were variant traditions. The objection that it does not make sense for the author of Mark to invent a character like Joseph of Arimathea has been answered by applying MacDonald’s literary analysis of the Gospel and demonstrating that such an invention would be consistent with Mark’s anti-Homeric motifs elsewhere, as well as Jewish literary influences on his Gospel. Without the tomb existing, certainly no women found it empty, but likewise the presence of women on the third day can be explained by Homeric archetypes, eschatological symbolism, and the need of Mark to explain why the empty tomb story had never been heard before. Ultimately, the empty tomb is theological rather than historical: its place at the end of the first Gospel makes clear that Jesus is physically resurrected, with the same body that had died on the cross, and the absence of a corpse at his burial place is the proof.
Works Cited


