

## “ON THE THIRD DAY”: THE TIME FRAME OF JESUS’ DEATH AND RESURRECTION

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The three-day time frame of Jesus’ death and resurrection was a part of the earliest Christian preaching. It had a place in the kerygmatic formula that Paul quotes in 1 Cor 15:3–5, a four-line formula that is generally acknowledged to have originated in the very earliest years of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received,  
that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,  
and that He was buried,  
and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,  
and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.<sup>2</sup>

\* Editor’s note: Martin Pickup unexpectedly passed away shortly after submitting this piece for publication. This article reflects his interest and expertise in the Jewish background to the NT and in the early church’s proclamation of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. His family, friends, and many former students rejoice in the hope Marty defended with such skill in this article. “So also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor 15:22).

<sup>1</sup> Scholars across the theological spectrum acknowledge the earliness of this formula. Most assign it a date of no more than two to five years after Jesus’ crucifixion. See, e.g., K. Lake, *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1907) 37–43; J. J. Smith, “Resurrection Faith Today,” *TJ* 30 (1969) 403–4; G. Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 38; R. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 255; M. Goulder, “The Explanatory Power of Conversion Visions,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* (ed. P. Copan and R. Tacelli; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 98; H. Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000) 90; J. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 855; M. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010) 233–35, n. 140. Though some have argued a Hellenistic origin for the formula (e.g. H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* [trans. J. Leitch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975] 252–54), most believe it originated in Jerusalem; see W. Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989) 7–19; G. Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004) 42–43.

<sup>2</sup> Most scholars agree that the original formula comprised the four lines of vv. 3b–5; see, e.g., Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* 251–52; C. F. Evans, *Resurrection and the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1970) 43–46; R. Sider, “St. Paul’s Understanding of the Resurrection,” *NorT* 19 (1977) 132–34; J. Murphy-O’Connor, “Tradition and Redaction in 1 Cor 15:3–7,” *CBQ* 43 (1981) 582–89; M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal and Resurrection Immortality in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 9–11; R. C. Webber, “A Note on 1 Corinthians 15:3–5,” *JETS* 26 (1983) 265–69; G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 722–23; Craig, *Assessing the Evidence* 3–6; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* 35; A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 1188–89, 1203; J. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 541–42 (though Fitzmyer thinks the original formula ended with “appeared to Cephas”); Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus* 223–35, 318–29, n. 207. Some scholars argue that the original formula extended through v. 7 (sans Paul’s explanatory insertion in v. 6b); see, e.g., K. MacGregor, “1 Corinthians 15:3b–6a, 7 and the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus,” *JETS* 49 (2006) 225–34.

The importance of the phrase “on the third day” (τῆ ἡμέρᾳ τῆ τρίτῃ) is suggested by the fact that it is the only explicit time designation of the entire formula, and the four affirmations of the formula appear to be structured around this temporal framework.<sup>3</sup> The NT Gospels give similar prominence to the third-day aspect of Jesus’ resurrection, with all four Gospels claiming that, on several occasions, Jesus predicted he would be slain and rise again in connection with the third day.<sup>4</sup> Each evangelist says that Jesus was crucified and buried on a Friday (“preparation day”) and that his tomb was found empty on the following Sunday (“the first day of the week”)—i.e. three days later by inclusive reckoning.<sup>5</sup> Far from being a minor chronological detail that happened to get included in the kerygma,<sup>6</sup> the three-day time frame of Jesus’ death and resurrection was a key theme that was ensconced in the church’s earliest tradition.

Much of the scholarly discussion concerning this third-day motif has focused on why it found a place in the kerygmatic tradition.<sup>7</sup> Why would the earliest Christians claim that Jesus rose specifically on the third day of his death? The question naturally touches upon the historicity of the resurrection-day events. Many critics have argued that it is not necessary to think the kerygma’s reference to the third day

<sup>3</sup> The formula portrays the timing of the resurrection of Jesus (line 3) in relation to the day of his death (line 1). Since line 2 structurally goes with line 1, this suggests that the burial of Jesus is assigned to the same day as his death, which coincides with what Jewish burial practice would demand and what Mark 15:42–47 pars. report. Similarly, since line 4 structurally goes with line 3, this suggests that the appearances to Cephas and the twelve are assigned to the same day as his resurrection, which coincides with what Luke 24:34–36 and John 20:19 report. It would seem, therefore, that all of the events of the four-line formula are placed within a three-day time frame, with the death and burial assigned to day one, and the resurrection and appearances to Cephas and the twelve assigned to day three. This way of interpreting the formula is disputed, of course, as I discuss below.

<sup>4</sup> Note the following occasions where the evangelists present Jesus as foretelling his third-day resurrection or expressly highlighting the third-day motif: Matt 12:39–40; 16:21; 17:23; 20:17–19; 26:61; 27:40, 63–64; Mark 8:31; 9:30–31; 10:32–34; 14:58; 15:29; Luke 9:21–22; 13:32; 18:31–33; 24:7, 21–23, 46; Acts 10:40–41; John 2:19–21.

<sup>5</sup> Matt 27:62; 28:1; Mark 15:42; 16:2; Luke 23:54; 24:1; John 19:31, 42; 20:1. The “preparation day” (παρασκευῆ) was a Jewish idiom for Friday, the day before the Sabbath (Mark 15:42; Josephus *Ant.* 16.163; *Mart. Pol.* 7.1). For a critique of the mistaken view that Jesus was crucified on a Wednesday or Thursday, see H. Hoehner, “Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, Part IV: The Day of Christ’s Crucifixion,” *BSac* 131 (1974) 241–49.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the detail that the Lord’s Supper was established “on the night in which He was betrayed,” a time designation that found inclusion in the tradition Paul “received” and “delivered” (1 Cor 11:23). Though all four Gospels concur with it, none gives special significance to the fact that the betrayal and the supper took place on the same night.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913; trans. J. Seely; Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) 56–60; A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1914) 334–35; S. V. McCasland, “The Scriptural Basis of ‘On the Third Day,’” *JBL* 48 (1929) 124–37; B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 59–72; G. Dellings, “ἡμέρα,” *TWNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 2.948–50; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* 256; E. Bode, *The First Easter Morning* (AB 45; Rome, 1970) 110–26; Evans, *Resurrection* 47–50; H. McArthur, “‘On the Third Day,’” *NTS* 17 (1971) 81–86; G. O’Collins, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1973) 10–15; Sider, “Paul’s Understanding” 136–41; W. Craig, “The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus,” *NTS* 31 (1985) 39–67; Harris, *Raised Immortal* 11–12, 39–40; Fee, *First Corinthians* 726–28; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* 47; *Resurrection of Christ* 42, 71–72; Thiselton, *First Corinthians* 1195–97; Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus* 324–29.

stemmed from the discovery of the empty tomb three days after Jesus’ burial, and from initial sightings of the risen Lord on that day. Other generating factors could be proposed, such as Christian reflection on OT passages using three-day language,<sup>8</sup> ancient myths of gods rising in three days,<sup>9</sup> or Jewish theological concepts associated with the third day.<sup>10</sup> But each of these proposals has its own deficiencies, and as many scholars have pointed out, it is difficult to see how any of them can explain why the kerygma would include a chronological detail about Jesus rising on the third day unless some event(s) suggesting he rose on that day had occurred.<sup>11</sup>

A related issue is whether the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ predictions of resurrection are historical or *vaticinia ex eventu*.<sup>12</sup> Complicating the matter is the fact that Mark employs the phrase “after three days” (μετὰ τρεῖς ἡμέρας) when narrating these predictions, whereas Matthew and Luke follow the language of the kerygmatic formula and use “on the third day” (τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ and τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Commonly suggested passages are Hos 6:2 and Jonah 1:17; also Lev 23:11; 2 Kgs 20:5. See Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* 59–72; C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Collins, 1965) 76–78, 103; J. Wijngaards, “Death and Resurrection in Covenantal Context (Hos. 6:2),” *VT* 17 (1967) 226–39; McArthur, “On the Third Day” 81–86; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* 256; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* 47; idem, *Resurrection of Christ* 71–72; A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999) 50–52.

<sup>9</sup> See Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* 56–60; R. Carrier, “The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb,” in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave* (ed. R. Price and J. Lowder; Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005) 159; E. Fales, “Taming the Tehom: The Sign of Jonah in Matthew,” in *The Empty Tomb* 307–48. For a critique of this view, see A. Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background* (New York: Harper, 1964) 105–8; K. Lehmann, *Auferweckt am dritten Tag nach der Schrift* (Freiburg: Herder, 1969; online version: <http://www.freidok.uni-freiburg.de/volltexte/1293/>) 130–35; Bode, *First Easter* 110–11; T. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: Dying and Rising Gods in the Ancient Near East* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001) 214–15, 220–21.

<sup>10</sup> I refer to the following concepts discussed later in this article: (1) the idea that divine deliverance comes on the third day (see Lehmann, *Auferweckt am dritten Tag* 176–93; Bode, *First Easter* 119–26; McArthur, “On the Third Day” 84–86); (2) several ideas pertaining to death, often conflated by scholars: (a) that the decomposition of a corpse begins after the third day of death; (b) that the soul of a deceased person hovers over the body for three days; or (c) that death is not certain until three days have elapsed (see Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* 59; E. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* [London: Faber and Faber, 1947] 199–200; McCasland, “On the Third Day” 135–36; J. D. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* [San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1998] 548–49; Carrier, “Spiritual Body” 158–59; G. Vermes, *The Resurrection* [New York: Doubleday, 2008] 81, 154).

<sup>11</sup> See Sider, “Paul’s Understanding” 136–39; Craig, “Empty Tomb” 42–49; idem, “On Doubts about the Resurrection,” *Modern Theology* 6/1 (October 1989) 57–58; C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987) 109–10; Harris, *Raised Immortal* 11–12; Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection* 38–65; C. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) 531; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 321–22. There is no evidence for any of the above ideas in Jewish messianism, which argues against any being the essential impetus for the kerygma’s third-day motif.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus* 284–302. It should be noted that an actual prediction by Jesus of resurrection on the third day cannot explain, on its own, why the church would affirm that he rose on the third day. It is clear that the disciples were despondent over the death of Jesus and were not anticipating his return to life, despite any predictions he may have made. Only if some event occurred suggesting that he had, in fact, risen on the third day would their minds focus on a prediction he had made along those lines (Harris, *Raised Immortal* 12; Fee, *First Corinthians* 726).

<sup>13</sup> Mark 8:31 (= Matt 16:21; Luke 9:21–22); Mark 9:30–31 (= Matt 17:23); Mark 10:32–34 (= Matt 20:17–19; Luke 18:31–33).

Matthew also records Jesus saying on one occasion that, like Jonah, he would be “three days and three nights” in the earth (Matt 12:40). On the surface, these varied three-day phrases appear not to be equivalent demarcations of time. The Markan phraseology in particular seems to suggest that Jesus would rise after the completion of three days—i.e. on day four, which would conflict with the other three-day phrases, as well as with the chronology of Mark’s own resurrection narrative. Yet, based on the use of this phraseology in other ancient literature, many argue that Mark’s “after three days” is an idiom that is equivalent to “on the third day.”<sup>14</sup> A basic equivalence has also been argued for Matthew’s “three days and three nights.”<sup>15</sup> It seems, however, that an increasing number of scholars dismiss these arguments as unnecessary,<sup>16</sup> for they contend that the original sense of the three-day language in its varied forms was not literal at all. Ancient speakers sometimes used three days as an idiomatic way of indicating a brief, indefinite time.<sup>17</sup> On this basis, many scholars are willing to concede that Jesus did affirm he would rise from the dead in connection with three days, yet they understand him to have meant only that his resurrection—or perhaps the general resurrection of all saints—would occur *soon* after his death.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Note, e.g., Josh 3:2 (cf. 2:16) LXX; Josephus *Ant.* 7.280 (cf. 281); 8.214 (cf. 218); *Bib. Ant.* 11:2–3; *T. Job* 53:8; *4 Bar.* 9:13–14; cf. *Sem.* 8:1; 12:13. Matthew himself uses “after three days” in Matt 27:63–64, demonstrating that he considered it equivalent to “on the third day.” See Delling, “ἡμέρα” 2.948–50; V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (2d ed.; Macmillan, 1966) 378; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* 256; Bode, *First Easter* 109–10; McArthur, “On the Third Day” 85; Hoehner, “Chronological Aspects” 241–49; R. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 447–48; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 336–37.

<sup>15</sup> Note, e.g., Esth 4:16 (cf. 5:1); 1 Sam 30:12 (cf. v. 13); *Gen. Rab.* 56:1. See McArthur, “On the Third Day” 85; Hoehner, “Chronological Aspects” 241–49. This accords with the principle, made explicit in rabbinic literature, that part of a day is reckoned as a whole day (*y. Shab.* 9:3; *b. Naz.* 5b; *Pes.* 4a). Matthew appears to have considered the phrase “three days and three nights” to be equivalent to “after three days” and “on the third day,” as indicated by the fact that Matt 27:63 harks back to Matt 12:40 (Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* 122).

<sup>16</sup> Many scholars dismiss these arguments without critique or ignore them altogether; e.g. Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus* 296, 324–29; M. Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010) 471–72.

<sup>17</sup> See J. B. Bauer, “Drei Tage,” *Bib* 39 (1958) 354–58; Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* 61–63; M. L. Barré, “New Light on the Interpretation of Hosea VI 2,” *VT* (1978) 138–41; R. Gradwohl, “Drei Tage und der dritte Tag,” *VT* 47 (1997) 373–78; Proctor, “After Three Days” 418–23; Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus* 296, 327–29. Commonly suggested examples of this idiom are found in Josh 1:11; 2:16; 3:2; Hos 6:2; Esth 4:16; 5:1; Luke 13:32; Acts 25:1; 28:7, 12, 17; 2 Macc 5:14; 11:18; *Bib. Ant.* 11:2–3; 56:7; *T. Job* 31:4; *T. Sol.* 20:7; Josephus *Ant.* 7.280, 281; 8.214, 218; 8.408. Though several of these examples make perfectly good sense if they are understood literally, I do not dispute the potentially nonliteral use of three-day terminology to indicate a short time.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Taylor, *Mark* 378; Hooker, *Son of Man in Mark* 103, 114–15; Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* 61–63; C. K. Barrett, *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1967) 77; W. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 303; O’Collins, *Resurrection* 11–12; C. S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986) 343–44, 346–47; W. D. Davies and D. Allison Jr., *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–1997) 2.659–61; R. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (vol. 2; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 1477–78; B. Witherington III, *Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 242–43; C. Evans, “Did Jesus Predict His Death and Resurrection?,” in *Resurrection* (ed. S. Porter et al.; Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 91–97; idem, *Mark* 17–18; Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus* 295–96, 324–29.

Since the four Gospels present Jesus as rising on the actual third day of death,<sup>19</sup> those scholars who adopt a nonliteral understanding of his third-day language must explain when and why the church came to view these words in a literal sense. Some believe that an event on the third day—such as the discovery of the empty tomb—caused the nascent church to reinterpret Jesus’ words to mean resurrection in a literal three days.<sup>20</sup> This would mean that, from its inception, the kerygmatic formula employed the phrase “on the third day” in a literal sense. But those who deny the historicity of the empty tomb claim that the formula’s third-day language meant only that Jesus rose a short time after his death, and not until decades later was it reinterpreted as a literal reference to three days.<sup>21</sup> It seems that some scholars even press a nonliteral view of the formula’s third-day language to the point of saying that, originally, it had virtually no temporal significance at all. It was intended merely as a theological statement using the language of Hos 6:2 (“He will raise us up on the third day”) to connect the resurrection of Jesus with the eschatological resurrection of Israel.<sup>22</sup>

A nonliteral interpretation of the formula’s third-day language nullifies the temporal structure of the formula that seems to place all of its events within a precise three-day time frame. But getting rid of this three-day time frame facilitates the position of those scholars who want to affirm that, unlike the evangelists, the creators of the formula never intended to proclaim a physical resurrection of Jesus. Scholars of this bent tell us that the *postmortem* appearances to disciples were subjective visions of Christ in heaven rather than objective sightings of him on earth.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the formula’s reference to his resurrection is merely affirming that his spirit ascended to heaven, or that he continued to live on in a spiritual form, or within the hearts of believers—but not that his interred body arose.<sup>24</sup> The reference

<sup>19</sup> Technically, what the Gospels record is that Jesus’ tomb was found empty on the third day. The implication of the evangelists, however, is surely that Jesus’ prediction of a third-day resurrection was accurately fulfilled.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Evans, “Did Jesus Predict . . .?” 95; Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus* 328.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Christ* 42, 71–72; Casey, *Jesus* 471–72; Lindars, “Jesus Risen” 94–95.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* 47, 177; idem, *Resurrection of Christ* 42, 71–72; Evans, *Resurrection* 48–49; Lindars, “Jesus Risen” 93; Crossan, “Empty Tomb” 137.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., J. Robinson, “Jesus from Easter to Valentinus (or to the Apostles’ Creed),” *JBL* 101 (1982) 7–17; J. D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994) 87–88, 165–70; idem, *Who Killed Jesus?* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 202–4; M. Goulder, “The Baseless Fabric of a Vision,” in *Resurrection Reconsidered* (ed. G. D’Costa; Oxford: Oneworld, 1996) 48–61; idem, “Explanatory Power of Conversion-Visions” 86–103; R. Funk, *The Acts of Jesus: What Did Jesus Really Do?* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 465–66; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* 47–100, 173–79; idem, “Closing Response,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection* 150–53; idem, *Resurrection of Christ* 43–49, 153–82; D. Allison, Jr., *Resurrecting Jesus* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005) 269–99; Casey, *Jesus* 488–98. These visions are regarded as hallucinatory, though many consider the term hallucination to be pejorative and prefer the term vision.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* 103–5; A. Y. Collins, *The Beginning of the Gospel: Probing of Mark in Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 123–27; eadem, “The Empty Tomb in the Gospel according to Mark,” in *Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology* (ed. E. Stump and T. P. Flint; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) 111–14; M. Borg, “The Irrelevancy of the Empty Tomb,” in *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (ed. P. Copan; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 122–25; idem, “The Truth of Easter,” in *The Meaning of Jesus* (ed. M. Borg and N. T. Wright; San Francisco: HarperCol-

to his burial has nothing to do with the affirmation of his resurrection, for the purpose of the burial reference is to confirm the preceding affirmation of death, not imply that the grave was subsequently missing a corpse.<sup>25</sup>

Many critics say further that even if some of the earliest Christians did presume that their Lord rose physically and that his body no longer lay in the grave, they had no actual knowledge that such was the case.<sup>26</sup> In the days immediately following Jesus' burial, the disciples of Jesus were not in a position to investigate the gravesite (if they even knew its location), for they all had fled to Galilee after his arrest, and it was there, not in Jerusalem, where the first visions of the risen Christ occurred.<sup>27</sup> Only in the later decades of the first century, when the Church sought to emphasize the bodily nature of the general resurrection of saints, did stories begin to emerge claiming that, literally on the third day, Jesus' tomb was found empty and he began appearing to his disciples in Jerusalem. What the Gospels record, we are told, are late legendary tales, and the story of the empty tomb may even have originated in the imagination of Mark.<sup>28</sup> Many scholars argue further that the doctrine of the empty tomb must have been a late development in the Church or Paul would not have failed to use it in his refutation of the Corinthians who denied the future resurrection of physical bodies (1 Corinthians 15).<sup>29</sup>

lins, 1999) 130–35; M. Goulder, “Jesus’ Resurrection and Christian Origins: A Response to N. T. Wright,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3 (2005) 187–95; Carrier, “Spiritual Body” 105–231; Casey, *Jesus* 456–61; Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* 126–27, 163–65; idem, *Who Killed Jesus?* 208–10; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Christ* 177–80.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* 252, 254–55; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* 45–46; idem, “Closing Response,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection* 153; Crossan, *Birth of Christianity* 550; Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection* 87; Casey, *Jesus* 459.

<sup>26</sup> Gerd Lüdemann says that these Christians were not “sufficiently sophisticated” to recognize “that religious truths can never be understood literally.” He puts Paul in this category; the apostle’s Pharisaic background caused him to interpret the tradition of Jesus’ resurrection as a transformation of his physical body (*Resurrection of Christ*, 69–71, 96, 138, 177–80). See also B. Lindars, “Jesus Risen: Bodily Resurrection But No Empty Tomb,” *Theology* 89 (March 1986) 91–93; J. Crossley, “Against the Historical Plausibility of the Empty Tomb Story and the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus: A Response to N. T. Wright,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3 (2005) 171–78; Casey, *Jesus* 497–98; Crossan, “Empty Tomb” 136–38.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Lindars, “Jesus Risen” 93–94; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Christ* 36, 138–39, 173–78; J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 375; idem, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* 152–58.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., J. D. Crossan, “Empty Tomb and Absent Lord,” in *The Passion Mark: Studies on Mark 14–16* (ed. W. Kelber; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 135–52; idem, “Historical Jesus as Risen Lord,” in *The Jesus Controversy* (ed. J. D. Crossan et al.; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999) 7–45; Lindars, “Jesus Risen” 90–96; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* 109–18, 171–72; idem, “Second Rebuttal” and “Closing Response,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection* 61, 151, 153; idem, *Resurrection of Christ* 35–36, 50–52, 60–62, 177–82; Goulder, “Baseless Fabric” 55–59; Collins, “Empty Tomb” 114–31; eadem, “Response to Kretzmann,” in *Hermes and Athena* 151–55; D. Catchpole, *Resurrection People: Studies in the Resurrection Narratives in the Gospels* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000) 4–9; Carrier, “Spiritual Body” 155–65; Casey, *Jesus* 473–88. See also Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus* 299–337.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Lüdemann, “Opening Statement” and “Closing Response,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection* 44, 153; Hoover, “A Contest Between Orthodoxy and Veracity,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection* 130; Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection* 86–87; Casey, *Jesus* 459.

In short, the contention of many modern scholars is that it was the second generation of the church who first began to preach that Jesus rose in a physical sense. This position provides these scholars with a ready response to those who ask why the Jewish authorities never refuted the church’s claim by producing Jesus’ body. There was no reason for them to do so, it is said, because the nascent church was not proclaiming a physical resurrection or an empty tomb. By the time the church began to affirm these propositions decades later, Jesus’ place of interment was long forgotten or not easily located, and his highly decomposed corpse hardly identifiable.<sup>30</sup>

The plausibility of the entire reconstruction above depends to a large degree on whether it is true that the third-day language of the kerygmatic formula functioned originally in a nonliteral sense. The presence of any time-lag between Jesus’ death and resurrection is difficult for a nonphysical-resurrection view to explain, but it is especially difficult if the time lag is a literal three days.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, if the appearances to Cephas and the twelve also occurred on the third day, as the formula seems to imply, then the disciples could not have been in Galilee at the time; it was simply too far away.<sup>32</sup> The band of disciples must still have been in Jerusalem on the third day, which means that the Gospel accounts of disciples finding the tomb empty on the third day become historically plausible. This, then, would explain why the church assigned Jesus’ resurrection specifically to the third day. For those, therefore, who deny the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection, much depends on being able to give a nonliteral interpretation to the formula’s third-day language.

This is where proponents of this view have come short. One cannot deny that there are sufficient examples in ancient literature to show that a speaker’s reference to three days could mean, in some contexts, a brief, indefinite time—but whether it was in this sense that the formula spoke of resurrection on the third day is another matter. The real issue is this: In a context discussing a person’s death and burial, such as what we have in the formula, is a nonliteral sense the most reasonable way to understand a reference to three days? Most scholars fail to ask this question.

In addition to issues of historicity, there is a related question that also needs to be addressed. Why does the third-day motif receive the emphasis that it does in the gospel proclamation? Rather than being treated as a minor detail, the third-day aspect of Jesus’ resurrection is highlighted throughout the Gospels. This is a striking fact, particularly in light of the additional church tradition that Jesus rose “on the first day of the week” (Mark 16:2 pars.). Despite the prominence of this other time designation, one that caused Sunday to become the special day of Christian worship, the claim that Jesus rose “on the third day” continued to be emphasized as well. Such emphasis suggests that the early church saw special significance in the

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<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* 105; Hoover, “Contest,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection* 136–37. Hoover argues that the military devastation of Jerusalem in AD 70 would have made finding Jesus’ grave virtually impossible.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, *Resurrection of the Son* 322; Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus* 324.

<sup>32</sup> Even if the disciples had traveled on the Sabbath day, they could not have arrived in Galilee in just three days; see Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection* 53–54; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Christ* 36.

three-day time frame of Jesus' death and resurrection. But what was that significance?

Some suggest that the church saw the third-day motif as a powerful example of Jesus' fulfillment of OT Scripture, a point of emphasis in the kerygmatic formula,<sup>33</sup> as well as the Gospels.<sup>34</sup> Yet this raises the knotty problem of trying to determine what OT passages the church had in view. Though it is likely that the formula intends "the Scriptures" in a generic sense,<sup>35</sup> one would presume that the nascent church had one or more specific passages in mind that it saw as foretelling Jesus' third-day resurrection. As noted above, Hos 6:2 is often suggested, as is Jonah 1:17.<sup>36</sup> The former passage is interpreted of the general resurrection in the rabbinic literature and perhaps also in the *Haẓon Gabriel* inscription,<sup>37</sup> but it is never cited anywhere in the NT.<sup>38</sup> The latter passage is cited only in Matthew's Gospel, which suggests to many (particularly in light of its omission in the Lukan parallel) that its connection with Jesus' resurrection may have been a late development.<sup>39</sup> It is also strange that the early apostolic sermons in the book of Acts cite neither of these passages—nor any other OT text containing three-day language—when offering

<sup>33</sup> Though it is grammatically possible for the phrase "according to the Scriptures" in 1 Cor 15:4 to modify only the words "He was raised" (see B. Metzger, "A Suggestion Concerning the Meaning of 1 Cor 15:4b," *JTS* 8 [1957] 118–23; Hays, *First Corinthians* 256), it seems better to understand it as modifying "on the third day" or, better still, the entire unit of thought: "He was raised on the third day." This is because of the grammatical parallel with 1 Cor 15:3b, as well as the thematic parallel with Luke 24:46; see C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 340; Bode, *First Easter* 116–17; Fee, *First Corinthians* 727. Thus, "on the third day" is at least a part of what is "according to the Scriptures."

<sup>34</sup> Luke 24:45–46. Cf. the use of δεῖ ("it is necessary") in the accounts of Jesus' predictions of passion and resurrection (Mark 8:31 pars.). The implication is that the third-day resurrection was a part of the plan of God foretold by the OT (R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982] 53).

<sup>35</sup> Thiselton, *First Corinthians* 1195; Wright, *Resurrection of the Son* 320–21.

<sup>36</sup> See McCasland, "On the Third Day" 129–30; C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Collins, 1965) 76–78, 103; Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* 59–72; Dellling, "ἡμέρα" 2.949; McArthur, "On the Third Day" 85–86; C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Collins, 1965) 76–78, 103; Wijngaards, "Death and Resurrection" 238–39; France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* 53–55; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* 47; Evans, *Mark* 17–18; Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians* 458–59.

<sup>37</sup> Hos 6:2 is never interpreted messianically by the rabbis, but it is interpreted of the end-time resurrection of saints in *y. Ber.* 5.2; *y. Sanh.* 11.6; *b. Sanh.* 97a; *b. Rosh. HaSh.* 31a, as well as in *Tg. Neb.* Hos 6:2 (though the targum omits the reference to three days.) On the *Haẓon Gabriel* inscription, see A. Yardeni and B. Elizur, "Document: A First-Century B.C.E. Prophetic Text Written on a Stone, First Publication," *Cathedra* 123 (2007) 155–66; I. Knohl, "By Three Days, Live: Messiahs, Resurrection, and Ascent to Heaven in *Haẓon Gabriel*," *JR* 88 (2008) 147–58; idem, *Messiahs and Resurrection in the "Gabriel Revelation"* (London: Continuum, 2009). Knohl's view that this inscription refers not to Hos 6:2, but to the supposed resurrection of Messiah ben Joseph is quite dubious; see S. Stern [Book Review of *Messiah and Resurrection in 'The Gabriel Revelation'*], *Culture and Religion* 11 (2010) 98–100. See also J. Collins, "A Messiah before Jesus?" and "An Essene Messiah? Comments on Israel Knohl, *The Messiah before Jesus*," in *Christian Beginnings and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. J. Collins and C. Evans; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 15–44.

<sup>38</sup> Tertullian (*Adv. Marcionem* 4.43.1–2; *Adv. Iudaeos* 13.2) is the earliest writer to connect Hos 6:2 with Jesus.

<sup>39</sup> See Matt 12:39–40; 16:4. If Jonah 1:17 had been the primary OT passage that the church saw fulfilled by Jesus' third-day resurrection, we would expect the kerygmatic formula to use that passage's peculiar phraseology, "three days and three nights" (McCasland, "On the Third Day" 129–30).

scriptural support for Jesus’ resurrection. The main OT passage to which the Acts sermons appeal is Psalm 16, a text that contains no reference to three days, but speaks of God not allowing his holy one to undergo the decomposition of death (Acts 2:22–36; 13:16–41).

Because of the above difficulties, many scholars turn to Jewish theological concepts to explain the early church’s emphasis on the third-day motif. Most point to the theological principle that divine deliverance comes within a period of three days.<sup>40</sup> This maxim is affirmed in the rabbinic literature, as in the following statement: “The Holy One, blessed be he, never leaves the righteous in distress for more than three days” (*Gen. Rab.* 91:7; cf. 56:1). The rabbis demonstrate the principle by listing several OT passages that mention providential events occurring on the third day. Such a principle, however, is never expressly taught in Scripture (neither OT nor NT), and we cannot be sure that it existed earlier than the rabbinic period. Thus, while the idea of associating divine deliverance with the third day could date to the first century and may have facilitated the Christian message about Jesus rising in three days,<sup>41</sup> it does not seem capable of adequately explaining the significance that the NT gives to this time frame.

I believe that the three-day time frame of Jesus’ death and resurrection is more directly related to another Jewish concept—viz. the Jewish understanding that the decomposition of a corpse begins after the third day of death.<sup>42</sup> I suggest that the kerygma’s third-day motif focused attention on the fact that the risen Christ did not undergo the decay that besets the bodies of deceased human beings and symbolizes their sinfulness. By raising him from the dead before his body could begin to decompose, God demonstrated the personal righteousness of Christ and the fact that he died not for his own sins, but for the sins of others. I believe this is the primary significance that the early church saw in the third-day motif when it produced the kerygmatic formula.

In a sense, my proposal is not new; a possible connection between the timing of corpse decay and Jesus’ third-day resurrection has been suggested before.<sup>43</sup> But

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Lehmann, *Auferweckt am dritten Tag* 176–93; McArthur, “On the Third Day” 84–85; Bode, *First Easter* 119–26; Lane, *Mark* 302–3; P. Lapede, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (trans. W. Lins; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1982) 91–2; Fee, *First Corinthians* 727–28; Vermes, *The Resurrection* 81. For a critique of Lehmann’s argumentation and a defense of the view that the third-day motif was prompted by the discovery of the empty tomb on the third day, see Craig, “Empty Tomb” 45–49. Yet even Craig believes that the concept of divine deliverance on the third day explains the kerygma’s use of third-day terminology to depict that event.

<sup>41</sup> As Thiselton observes, this theory does not necessarily compete with other theories (*First Corinthians* 1197).

<sup>42</sup> Not by the third day or in three days, as some scholars have wrongly stated the matter; e.g. Thiselton (*First Corinthians* 1197), who cites C. Wolff, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, THKNT 7 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1996) 364–68; J. Lowder, “Historical Evidence and the Empty Tomb Story,” in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave* (ed. R. Price and J. Lowder; Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005) 289.

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* 58–59; M. Goguel, *La foi à la résurrection de Jésus dans le christianisme primitif* (Paris: Leroux, 1933) 167–69, cited in Bode, *First Easter* 112–13; Metzger, “The Meaning of 1 Cor 15:4b” 122; D. Hill, “On the Third Day,” *ExpTim* 78 (1966–67) 266–67; O’Collins, *The Resurrection* 13–14; Thiselton, *First Corinthians* 1197 (citing Wolff, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* 364–68).

this suggestion has not had many advocates.<sup>44</sup> There are, in my judgment, two reasons for this. First, the rabbinic traditions that speak of decay beginning after the third day of death have been poorly analyzed, with the result that many people think these traditions affirm a Jewish belief in the incompleteness and potential impermanence of death for the first three days—none of which fits well with the gospel claim regarding the miraculous resurrection of Jesus. But, as I will show below, all of this stems from a misreading of the rabbinic documents. Secondly, scholars tend to consider a connection between the third-day motif and corpse decay only in the midst of debates about whether such a concept could explain, on its own, why the kerygma affirmed that Jesus rose specifically on the third day. It cannot bear that burden, and I make no claim that it can. As I stated above, the presence of the third-day motif in the early kerygma seems impossible to explain apart from some historical event indicating that Jesus rose on that particular day. But this does not mean that Jewish views regarding postmortem decomposition might not explain the significance the early church saw in this third-day chronology. For these reasons, I believe this matter deserves a fresh look.

In the following pages, I will examine data indicating that the early kerygmatic formula of 1 Cor 15:3–5 implied that Christ experienced no bodily decay when it said that he rose “on the third day.” The creators of the formula, therefore, intended this language literally. As I will show, this interpretation best explains the significance of the third-day motif in the church’s kerygma. It also has profound implications for the previously mentioned issues that entangle the debate over the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection.

## II. RABBINIC STATEMENTS ABOUT CORPSE DECAY

1. *Traditions in fifth-century documents.* A common collection of traditions pertaining to the decomposition of a corpse find inclusion in rabbinic documents of the fifth century—viz. the Jerusalem Talmud, Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah.<sup>45</sup> The following excerpt is exemplary.<sup>46</sup>

*Leviticus Rabbah 18:1*

G. R. Abba b. R. Pappi and R. Joshua of Sikhnin in the name of R. Levi: “After three days [in the grave] a person’s belly bursts open and erupts into the mouth and says [to the person], ‘Here is what you stole, grabbed, and put into me!’”

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<sup>44</sup> Most current scholars give scant attention to the possibility that the third-day motif is associated with the timing of corpse decay. Dale Allison Jr., for example, never mentions it when listing possible explanations of the third-day motif (*Resurrecting Jesus* 231–32), and Michael Licona relegates it to a footnote (*Resurrection of Jesus* 329, n. 208).

<sup>45</sup> See *y. Moed Q.* 3:5; *y. Yeb.* 16:3; *Gen. Rab.* 65:20; 73:5; 100:7; *Lev. Rab.* 18:1; 33:5; see also *b. Shab.* 151b.

<sup>46</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the English translations of rabbinic works quoted in this article are those of Jacob Neusner. They are form-analytical in nature, with capital letters demarcating distinct units of thought.

- H. R. Haggai in the name of R. Isaac finds proof for that proposition from the following verse: “And I will spread dung on your faces, the dung of your sacrifices” (Mal. 2:3)—even the dung of your sacrifices.
- I. Bar Qappara said, “For three days the spirit of deep mourning seizes the mourner. Why? Because the features of the deceased’s face still are to be discerned.”
- J. “For it has been taught [in the Mishnah, m. Yeb. 16:3:] ‘They adduce evidence as to a corpse’s identity only from the features of the face, including the nose, and they give testimony only within three days [of the deceased’s death].’”

This text is describing the outward, visible effects of the early processes of corpse decomposition during what modern forensic biologists call the *bloat stage*. At death, enzymes within the body are released, causing cells to digest themselves and chemicals from stomach acids and tissues (*autolysis*). Initially, no outward sign of decomposition is readily observable. But the decaying tissues release green substances and gases, eventually discoloring the body and causing it to bloat after a few days. Fluid oozes from the mouth and nostrils, and there is a terrible odor caused by gases produced from bacterial metabolism (*putrefaction*). All of these factors drastically alter the appearance of the deceased’s face and body. Depending upon climate and other conditions, these visible signs of decomposition are clearly manifest four to six days after death.<sup>47</sup>

The above rabbinic text interprets these physical processes of decay from a theological perspective. It considers the filth exuding from the corpse of a deceased human being to be divine recompense for the person’s sin, and it interprets the words of Mal 2:3 midrashically so as to apply to this phenomenon. What is particularly noteworthy for our purpose is the fact that the text says this visible process of decay begins after three days have passed.<sup>48</sup> At that point, the visage of the deceased becomes so altered as to be unrecognizable and, for this reason, it is said that a mourner’s most intense grief can begin to subside after the third day. It is curious that these rabbinic traditions repeatedly speak of corpse decay in relation to the initial three days of death, yet they make it clear that decay does not begin during those three days, but on the day afterward. One wonders why the rabbis do not simply say that decay begins on the fourth day. The most logical explanation is that they are considering the onset of decay from the perspective of Jewish mourners who, during the first three days of a loved one’s death, would enter the tomb to be near and tend the body. This practice is well-documented; it paralleled Greek custom and was the special duty of female mourners. The third day, in particular, was

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<sup>47</sup> A. Gunn, *Essential Forensic Biology* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2006) 11–12; M. Clark, M. Worrell, and J. Pless, “Postmortem Changes in Soft Tissues,” in *Forensic Taphonomy: The Postmortem Fate of Human Remains* (ed. W. Haglund and M. Sorg; Danvers, MA: CRC, 1997) 152–60.

<sup>48</sup> From a modern scientific standpoint, decomposition begins at a cellular level a few minutes after death (Gunn, *Forensic Biology* 8–9). But when ancient Jews talked about decomposition, they were speaking of the visible, drastic changes in a corpse that altered its appearance and quickly made the person unrecognizable.

a standard day for such visits to a tomb.<sup>49</sup> This practice could not continue in the days immediately following because of the onset of corpse decay with its putrid stench and grotesque marring of the face and body. The third day, therefore, was the last day a tomb could be entered before decomposition of the corpse made it infeasible to do so.<sup>50</sup>

The idea that decomposition begins after the third day of death is a uniform concept throughout the rabbinic documents. In the following excerpt from the Jerusalem Talmud, we observe the same collection of traditions that we saw above—as well as an oft-cited additional unit of material.

*Y. Moed Qatan 3:5 (82b)*

- D. ... Bar Qappara has said, “Mourning retains its power over the mourner for only three days.”
- E. R. Abba son of R. Pappi, R. Joshua of Sikhnin in the name of R. Levi: “For the first three days after death, the soul flutters over the body, thinking that she will return to it. When she sees that the appearance of the corpse deteriorates, she leaves the body and goes her way.”
- F. After three days the belly explodes over the face and says to the deceased, “Here is what you have stolen and seized and given to me.”
- G. R. Haggai in the name of R. Josiah proves that proposition from the following verse of Scripture: “[Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and] spread dung upon your faces, the dung of your offerings [and I will put you out of my presence]” (Mal 2:3).
- H. At that moment: “He feels only the pain of his own body, and he mourns only for himself” (Job 14: 22).

This text (at E.) includes an imaginative depiction of the soul of a deceased person hovering over its body for three days, and departing only when decay sets in after the third day.<sup>51</sup> The underlying principle here is the biblical idea of death as the separation of the spirit from the body (Eccl 12:7; 3:21; Job 34:14; cf. Jas 2:26).

<sup>49</sup> See especially K. Corley *Maranatha: Women's Funeral Rituals and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) 23–25, 44–46, 115, 145, n. 32; cf. *Sem.* 8:1; Mark 16:1 pars. See also D. Zlotnick, *The Tractate “Mourning”* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966) 11–12; W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1985) 194; N. J. Richardson, “Early Greek Views about Life after Death,” in *Greek Religion and Society* (ed. P. Easterling and J. Muir; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 53.

<sup>50</sup> Aromatic ointments and spices were a part of the Jewish preparation of a body for burial, and these would help mask the stench of decomposition. Even so, it seems unlikely that mourners would have entered a tomb in the days immediately following the third day (i.e. during the bloat stage of decomposition) when putrefaction was at its most offensive point (cf. John 11:39). Note also *Sem.* 8:1 (to be discussed below) which places a three-day limit on the inspection of an interred body lest one appear to be engaging in “heathen practice.” See Zlotnick, *Mourning* 11–12.

<sup>51</sup> The idea of the souls of the dead remaining near their corpses for a period of time before departing is known in other cultures as well (Garland, *Greek Way of Death* 38–41). There does not seem to be a consistent view of such matters among Jewish sources. Sirach appears to speak of the soul of a deceased person not departing until the time of burial, which is said to take place after mourners have grieved for one or two days (Sir 38:16–23). Some of the rabbis speak of the soul departing the body at the completion of seven days of mourning, or when the flesh has completely decomposed leaving only the bones, i.e. about twelve months (*Lev. Rab.* 18:1; *b. Shab.* 152a). On the other hand, *T. Job* 52.6–12 portrays the soul of Job departing his body and going to heavenly glory immediately after death.

This separation is considered a difficult task for the deceased person’s spirit, one that the spirit is reluctant to accept until it sees decay begin to destroy the body after the third day. The entire passage is a midrash on Job 14:20–22 (cited at H.), which records Job’s lament to God about the calamity of a human being’s death: “You change his countenance and send him away . . . . He feels but the pain of his own body and mourns only for himself [lit: ‘his soul mourns over him’].”<sup>52</sup> The midrash treats the words of Job 14:20 as a reference to corpse decay and the words of 14:22 as a reference to the separation of the spirit from the body. The idea that the dead mourn their own passing and long to return to life is suggested by the text of Job itself, which can be read as if a dead man is mourning for himself just as his surviving loved ones would do.<sup>53</sup> The idea that the spirits of the dead hover over their bodies is derived from Job’s words, “His soul mourns over him” (14:22). Perhaps this midrash offered a measure of comfort to Jewish mourners who wanted to keep entering the tombs of their recently interred loved ones to continue to be near them, but had to suspend this practice after the third day because of the onset of decay. Mourners needed to know that, for the same reason, the spiritual presence of their loved one was also no longer at the tomb after the third day.

Because of this rabbinic tradition, modern readers tend to consider the Jewish concept of corpse decay only in conjunction with that of the hovering soul. This is unwarranted since the two concepts are only marginally connected in the text. (The emergence of decay is what prompts the soul to give up hope of returning to the body; otherwise, there is no connection between the two ideas.) The problem increases when readers misconstrue the hovering-soul tradition itself. Several wrong conclusions must be avoided. First, some readers may surmise that the image of the hovering soul was a way of depicting the state of a terminally ill person who was near death or comatose, yet still alive. The context makes it clear, however, that the text is not addressing that situation, but the phenomenon occurring whenever someone has actually died.

Secondly, the text is not saying that the spirit of a deceased person affects the timing of decomposition by staying close to the body for three days—as if decay refrains from setting in as long as the spirit remains near. The text states just the opposite: Decay of the body begins first and then the spirit, having seen this, departs. There is no causal connection between the spirit’s proximity to the corpse and the onset of decomposition.

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<sup>52</sup> Job 14:22 is expressly connected with the hovering-soul tradition in *Gen. Rab.* 100:7.

<sup>53</sup> Commentators debate whether Job 14:20–22 describes a dead person as sentient and feeling pain during the process of decay (and if so, if the language is intended metaphorically), or whether the text merely depicts the discomfort of one who is near death; see M. Pope, *Job* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 111; R. Gordis, *The Book of Job* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978) 152–53; E. Dhorme, *Job* (trans. H. Knight; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984) 205–7; D. Clines, *Job 1–20* (Dallas: Word, 1989) 335–36; M. Eiseemann, *Job* (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1994) 146. It is clear that the rabbinic midrashist reads the biblical text as referring to one who is already dead and literally feeling pain during decomposition. See also *b. Sanh.* 47b; *b. Ber.* 18b; D. Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Routledge, 2000) 83, 97–116.

A third misreading of the text is particularly troubling because of how commonly it occurs and how consequential it can be. Many readers have concluded from this rabbinic tradition that Jews must have believed that death was incomplete until three days passed and that, because the soul was still near the body, it was possible for a dead person to come back to life during this period. One often hears that the reason why Jewish mourners visited the tomb of a loved one for the first three days of death was because they hoped to find that a resurrection had occurred; yet once three days elapsed, they realized that their loved one's spirit had departed, making a return to life impossible. David Kraemer, for example, gives the following explanation of Jewish views of death in light of this rabbinic tradition: "When three days have passed ... death is irreversible; until that point, it is always possible that the soul will find its way back into the body."<sup>54</sup> G. M. Landes says that Jews believed "death is permanent only after a body has shown no signs of animation for a period of three days, the idea being that until that time had elapsed, the soul was conceived as still lingering near the individual, encouraging the hope of revival."<sup>55</sup> This same understanding prompts Craig Evans to suggest that the reason why Jesus waited four days before raising Lazarus (John 11:1–44) was to ensure that his mourners had given up hope for his return to life: "Thus, when Jesus arrives at the tomb of Lazarus, despair has reached its lowest point. There is now, even with the arrival of Jesus, absolutely no hope of recovery: the body is dead (and has begun to stink; cf. v. 39) and the soul has departed .... Seen in the light of these popular assumptions, Jesus' ability to raise Lazarus, dead for four days, would have been viewed as astounding."<sup>56</sup>

This is not a correct understanding of the rabbinic tradition at hand. Yes, the tradition portrays the soul of a deceased person thinking that a return to the body is possible. But the text never says that death is truly reversible or that mourners themselves think their loved one may come back to life during those three days. The text is simply depicting the personal turmoil of death for the one who dies; it is not affirming a real hope of imminent resurrection. Nothing here suggests that

<sup>54</sup> Kraemer, *Meanings of Death* 84; cf. pp. 21, 125. Kraemer acknowledges that the hovering-soul tradition may indicate that death was indefinite only as far as the deceased's soul was concerned (p. 83), but with no supporting evidence he extrapolates that the mourners themselves shared this view. As a result, Kraemer suggests that the reason Jewish authorities in Matthew ask for the tomb of Jesus to be guarded for three days is not only to prevent his disciples from stealing the body, but in case Jesus' spirit managed to reenter it: "Thus, to assure that Jesus not reawaken to life—whether in fact or by ruse—guards would have to be posted until the third day. After that time, 'everyone knows' that such a reawakening is impossible" (p. 84).

<sup>55</sup> G. Landes, "The 'Three Days and Three Nights' Motif in Jonah 2:1," *JBL* 86/4 (1967) 446–47. Numerous scholars appear to draw this same conclusion; e.g. Bode, *First Easter* 113; Harris, *Raised Immortal* 11; R. Carrier, "Jewish Law, the Burial of Jesus, and the Third Day," <http://www.infidels.org/kiosk/article125.html>.

<sup>56</sup> C. Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003) 14–15; see also C. Evans and N. T. Wright, *Jesus, the Final Days: What Really Happened?* (ed. T. Miller; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 45–46; cf. D. Allison Jr., *Testament of Abraham* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003) 402. The likely reason why Jesus is said to have waited till the fourth day to raise Lazarus is to preclude anyone from claiming that Lazarus had not really died, but was mistakenly buried alive. It also distinguishes the nature of Lazarus's resurrection from that of Jesus' resurrection.

Jewish mourners thought of death as a potentially impermanent state until three days passed.

Perhaps what has facilitated this misunderstanding is a tradition recorded in *Semaḥot*, one of the minor tractates of the Talmud.<sup>57</sup> The passage in question speaks of Jewish mourners returning to the tombs of loved ones during the first three days of interment in hopes of finding them alive.

One may go out to the cemetery for three days to inspect the dead for a sign of life, without fear that this smacks of heathen practice. For it happened that a man was inspected after three days, and he went on to live twenty-five years; still another went on to have five children and died later (*Sem.* 8.1).<sup>58</sup>

Contrary to what some have said,<sup>59</sup> this text is not talking about dead persons returning to life. It is talking about mourners who worry that an interred loved one might only have been comatose and thus buried alive! Such a concern was not uncommon in antiquity. It is one of the reasons why the Greco-Roman world customarily laid out corpses for observation before burial, just in case there might be discernible signs of life.<sup>60</sup> The *Semaḥot* passage reveals the same concern among Jews. Yet, because Jewish halakhah normally required burial on the same day as death,<sup>61</sup> mourners had to enter the tomb for three days to check the body for signs of life. So the problem of premature burial is being addressed in the *Semaḥot* passage; resurrection is not under consideration. Nor does the text refer to the recovery of a mistakenly buried person as a “resurrection.”

Even scholars who recognize that *Sem.* 8:1 is talking about premature burial sometimes make the mistake of connecting it with the aforementioned hovering-

<sup>57</sup> *Semaḥot* (i.e. *Evel Rabbati*) could date to the late third century (see D. Zlotnick, *Mourning* 1–9), but most scholars assign it to the middle of the eighth century (see H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991] 249). Its traditions, of course, go back much earlier.

<sup>58</sup> The translation comes from Zlotnick (*Mourning* 11), but with the variant reading “three days” instead of “thirty days.” In view of the stated purpose for these visits to the tomb, “three days” seems the more logical reading and most scholars adopt it. Once decomposition set in, the reality of the person’s death could no longer be questioned; see S. Safrai, “Home and Family,” in *The Jewish People in the First Century* (ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1976) 2.784–85; T. Longstaff, “The Women at the Tomb: Matthew 28:1 Re-examined,” *NTS* 27 (1981) 280–81. Even Zlotnick acknowledges the logic in regarding “three days” as the original reading (*Mourning* 135, n. 1).

<sup>59</sup> See Carrier, “Jewish Law,” <http://www.infidels.org/kiosk/article125.html>. In a subsequent article, Carrier appears to have corrected his misunderstanding (“Why I Don’t Buy the Resurrection Story,” [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard\\_carrier/resurrection/2.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/resurrection/2.html)). For a proper analysis of *Sem.* 8:1, see Zlotnick, *Mourning* 11.

<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of this important funerary rite (the *prothesis*), see Garland, *Greek Way of Death* 21–31; W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1985) 192.

<sup>61</sup> Deut 21:23; Tob 1:17; 2:4; Mark 5:35–38; Acts 5:6–10; *J. W.* 4.5.2; *m. Sanh.* 6:4–5; *Sem.* 1:5; see B. McCane, “Where No One Had Yet Been Laid,” in *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (NTTS 28.2; ed. B. Chilton and C. Evans; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998) 438–39. The Mishnah allowed an exception if the reason for delaying the burial was so adequate provisions could be acquired to properly honor the deceased (*m. Sanh.* 6:5; cf. *b. Sanh.* 47a). The Law of Moses mandated that executed criminals had to be buried on the same day (Deut 21:22–23).

soul tradition, as if the same situation were under discussion in both texts.<sup>62</sup> But as we observed, the tradition of the hovering soul is talking about the spirit of a person who is actually dead hovering over the body; a comatose situation like that of *Sem. 8:1* is not in view. Nor does *Semaḥot* suggest that the soul of someone in a near-death state leaves the body and begins to hover over it. The only similarity between these two rabbinic texts is that both refer to three days. But the reason why they do is because that was the time when one could be in a tomb before decomposition of the corpse began.

Once we understand the above rabbinic documents correctly, it becomes evident that there is nothing in ancient sources to support the notion of a Jewish belief that death was incomplete or reversible up until the third day.<sup>63</sup> Yet this misunderstanding has contributed to a dismissal of the suggestion that the timing of Jesus' resurrection was connected to the timing of decay. Scholars wrongly presume that the point of such a connection would be to signify the completeness of Jesus' death before his resurrection. Any such connection, they say, would require Jesus to have been raised on the fourth day, not the third; or it would imply that his resurrection was possible only within the initial three days of death, an idea obviously contrary to the gospel's presentation of the power of God and the nature of the general resurrection of saints at the end of time.<sup>64</sup> As we have seen, however, such objections stem from a faulty interpretation of the rabbinic passages.

1. *Traditions in the Mishnah (c. AD 200)*. The discussions of *postmortem* decay in the rabbinic documents of the fifth century build upon the halakhic treatment of this subject in the Mishnah, the earliest rabbinic document. The relevant material is in *Yebamot*, a tractate devoted to the issue of levirate marriage and a wife's ability to remarry after her husband dies. Chapters 10–16 discuss halakhic issues surrounding the dissolution of the marital bond, with chapters 15–16 specifically addressing the severing of the marital bond by the death of the husband. This required that death be substantiated rather than merely presumed to have occurred, and it required the identity of the deceased to be verified so that the man's wife could be legally classified as a widow with the right to remarry. (Otherwise, the man is regarded as legally alive and the marriage as still in effect. The wife is an *agunah*, still "bound" to him. If she remarries, she is considered adulterous, and any children she bears are illegitimate.) The means of verification is the testimony of witnesses who have known the deceased and can reliably identify his corpse. This identification, it is said, must

<sup>62</sup> See, e.g., Longstaff, "The Women at the Tomb" 280, n. 17; Allison, *Testament of Abraham* 402; idem, *Resurrecting Jesus* 232, n. 131; Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus* 329, n. 208.

<sup>63</sup> The Synoptic Gospels give further evidence that Jews did not hold such a belief. In the pericope of the raising of Jairus' daughter, the messengers bringing news of the girl's death clearly regard it as a permanent state, despite the fact that she had died that very day (Mark 5:35, 38–40 pars.). Likewise, the mourners at the house have no doubt about the certainty and irreversibility of the girl's death, as indicated by their laughter when Jesus says that she is only sleeping. Though the child is clearly within the first three days of death, the text gives no indication that her family and friends entertain the notion of a window of opportunity during which she might come back to life.

<sup>64</sup> See, e.g., Dellling, "ἡμέρα" 2.949; Bode, *First Easter* 112–13; Evans, *Resurrection* 49–50; Harris, *Raised Immortal* 11; Craig, "Empty Tomb" 44.

take place within three days of death so that decomposition of the facial features will not already have begun.

*M. Yebamot 16:3*

- A. They derive testimony [concerning the identity of a corpse] only from the appearance of the whole face with the nose,
- B. even though there are signs of the corpse’s identity on his body or garments.
- C. They derive testimony [that a man has died] only after he has actually died [and has been seen dead],
- D. and even if they [the witnesses] saw him mortally wounded, crucified, or being eaten by a wild beast.
- E. They give testimony [about the identity of a corpse] only during a period of three days [after death].
- F. R. Judah b. Baba says, “[Decay in corpses] is not alike for all men, all places, and all times.”

Underlying all of the above is an understanding of the approximate length of time it takes for visible decomposition of a corpse to begin, as well as the fact that, once it begins, the appearance of the corpse’s face alters, preventing reliable identification. The rabbis know that different circumstances affect the timing of the onset of decay, but the premise of the halakhah is that decay begins only after the third day of death. Therefore, to preclude any possibility of mistaken identification, witnesses testifying to the identity of the deceased had to have viewed the body within three days of the time of death for their testimony to be considered legally valid.<sup>65</sup>

It should be noted that this three-day period begins with the day of death itself. This is how *m. Yeb. 16:3* is understood in the later rabbinic documents that we examined above (*Lev. Rab. 18:1*; *y. Moed Q. 3:5*). The three days during which a person’s death can be legally attested are equated with the initial three days of mourning for the deceased, and with the three days his soul hovers over the body. It is evident, therefore, that when the rabbinic documents speak of three days as the time before corpse decay sets in, they are talking about three days from the day of death, reckoned inclusively. This inclusive reckoning is precisely how the NT Gospels portray the timing of Jesus’ third-day resurrection.

### III. FIRST-CENTURY CONCEPTS?

To this point, we have seen that there is a consistent theme in rabbinic literature that the decomposition of a corpse begins after the third day of death and that

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<sup>65</sup> The importance of identifying a corpse within three days of death (i.e. before decay set in) is also reflected in *y. Yeb. 16:3*; *Gen. Rab. 65:20* [= 73:5]; and *Lev. Rab. 33:5*. Here we find a noncanonical tradition about the sin that king Abijah of Judah committed against the forces of Jeroboam. After slaughtering his army (2 Chr 13:17), Abijah “removed the identifying marks of the faces of the Israelites” (*Gen. Rab. 65:20*). He did this by not burying the bodies immediately and by setting up guards for three days to prevent anyone from seeing their faces and bearing witness to their identities. This kept the widows of the fallen soldiers from being able to legally remarry (*m. Yeb. 16:3*).

a chief halakhic concern is the availability of witnesses to identify the body within this three-day window. We have traced these ideas in rabbinic documents going back as early as the Mishnah, and have noted that the three-day period is inclusive of the day of death itself. However, we must not make the (all too common) mistake of assuming that the Mishnah and later rabbinic documents necessarily reflect first-century concepts and practices.<sup>66</sup> Before we can determine whether any of our research may have a connection with the Gospels' affirmation that Jesus rose on the third day, we must ask whether we have good reason to believe that these Jewish concepts relating to the decomposition of a corpse existed as early as the first century.

There is, of course, an inherent plausibility in the suggestion that they did, given the universality of visible postmortem decay and the general length of time it takes to begin. The Greek custom of burying the deceased on the third day of death may reflect an understanding that decomposition begins the following day.<sup>67</sup> Some scholars suggest that this recognition underlies the imagery of Hos 6:2 ("He will raise us up on the third day"), which, if true, would provide evidence of the concept in Israel as far back as the eighth century BC; but other scholars dispute this interpretation.<sup>68</sup> The rabbinic documents envision all of the halakhic requirements of corpse identification as operative in OT times (*y. Yeb.* 16:3; *Gen. Rab.* 65:20), but of course halakhic anachronisms abound in rabbinic literature. Therefore, we cannot rely upon any of these data. Yet our argument does not require that these ideas be evidenced as far back as OT times; ours is a more modest position. We ask simply this: Were the rabbinic concepts relating to the timing of corpse decay a part of the Jewish milieu of Jesus' day?

There is good evidence that they were. First, we should observe that *m. Yeb.* 15–16 takes it as a given that witnesses need to confirm a dead man's identity for him to be considered legally dead. This principle is presumed throughout the entire tractate. Also presumed is the fact that decomposition of a corpse begins after the third day of death, preventing reliable identification. The point is never argued, nor raised for its own sake. The text simply affirms that the deceased's face and nose must be the basis of a witness's identification and that, to be legally valid, three days is the period within which the identification must occur. These observations suggest that the need to verify a corpse's identity before the onset of decay, as well as the idea that decay begins after the third day of death, were concepts earlier than the Mishnaic traditions themselves. But how much earlier?

<sup>66</sup> See J. Neusner, *Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament: What We Cannot Show, We Do Not Know* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994) 1–134; Kraemer, *Meanings of Death* 4–11.

<sup>67</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion* 192.

<sup>68</sup> Many interpreters believe that the imagery of Hos 6:2 has to do with recovery from illness, not with resurrection from death. The reference to "the third day" would therefore have nothing to do with the onset of corpse decay. For a discussion of these matters, see F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freeman, *Hosea* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) 420; Wijngaards, "Death and Resurrection" 226–39; Barré, "New Light" 129–41; H. Wolff, *Hosea* (trans. G. Stansell; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 116–18; Wright, *Resurrection of the Son* 118–19, 147–48.

It is interesting to note that one of the named sages in this material is “Gamaliel the Elder,” Paul’s teacher according to Acts 22:3. The last section of the tractate records two traditions crediting Gamaliel with a specific ruling pertaining to the verification of a man’s death.

*M. Yebamot 16:7*

- A. Said R. Aqiba, “When I went down to Nehardea to intercalate the year, Nehemiah of Bet Deli came upon me. He said to me, ‘I heard that only R. Judah b. Baba permits a wife in the Land of Israel to remarry on the evidence of a single witness [to her husband’s death].’
- B. “I stated to him, ‘That is indeed so.’
- C. “He said to me, ‘Tell them in my name—
- D. “‘you know that the country is alive with ravaging bands—
- E. “‘I have a tradition from Rabban Gamaliel the Elder that:
- F. “‘They permit a wife to remarry on the testimony of a single witness [to her husband’s death].’
- G. “And when I came and laid the matters out before Rabban Gamaliel, he was overjoyed at my report and said, ‘We now have found a pair for R. Judah b. Baba.’
- H. “And in the same discourse Rabban Gamaliel recalled that men were slain at Tel Arza, and Rabban Gamaliel the Elder permitted their wives to remarry on the evidence of a single witness.”

In this text Gamaliel the Elder (to be distinguished from his grandson of the same name) is credited with ruling that, in times of necessity, a single witness may verify a man’s death so his wife may remarry. We cannot, of course, take the source attributions in the Mishnah at face value and simply assume this information to be historical.<sup>69</sup> What we *can* do (in keeping with the methodology that Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner have recently demonstrated) is affirm the following: On the basis of data in the Mishnah, the proper identification of a corpse to legally verify a man’s death and permit his wife to remarry is the kind of instruction that Gamaliel was likely to give his students.<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, there is support for the historicity of this suggestion, and it comes from Paul himself. I refer to Paul’s argumentation in Rom 7:1–4.

<sup>1</sup> Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? <sup>2</sup> For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. <sup>3</sup> So then, if while her

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<sup>69</sup> As Jacob Neusner has forcefully shown; see, e.g., *Reading and Believing: Ancient Judaism and Contemporary Gullibility* (BJS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), and *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 668–79. Neusner himself noted in this instance, however, that “the persistence of the tradition in two forms, but in identical language, seems important evidence that it originated in something Gamaliel had actually said and done, and that the incident or ruling (whichever it originally was) was very soon set into language which became fixed” (*Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* [Leiden: Brill, 1971] 3.349–50).

<sup>70</sup> See B. Chilton and J. Neusner, “Paul and Gamaliel,” in *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007) 175–223.

husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man. <sup>4</sup> Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.

Paul argues that believers in Jesus are no longer under the condemnation of the Law of Moses because Jesus, the Messiah to whom they joined themselves, died and was released from the Law's jurisdiction. So a believer in Jesus is now bound in a relationship with the resurrected Messiah who himself is no longer under the Law. The situation, Paul says, is analogous to that of a wife whose husband has died, releasing her from the Law and freeing her to marry another man without being considered an adulteress. Paul says that these matters should be understood by "those who know the law" (v. 1)—i.e. those knowledgeable about Jewish halakhah.

There are several aspects of what Paul says here that puzzle commentators, and a full discussion of those matters goes beyond the scope of this article.<sup>71</sup> What seems to be overlooked, however, is the possibility that Paul is alluding to the halakhah that *m. Yeb.* 15–16 would later discuss: viz. the right of a widow to legally remarry if—and only if—it was established by proper testimony that her husband had died. This makes better sense than to think, as do most interpreters, that Paul is raising a widow's right to remarry simply because it happened to illustrate the principle of verse 1 that the Law's jurisdiction over a person ended at death. That principle is such an obvious and mundane truism, one wonders why the apostle would feel the need to demonstrate it, and particularly why he would choose to do so by such an indirect and seemingly clumsy means as pointing out that the wife of a dead man may remarry. Commentators can only suggest that Paul's choice of illustration helped him to segue into v. 4 where he makes use of the remarriage metaphor. It makes better sense, however, to think that Paul is referring to the halakhic principle that a deceased man continues to be reckoned as alive and under the Law's jurisdiction—thereby preventing his wife from remarrying—unless he is legally proven to have died.<sup>72</sup> Thus, Paul's initial question about his readers'

<sup>71</sup> Some of the more significant questions are: (a) In what sense does Paul use the word νόμος ("law") in these verses? (b) To what extent, if any, are the details of vv. 2–3 intended to find allegorical parallel in the application of v. 4? In particular, (c) to whom (or what) does the deceased husband of vv. 2–3 correspond? For discussions of these questions, see J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 239–44; C. Cranfield, *Epistle to the Romans*, (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986) 1.331–37; J. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Dallas: Word, 1988) 357–63; D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 410–18; N. T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 549–59; R. Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 430–36.

<sup>72</sup> Commentators often note a parallel between Rom 7:1 and the rabbinic affirmation, "When someone dies, he is free of the Torah and of religious duties" (*b. Shab.* 30a; cf. *b. Shab.* 151b; *b. Nid.* 61b; see W. Deizinger, "Unter toten Freigewerden: Eine Untersuchung zu Röm. III–VIII," *NovT* 5 [1962] 271–74). But this is simply the rabbis' way of explicating passages that talk about the dead being forsaken by God (e.g. Pss 88:5 and 115:17). *M. Yeb.* 15–16 is where the termination of the Law's jurisdiction at death becomes a practical issue because of how it affects the marriageability of the deceased man's wife. This is where the parallel with Rom 7:1–4 lies.

knowledge of the Law pertains not to the affirmation of verse 1 alone, but to the entire death and remarriage scenario of verses 1–3.

I affirm this interpretation because of the numerous, striking parallels between Rom 7:1–4 and *m. Yeb.* 15–16. In both texts, (1) the underlying issue is the jurisdiction of the Law over a person for as long as he lives, a principle that (2) affects the status of the person’s spouse. In both texts, (3) the specific scenario is that of a husband who dies, releasing his wife from the bond of marriage (rather than a wife who dies, releasing her husband), a situation that (4) allows the wife to remarry and (5) bear legitimate offspring.<sup>73</sup> The express concern of both texts is that (6) the wife not be classified as adulterous, a condition arising from an unlawful remarriage (rather than from an extramarital affair).

It seems to me that these correspondences between Paul’s comments and the halakhic issue of *m. Yeb.* 15–16 are too numerous to be mere coincidence. I affirm, therefore, that in Rom 7:1–4 Paul is alluding to the same halakhic issue that *m. Yebamot* would later address—viz. that a deceased man is still classified as alive, and his wife still bound to him and unable to remarry, unless the man’s death was legally confirmed.<sup>74</sup> If this is what Paul is referring to, then it increases the likelihood that this topic was indeed a part of the instruction Gamaliel gave to his students, just as the Mishnah suggests. In Rom 7:1–4, therefore, we have a measure of corroboration for the fact that the need to verify a dead man’s identity before the onset of decomposition did go back to the early first century. The apostle does not, of course, specifically mention in this passage that verification of death must take place before decay begins, but that concept is what underlies the halakhic issue to which Paul is alluding.

But what about the specific point that decay begins after the third day of death? There is good evidence that this was the common idea among Jews as early as the first century. It is reflected in John 11:1–44 where we read that Martha initially objects to Jesus’ request to open the tomb of her brother Lazarus, saying, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days” (v. 39). The fact that Jesus arrives on the fourth day of Lazarus’s death is a key point in the pericope. It is stated twice (vv. 17, 39), and the text emphasizes that Jesus purposefully delayed his journey so that he would arrive at the tomb on the fourth day, a point when Lazarus’s body had already begun to decay. (This would make it evident to all afterward that Lazarus had not been mistakenly pronounced dead but that Jesus had performed a true resurrection miracle.) Interestingly, Martha’s reticence to

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<sup>73</sup> Paul’s phrase ἐὼν γένηται ἀνδρὶ ἑτέρῳ (v. 3) clearly indicates entering into marriage with another man (cf. Lev 22:12; Deut 24:2 LXX). Some commentators deny that Paul extends the remarriage metaphor to the point of saying the believer and Christ produce spiritual offspring (e.g. Cranfield, *Romans* 1.337). But not only is this suggested by the language of v. 4 (“joined to another [in marriage] . . . that we might bear fruit for God”), the word “adulteress” (μοιχαλίς) in v. 3 sets up the imagery. Inherent in the OT prohibition against adultery is the concern that the paternity of children not be in question (Num 5:27–28; Hos 2:1–4). See Wright, “Romans” 559; Jewett, *Romans* 435.

<sup>74</sup> This interpretation explains Paul’s unusual wording in v. 3, “she shall be called an adulteress.” In the scenario Paul envisions, the woman is an adulteress only in a strictly legal sense because of the way her remarriage is classified.

open the tomb of her brother on the fourth day is in marked contrast to the attitude of the women in the Synoptic Gospels who come to the tomb of Jesus on the third day of his death so that they may enter and anoint his body with spices (Mark 16:1–3; Luke 23:56; 24:1). This anointing procedure is an honorific gesture that has an obvious practical purpose—that of countering the offensive odor of imminent decomposition. Because it is the third day, this anointing of Jesus’ body is still appropriate, and the women can enter his tomb without worrying about the stench that so concerned Martha on the fourth day of Lazarus’s death.

The same issue also seems to be reflected in documents that speak of delaying a prominent person’s burial in order to perform extensive funerary procedures.<sup>75</sup> Even in such cases, burial is not delayed beyond three days. For example, in the *Testament of Job* (1st cent. BC–1st cent. AD) we read of mourners initially bringing Job’s body to the tomb for burial on the day that he dies, which would accord with normal Jewish praxis. Yet so great is the lamentation over the corpse, “all the widows and orphans circled about, forbidding it to be brought into the tomb. But after three days they laid him in the tomb in a beautiful sleep” (53:7–8). The phrase “after three days” (μετὰ τρεῖς ἡμέρας) is the same phrase that the Gospel of Mark uses when recording Jesus’ predictions of resurrection, and it presents us with the same questions of interpretation. It is clear from the context, however, that the *Testament* is not using this phraseology in a nonliteral sense to indicate a short amount of time; three actual days are in view. Nor is the author saying that Job’s interment takes place after the completion of the third day, i.e. on day four; Job’s body is finally laid to rest on the third day. This third-day burial might reflect Hellenistic influence since this was the norm in Greek culture and the *Testament of Job* is a product of Hellenistic Judaism. Yet, as we noted earlier, the timing of Greek burials may itself have been intended to insure interment before decay began. Indeed, this seems to be the key factor in the *Testament* rather than conformity to Greek custom. The text suggests that Job’s mourners would have delayed interment for more than three days if they could have done so, but they knew this was not possible. The most likely conclusion to draw is that they were concerned about the onset of decay if they delayed interment any longer than three days.<sup>76</sup>

From all of the above data that we derive from the rabbinic corpus, the NT, and contemporary Jewish literature, I believe we can conclude that decay setting in

<sup>75</sup> See *T. Job* 53:8; *T. Abr.* [A] 20:11; *m. Sanh.* 6:5; *y. Moed Q.* 3:5; *b. Sanh.* 47a; *Sem.* 11:1; cf. *Sir* 38:16–23.

<sup>76</sup> Dale Allison Jr. seems to suggest that the timing of Job’s burial reflects the Jewish idea of the soul hovering over its corpse for three days (in conformity with what he says elsewhere about the similar burial circumstances in the *Testament of Abraham*); see *Resurrecting Jesus* 232, n. 13; cf. *idem*, *Testament of Abraham* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003) 402. But this cannot be the case. The *Testament of Job* expressly says that, at the moment of Job’s death, his spirit was carried to heaven by a chariot of angels—an event that his daughters were allowed to witness—and it is these daughters who then lead the funeral procession to Job’s tomb (52.6–12). It is clear that the subsequent lamentation over Job’s body for three days has nothing to do with a hovering-soul concept or with a hope for Job’s imminent restoration to life. Nor is there any thought that he might not truly be dead. The most likely conclusion is that Job’s interment was delayed for no more than three days because of a concern about corpse decay.

after the third day of death was a well-established concept in Jewish society as early as the time of Jesus. There is, in fact, no evidence of a competing view. We also have good reason to believe that the halakhah requiring a corpse to be identified before the onset of decomposition dates back to this early period as well. The third day was known to be the last day that a corpse could be identified, and the last day that a body could be buried or a tomb entered before decomposition began.

#### IV. “RAISED ON THE THIRD DAY”

Based on the above analysis, I propose that the Jewish understanding of the timing of corpse decay forms the backdrop for the third-day motif in the kerygmatic formula of 1 Cor 15:3–5. I contend that the formula was speaking literally when it claimed that Jesus rose “on the third day,” because this temporal reference signified that he returned to life on the day before decomposition of his body could begin.

In Jewish thought, death is a divine punishment for sin, and the decomposition of a human corpse highlights human sinfulness by destroying, in a most gruesome manner, the body of flesh that was used to commit sin.<sup>77</sup> Jewish burial practices of the Greco-Roman period focused attention on the decomposition stage of death by means of a two-fold burial procedure. Primary burial was for the purpose of allowing the flesh of the deceased to decompose so that only the bones remained, a process that took about twelve months. Then a secondary burial (*ossilegium*) was performed; the bones were gathered and reinterred inside an ossuary.<sup>78</sup> Jews viewed the period of decomposition during primary burial as a time of divine punishment for the sins that the deceased had committed in the flesh (Ps 49:7–9; Job 21:19–26; 24:19–20). Hence, the doctrine of the general resurrection, which promises pardon and renewed life for God’s sinful people, is a resurrection of decomposed bodies (Ezek 37:1–14; Isa 26:19–21; Job 19:26).<sup>79</sup> Jews who believed in this future resurrection considered the postmortem decay of their flesh to be a divinely imposed penalty, enabling them to have atonement with God. The rabbis went so far as to say that even the sins of someone executed as a capital criminal, accursed of God (Deut 21:22–23), could be expiated by the decomposition of his flesh.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> See, e.g., Gen 2:17; 3:17–19; Job 17:13–16; 19:26; 21:19–26; 24:19–20; Ps 49:7–14; 55:23; 88:4–7, 11–12; Prov 5:8–11; Isa 26:19–21; 66:24; Lam 3:4; Ezek 37:1–14; 4 Ezra 7:1–25, 78–101; Wis 2:23–24; Rom 5:12; 6:16–23; 7:14–8:2; Gal 6:8; Jas 1:15; *m. Sanh.* 6:2, 6; *m. Moed Q.* 1:5; *t. Sanh.* 9:9; *y. Moed Q.* 1:5; 3:5; *y. Sanh.* 6:12; *Sifre Num.* 112; *Lev. Rab.* 18:1; *b. Sanh.* 47a–b; *b. Rosh HaSh.* 17a.

<sup>78</sup> See L. Y. Rahmani, “Ancient Jerusalem’s Funerary Customs and Tombs,” *BA* 44 (1981) 174–77; 45 (1982) 43–45, 109–11; P. Figueras, *Decorated Jewish Ossuaries* (Leiden: Brill, 1983) 5–7; C. Setzer, *Resurrection of the Body in Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (Boston: Brill, 2004) 117–20; Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries* 26–30.

<sup>79</sup> For a discussion of the way second-temple Judaism used these (and other) OT passages to support a doctrine of general resurrection, see Wright, *Resurrection of the Son* 85–206.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Job 19:26 LXX; 1QH 19:10–14; 4Q385 frg. 2.2–9; *Apoc. Mos* 41:1–3; 2 Bar. 50:2; *m. Moed Q.* 1:5; *m. Sanh.* 6:2, 6:6; *t. Yoma* 4:8–9; *y. Moed Q.* 1:5; *b. Sanh.* 47b; *Lev. Rab.* 18:1. Some rabbis said that the secondary burial of a loved one should be a time of rejoicing since, with the process of decay now com-

I contend, therefore, that the kerygmatic formula's declaration that God raised the crucified Christ on the third day signified to Jewish minds that his body did not decay, and thus it implied his personal sinlessness.<sup>81</sup> This not only vindicated Jesus, it supported the gospel claim that his death was not for his own sins, but to atone for the sins of others.<sup>82</sup> The formula's third-day language was intended literally, and not as an idiom meaning a short time. I affirm this to be the proper interpretation of the formula's third-day motif for the following reasons:

(1) In a context discussing a person's death and burial, such as what we have in the formula, the most reasonable way to understand a reference to the third day is as a literal time indicator signifying the day before decomposition of the body began. The fact that three-day language could be used nonliterally in Greco-Roman parlance to mean a brief, indefinite time does not negate the fact that such language could also be used literally, and it was certainly used literally in discussions about a person's death and burial. As we have shown, Jews understood the decomposition of a corpse to begin after the third day of death, and this understanding fundamentally affected practices pertaining to the dead, such as how long primary burial could be delayed and how long a tomb could be entered before decay began. Jewish mourners customarily visited the graves of their loved ones on the third day, the last day they could enter the tomb before the onset of decay. To Jewish minds, therefore, any reference to the third day in a context discussing someone's death and burial would surely be understood as the day when mourners visited tombs and would evoke thoughts of the process of decay beginning the following day.<sup>83</sup> In such a context, a Jewish speaker would hardly choose to use three-day language nonliterally to mean a brief time, for doing so would create needless confusion. Given, therefore, the context of the kerygmatic formula—a formula produced by Jewish Christians and affirming the death and burial of Jesus—the affirmation that

plete, their atonement was assured (*m. Moed Q.* 1:5). This concept may be associated with the rabbinic idea that a deceased person is sentient and feels the pain of decomposition (see n. 53 above; Kraemer, *Meanings of Death* 34–35, 40; 97–116).

<sup>81</sup> The fact that the risen Christ would never die again, his body never again subjected to the possibility of decay, is highlighted by the use of the perfect tense verb (ἐγήγερται) in line 3 instead of the aorist tense that the other lines use. Thus, Jesus' resurrection is to be distinguished from that of others (e.g. Lazarus) who were raised but died again (Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians* 547). The verb is passive, implying God as the performer of the act.

<sup>82</sup> For a refutation of the claim that the idea of Jesus' death as an atonement for the sins of others cannot go back to the earliest Christian community, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 3.95–100.

<sup>83</sup> Kathleen Corley has recently made a similar observation. Though she fails to note the implications of the formula's third-day language vis-à-vis corpse decay, Corley argues that, in view of ancient funerary customs, the formula's third-day language must have implied the day when mourners—particularly women—visited the tomb of a loved one (*Maranatha* 115). (Corley presumes, however, the unhistorical nature of the Gospel accounts of women finding Jesus' tomb empty. She suggests that because of the implication of the formula's third-day language, as well as a desire to avoid connotations of necromancy often associated with women visiting graves, the story was concocted that female disciples came to Jesus' tomb on the third day but found it empty. Surely the simpler theory is that the Gospels preserve an essentially historical tradition about female disciples finding an empty tomb when they made the customary third-day visit to the gravesite.)

he rose “on the third day” must have been intended literally and must have implied that he rose without his body experiencing decay.

(2) My proposal regarding the formula’s third-day motif comports with the well-known parallelism inherent in the structure of the four-line formula. A number of scholarly analyses have shown that the affirmations of lines one and three correspond to one another.<sup>84</sup>

Line 1: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures

Line 3: He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures

These lines share the same syntactic structure (verb—modifying phrase—prepositional phrase), the same prepositional phrase (“according to the Scriptures”), and the verb “died” in line one corresponds antithetically to “was raised” in line three. Given this structure, we would look for the parallelism of the two lines to extend to their respective modifying phrases, so that “[died] for our sins” would parallel “[raised] on the third day.”<sup>85</sup> The former phrase is atonement language signifying that Christ died for the sins of others, so we would expect it to find parallel in the corresponding phrase “[raised] on the third day.” This, in fact, is precisely what we do observe—if the phrase “on the third day” signifies the day before the onset of decomposition. Because human decomposition destroys the fleshly body that the deceased had used to commit sin, the affirmation that the crucified Christ was raised on the day before his corpse could begin to decay would suggest that he died not for his own sins, but for the sins of others—which is exactly what the corresponding phrase of line one states. No other interpretation of “on the third day” produces such a precise theological parallel between the two phrases. This fact strongly argues in favor of the interpretation that I propose.<sup>86</sup>

(3) The early Christian sermons attributed to Peter and Paul in the book of Acts corroborate this interpretation of the formula’s third-day language. Many scholars have noted that these three sermons—recorded in Acts 2, Acts 10, and Acts 13 respectively—follow the four-affirmation pattern of the kerygmatic formula (viz. Christ died, was buried, was raised, appeared to witnesses).<sup>87</sup> Also figuring prominently in two of these sermons is the assertion that Jesus rose before his corpse could begin to decay (Acts 2:24–32; 13:34–37). These connections between

<sup>84</sup> E.g. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* 251–54; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* 35; Hays, *First Corinthians* 255.

<sup>85</sup> Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Christ* 42. Lüdemann also correctly points out that since the phrase “for our sins” is a theological statement, we would expect the parallel phrase “on the third day” to be a theological statement (which he finds by treating it as an allusion to the general resurrection of saints, per Hos 6:2). But Lüdemann sees this as justification for interpreting “on the third day” nonliterally and denying its chronological nature. As I show below, the formula’s third-day language can function as a literal chronology indicator and still make a strong theological statement.

<sup>86</sup> The juxtaposition of these two ideas (viz. Jesus’ absence of bodily decay and the atoning nature of his death) is also seen in Paul’s sermon to the Jews of Pisidian Antioch: “He whom God raised did not undergo decay. Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you” (Acts 13:37–38).

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Acts 2:23–32; 10:39–41; 13:28–31. See e.g. W. Craig, “Closing Response,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection* 164–65; Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus* 233.

the sermons of Acts and the kerygmatic formula support my contention that the formula's third-day motif signified Christ's absence of corpse decay. It is also noteworthy that the sermon of Acts 10—the only one of the three sermons of Acts that does not expressly state that the risen Christ experienced no decay—does include the statement (not found in the other sermons), "God raised Him up *on the third day*" (10:41). These early sermons suggest, therefore, that to claim Jesus rose on the third day was another way of saying that his body did not decay. The two statements were virtually interchangeable.

Scholars who deny the physical resurrection of Jesus typically deny the historicity of the Acts sermons, claiming that these homiletic statements about his lack of decay were part of a late doctrinal shift in the church to emphasize the concept of physical resurrection. The close correspondence, however, between the content of the formula and the content of the Acts sermons argues that the latter do reflect the basic doctrines of the nascent Church. This increases the likelihood that the formula's third-day language corresponds to the statements in Acts about Jesus' lack of decay. Critics might respond by theorizing that Christians of the later decades noticed how a literal interpretation of the formula's third-day language could imply that Jesus' body did not decay, and so they began to adopt this interpretation to highlight physical resurrection. But this rejoinder acknowledges our point about the connotation of the phrase "on the third day," and is ultimately self-defeating. If the kerygma's third-day language could suggest the idea of corpse decay in the later decades of the church, it could just as easily suggest it at the beginning of the church when the kerygma was formed. It is arbitrary to think that a connection between the third-day language and corpse decay would have entered the minds of only the church's second generation. Moreover, if the first generation of the church could see that the phrase "on the third day" might convey the notion that Jesus' body did not decay, why would they choose to use this wording in their formula if they wanted to preach that he rose in a nonphysical sense? Therefore, our argument stands: The sermons of Acts indicate that an early doctrine of the church was that Christ's body did not decay, and this corroborates our interpretation of the formula's third-day motif.

(4) This interpretation of the third-day motif also helps to explain the church's use of the OT to support the third-day resurrection of Jesus. According to the sermons of Acts, the main OT passage that the church put forth as foretelling his resurrection was Psalm 16, and in particular the words of verse 10: "You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay" (Acts 2:22–32; 13:27–31). Yet nowhere in this psalm (nor in any other OT passage cited in Luke–Acts) is there an express reference to three days—a puzzling fact since the author of Luke–Acts indicates that the third-day aspect of Jesus' resurrection was part of what the OT foretold (Luke 24:45–47). But if our contention regarding the significance of the third-day motif is correct, Psalm 16 does support the idea that Jesus rose on the third day. This is because a Jewish audience would understand the decay of which the psalm spoke to begin after the third day of death. On this basis, Psalm 16 readily fit with the church's assertion that Christ rose

on the third day, for that assertion was simply another way of saying that his body did not undergo decay.

In addition, this interpretation of the third-day motif enhances our understanding of why the church claimed that the third-day resurrection of Jesus was foreshadowed by Jonah’s “three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster” (Matt 12:40). The book of Jonah portrays the experience of the OT prophet as a symbolic journey to Sheol and back (Jonah 2:2, 6).<sup>88</sup> It was easy, therefore, for Jonah’s third-day deliverance from the realm of death to be viewed by Christians as a symbolic “resurrection” without his body having experienced decay. The parallel with the church’s claim about Jesus was striking.<sup>89</sup>

(5) Finally, my proposal helps explain why the formula included the affirmation that Christ appeared to Cephas and the twelve. Christ’s identification by these witnesses is a key feature of the formula, while later appearances to other disciples are the substance of additional traditions cited by Paul in 1 Cor 15:6–7.<sup>90</sup> All of these appearance traditions served the purpose of confirming that Jesus was alive again, yet the formula included only the appearances to Cephas and the twelve. The prominence of these men as church leaders only partially accounts for this, for there were other occasions when, according to tradition, Christ appeared to the twelve apostles (cf. 1 Cor 15:7) and yet it seems that the formula calls attention only to his first appearance to them.<sup>91</sup> Why is this?

My proposal regarding the third-day motif provides an answer. As we have seen, Jewish halakhah mandated that the third day of death was the last day a dead body could be identified by witnesses. If this was a rule as early as the first century (and our prior analysis suggests that it was), then Jesus’ resurrection and identification by witnesses on the third day fell within these halakhic standards. It is interesting to note that the implied temporal structure of the formula places Jesus’ death and burial on day one, and his resurrection and appearances to Cephas and the twelve on day three. The latter chronology is confirmed by the Gospels of Luke and John, which place both of these appearances later on the day that he arose (Luke 24:34, 36–43; John 20:19–23). I submit, therefore, that the appearances to Cephas and the twelve on the third day served a unique function among all of the other appearance traditions, a function prompting their inclusion in the kerygmatic

<sup>88</sup> B. Wheaton, “As It is Written: Old Testament Foundations for Jesus’ Expectation of Resurrection,” *WTJ* 70 (2008) 251–52.

<sup>89</sup> As noted previously, there is no clear evidence that the early church associated Jesus’ resurrection with Hos 6:2. But if it did, our interpretation of the kerygma’s third-day motif harmonizes perfectly. The language of this OT passage (“He will raise us up on the third day”) could be understood as alluding to the idea of resurrection before the onset of decay (regardless of how the OT prophet may have intended it; see n. 68 above). So it is possible that Hos 6:2 was one of the passages that the creators of the kerygmatic formula had in mind when they asserted that Christ’s third-day resurrection was “according to the Scriptures.” We simply have no evidence that this was the case.

<sup>90</sup> Christ’s *postmortem* appearances to witnesses are also emphasized in the Gospels and throughout Acts (cf. Luke 24:48; John 15:27; 21:24; Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39–41; 13:31; 22:15; 23:11; 26:16).

<sup>91</sup> The words “then to all the apostles” (1 Cor 15:7) may refer to more than the twelve, but the twelve are certainly included.

formula. These were the appearances that made it clear Jesus rose without experiencing decomposition. For this reason, the third-day appearances to Cephas and the twelve were crucial because they identified Jesus in keeping with halakhic standards. Indeed, there is a delicious irony in the fact that these witnesses were able to legally identify Jesus—a *resurrected* corpse!

## V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article has analyzed the third-day motif in the kerygma of the early Church, focusing specifically on the very early formula that Paul quotes in 1 Cor 15:3–5. I have argued that the significance of the claim that Christ rose “on the third day” can be fully appreciated only in light of ancient Jewish concepts regarding the timing of corpse decay. Modern scholarship has tended to dismiss this possibility, largely because of a poor analysis of relevant rabbinic texts and a tendency to focus only on what could serve as the essential impetus for the third-day motif. As a result of this dismissal, scholars have felt free to interpret the phrase “on the third day” in a nonliteral sense, nullifying the temporal structure of the formula. But a nonliteral interpretation ignores the context of the formula. When we consider the third-day language in the light of Jewish concepts of death and burial, it becomes apparent that saying Christ died, was buried, and was raised on the third day conveys a meaningful literal sense, one that implies he rose on the day before the onset of decomposition. Such a statement supported the Church’s teaching about the sinlessness of Christ and the atoning nature of his death. It also meant that his initial postmortem appearances complied with Jewish halakhah regarding the identification of deceased persons. This interpretation of the third-day motif fits with the formula’s syntactic parallelism, finds corroboration in the sermons of Acts, clarifies the church’s use of the OT to support Jesus’ resurrection, and explains the formula’s inclusion of the appearances to Cephas and the twelve.

Let me emphasize that this study, though illuminating the implication that Jewish-Christian minds would see in the idea of Christ rising on the third day, cannot explain why the kerygmatic formula affirmed that he rose specifically on that day. An absence of bodily decay would be implied had the formula said that he rose *during* the initial three days of death, so the statement that he rose specifically “on the third day” is explicable only if some event(s) occurred indicating that this was the actual day he arose. What our research makes clear, however, is the significance that saying Christ rose on the third day would have in light of Jewish views regarding the timing and theological significance of corpse decay.

There are several implications that necessarily follow from this conclusion, all pertaining to matters that are integral to the debate over the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection that we delineated in the introduction of this article. First and foremost, if indeed the formula’s third-day motif signified that Jesus rose without undergoing decay, it is impossible for the formula to refer to resurrection in any sense other than the resurrection of his corpse. Thus, this early formula shows us that the assertion of the church from the very beginning was that Jesus rose physically. Nor can the physical resurrection of Jesus have been a minor opinion held only by a

segment of the church. On the contrary, a proper understanding of the formula's third-day motif indicates that the restoration of life to Jesus's interred body was always an emphatic part of the church's kerygma. Though our research cannot directly address whether his postmortem appearances were objective reality or subjective visions on the part of the disciples, it does suggest that, from the earliest point, the church understood these appearances to be physical sightings of the risen Lord on earth rather than spiritual manifestations of him in heaven.<sup>92</sup>

It is also evident that the formula is implying the burial place of Jesus was empty on the third day. We cannot say, of course, that the formula proves it was *known* to be empty, as if the formula were necessarily alluding to the accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb that the Gospels would later record. Still, the formula comes closer to doing this than is sometimes thought. Our research shows that the third-day motif indicated that Jesus rose on the day of death when mourners routinely visited tombs. This necessarily ties the formula's affirmation of Jesus' resurrection back to the affirmation of his burial. While it is true that, structurally, the burial reference goes with the preceding death reference, it is not accurate for scholars to claim that the burial reference serves only to confirm the fact of Jesus' death and has no logical connection with the subsequent reference to resurrection. Clearly, it is the interred body of Jesus that is said to have returned to life on the third day.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, since the formula's third-day motif assigns his resurrection to the day when mourners would visit a deceased person's tomb, this implies that the burial place of Jesus could be visited, and the absence of his body observed. While it does not guarantee that the formula is speaking of a known burial place that had, in fact, been examined on the third day, it certainly suggests that idea.

The disciples, furthermore, must have been in Jerusalem on the third day—and thus were in position to examine the burial place—contrary to scholarly assertions that they had fled to Galilee immediately after Jesus' arrest. Since, as we have shown, the formula's third-day language was intended literally, Cephas and the twelve must still have been in Jerusalem on the third day; Galilee was too far away for them to have traveled there in three days.<sup>94</sup> So according to the data of the formula, the initial postmortem appearances of Jesus must have occurred not in Galilee, but in Jerusalem (as the Gospels of Luke and John indicate), which means that the band of disciples could have verified the emptiness of Jesus' tomb. Whether

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<sup>92</sup> On the issue of Paul's understanding of the resurrection and appearances, see Sider, "Paul's Understanding" 124–41; Wright, *Resurrection of the Son* 312–74; Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus* 336–38, 400–37.

<sup>93</sup> Since the formula's four lines are each introduced by ὅτι, this argues that four distinct affirmations about Jesus are being made. The affirmation of line four, though supporting that of line three, is still giving independent tradition about postmortem appearances. There is no reason to think otherwise about the affirmation of line two; though supporting line one, it gives independent tradition regarding Jesus' burial. On the debate over this matter, see H. Grass, *Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956) 146; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* 252, 254–55; Sider, "Paul's Understanding" 134–36; Fee, *First Corinthians* 725; Craig, *Assessing the Evidence* 45–49; Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Jesus* 45–46; idem, "Closing Response," in *Jesus' Resurrection* 153.

<sup>94</sup> See n. 32 above. The basis of this argument is the uncontested point that, according to the data of the Gospels, the initial appearances of Jesus could have taken place only in Jerusalem or Galilee.

any of them did so, the formula does not expressly say; but our research increases the plausibility of what the Gospels report about certain female disciples (Mark 16:1–8 pars.), and then Peter and John (Luke 24:12; John 20:3–10), going to the tomb of Jesus on the third day and finding it empty.<sup>95</sup> Such a discovery, along with appearances to Peter and the twelve on that day, would explain why the kerygma specifically affirmed the third day as the day that he arose.

Critics who deny the empty tomb must also face up to the full weight of the fact that the Jewish authorities never produced Jesus' body. This problem can no longer be circumvented by claiming that decades had gone by before the church began to assert that he rose physically and vacated his grave. On the contrary, our analysis establishes that a physical resurrection and empty tomb is exactly what the church was preaching from the very beginning. The comparatively short amount of time between the burial and the first public preaching of Jesus' resurrection (no more than fifty days according to Acts 2) increases the likelihood that the Jewish authorities could have located his grave and—if the corpse were there—quelled the burgeoning movement of Jesus followers by revealing it to all. It is telling that no evidence exists of the Jewish authorities doing so. Nor may one resort to saying that, by the time of the first preaching of the gospel, Jesus' corpse still would have decomposed beyond the point where it could be identified, legally or otherwise.<sup>96</sup> The presence of any remains at all in his grave would have utterly devastated the church's claim—all the more so a claim that he rose without undergoing decay.<sup>97</sup> Yet the Jewish authorities failed to point to any remains.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> We should also remember that, in the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures, women were especially associated with such third-day visits to a tomb (see nn. 49 and 83 above). Thus, it is entirely possible that the formula's third-day motif was alluding to well-known reports (which the Gospels would later record) of female disciples finding Jesus' tomb empty when they made the customary visit to his burial place on the third day.

<sup>96</sup> This is commonly argued; see, e.g., Lake, *Resurrection* 196; Lüdemann, "Second Rebuttal" and "Closing Response," in *Jesus' Resurrection* 61, 153; Lowder, "Historical Evidence" 288–90; Casey, *Jesus* 496–97.

<sup>97</sup> Gundry, "Trimming the Debate," in *Jesus' Resurrection* 114. (The point stands even if, contra the Gospels, Jesus' burial place contained other decomposing corpses. *M. Sanh.* 6:5–6 indicates that Jews were quite capable of distinguishing the remains of interred criminals, even if a tomb contained multiple occupants and only bones remained; see also Brown, *Death of the Messiah* 1210.) The fallback position of some critics is to assert that no one knew what became of Jesus' body, or perhaps that it was never buried at all but cast aside for wild beasts to devour (e.g. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* 154–58; idem, *Who Killed Jesus?* 160–77). Not only does this view fly in the face of multiple sources of uncontested tradition affirming Jesus' interment in a tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin council, it is contradicted by the formula's express statement, "he was buried" (1 Cor 15:4). As discussed above, this statement does not merely confirm the affirmation of Jesus' death; it most likely reflects an independent burial tradition (see n. 93). The third-day motif suggests that Jesus was interred at a known site that could be visited by mourners. Thus, the evidence is strong that the Jewish authorities knew, or could easily have learned, the location of Jesus' grave. See also Craig, *Assessing the Evidence* 352–56; idem, "First Rebuttal," in *Jesus' Resurrection* 47; Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus* 352–63.

<sup>98</sup> I find especially weak the rebuttal that Jewish authorities may not initially have deemed the Jesus movement serious enough to prompt them to examine the tomb (e.g. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus* 319; Lowder, "Historical Evidence" 288). At *some* point they must have deemed it serious enough, and (if he had not risen) his remains would be there waiting.

We noted at the beginning of this article that, according to the four Gospels, Jesus predicted he would die and rise again in connection with three days. Our research cannot directly address whether these accounts of his predictions are historical, though it does cast doubt upon the common opinion that, if he made such predictions, Jesus intended his reference to three days nonliterally in order to indicate a short time. As with the kerygmatic formula's third-day language, any reference Jesus may have made to dying and rising in three days would need to be interpreted within the context of Jewish conceptions of death—and in that context, three days had significant meaning. To this writer, it would seem strange if Jesus never considered how such a context would tend to give a literal sense to his words and evoke images of him rising before the onset of decay. Our research also lends support to the contention of those scholars who have argued that Mark's “after three days” was a Jewish idiom that was virtually equivalent to the phrase “on the third day.” Not only have we seen it used this way in the *Testament of Job* (also in a context of death and burial), but it now is apparent that if the Markan phrase meant after the completion of three days—i.e. on day four, it would imply resurrection after Jesus' body began to decompose. It seems highly unlikely that Jesus would have wanted to convey that idea, and it clearly conflicts with what we now know to be a fundamental part of the nascent church's kerygma.<sup>99</sup>

Another consequence of our study is that it explains why Paul did not appeal to the empty tomb of Jesus when refuting those at Corinth who denied the possibility of a future resurrection of physical bodies (1 Cor 15:1–58). This omission by the apostle is commonly hailed as proof that he did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus' physical body, or at least that he knew no tradition of an empty tomb, for relating that information to the Corinthians would have clinched his argument. Critics say that Paul's failure to mention the empty tomb demonstrates the lateness of such ideas within the church. But that is not the case. The Corinthians' philosophical objection to a future resurrection had to do with the idea of corruptible bodies being raised—viz. corpses already in a decomposed state (vv. 42, 50–54).<sup>100</sup> Since the formula's third-day motif affirmed that Christ rose before his body could decompose, his resurrection would not have posed the same philosophical problem for the Corinthians. Thus, it is perfectly understandable why Paul would not appeal in his polemic to the empty tomb of Jesus: it added nothing germane to the issue at hand. First Corinthians 15 offers no support, therefore, for those who want to deny the empty tomb and push the preaching of a physical resurrection of Jesus to the church's second generation.

The overall impact of this study is the support it offers for the essential veracity of the Gospels' resurrection narratives. When the formula's third-day motif is

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<sup>99</sup> Along the same line, we have further reason to reject the view of those who maintain, from a strictly literal reading of Matthew's “three days and three nights” (12:40), that Jesus' death and burial took place not on a Friday, but on a Wednesday or Thursday (see n. 5 above). If either of these positions were correct, it would mean that, by Jewish reckoning, Jesus rose after the third day had passed, and thus when decomposition had already begun.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son* 347–61; Hays, *First Corinthians* 253, 259–60, 269–77.

understood properly, it argues against the notion that the formula presents a substantially different picture of events than that which the Gospels record. The formula confirms that the preaching of Jesus' physical resurrection was not a late shift in church doctrine, but the message of the church from the very beginning. The formula argues against the idea that the Gospels' resurrection narratives derive from late legends or an imaginary tale concocted by Mark. In short, a proper understanding of the formula's third-day motif highlights the powerful evidence that exists for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus.