Two thought-events happened today that oddly enough coalesced. First, I’ve been thinking about the fact that the blog is approaching five years old in about ten days, and musing on all that has happened on the blog over all this time. I decided to look up my very first posts, and found this one among them.

Second, as it turns out, this post is exactly on a topic that I happened to lecture on today to my undergraduate class (what I said may well have scandalized some students, but I made sure to tell them that my opinion on this matter is a minority view among scholars; I always try to let them know if what I’m saying is standard fare — which is normally the case — or a minority opinion).

In any event, in both my lecture and in this primeval post, the topic is: was Jesus given a decent burial by Joseph of Arimathea (or anyone else)? My views have considerably deepened over the past five years, but I still hold to what I said here.

Here is the post, which was a response to a question I got via email.

**EMAIL QUESTION:**

Sir, I have inquiries regarding your view on two supposed historical events found in Jesus Tradition: (1) the burial by Joseph of Arimathea; (2) the discovery of the empty tomb by some of Jesus’ women followers.

It appears that when you gave a lecture for The Teaching Company (published in 2003) you regarded these two event claims to be “historical facts.” You stated that “the earliest accounts we have are unanimous in saying that Jesus was in fact buried by this fellow, Joseph of Arimathea, and so it’s relatively reliable that that’s what happened. We also have solid traditions to indicate that women found this tomb empty three days later.” Source: “From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity,” Lecture 4: “Oral and Written Traditions about Jesus” (The Teaching Company, 2003).

However, in your debate with W. L. Craig in 2006, you stated, “The payoff is this: We don’t know if Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea. What we have are Gospel stories written decades later by people who had heard stories in circulation, and it’s not hard at all to imagine somebody coming up with the story. We don’t know if his tomb was empty three days later. We don’t know if he was physically seen by his followers afterwards. Bill’s going to come up here and tell me now that I’ve contradicted myself. But I want to point out that earlier he praised me for changing my mind!”

-Just to clarify, did you really change your mind? -Despite the two being found in the earliest accounts (since, as you stated, they are found in all four Gospels), what led you to change your mind? -Do you explain your view on these two in detail in any of your written published work? Your “A Brief Introduction to the New Testament” (2008) does talk about the Jesus’ women followers’ having discovered the empty tomb, but it seems you neither deny nor affirm the historicity of which.

**RESPONSE:**
This is a great question, and it is in fact a topic on which I have changed my minds in recent years. Apologists for Christianity have frequently insisted that “everyone” agrees that whatever else you might want to say about Jesus’ resurrection, he was certainly buried publicly and three days later the tomb was empty. This has led such evangelical apologists as Josh McDowell and a host of others in his wake to insist that ...

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Q & A – Historical Events in Jesus Tradition