THE MYSTERY OF THE STOLEN BODY:
EXPLORING CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

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In what follows, I provide one example of how the cognitive science of religion can be profitably applied in the study of early Christianity (see also Martin 2004, 2005, this volume). I focus on the question of what the disciples believed to have happened to Jesus after his death and how their reflections on this affected the early spread of what later came to be known as Christianity.

1. The Mystery of the Empty Tomb

Pascal Boyer (2001: 228) bluntly observes that religion may be more about dead bodies than it is about death (as a metaphysical problem). This tentative suggestion is based on anecdotal anthropological evidence and cognitive theorizing on how persons react to the sight of a dead body. What we know for certain is that when a person dies, the corpse poses a very practical problem for the community of the living. As it is only a dead object, it must be disposed of in one way or another; yet the sight of the corpse still triggers the idea of personhood. Our ideas of the agentive properties of the deceased continue although we see biological bodies die (see Bering 2002, 2006). We cannot see the agentive properties die just as we do not see thoughts popping up from the brain. Because we do not see how thoughts and emotions emerge from the nervous system, we find it difficult to think that they cease with the death of the body (see Bering 2006).

Because of this cognitive tension, corpses are ritually buried while the ideas about the agentive properties of the deceased continue in our minds more or less as if nothing had happened. Dead agents are represented as absent but existing persons, quite unlike agents prior to their birth (Boyer 2001: 203–28; Bering 2006; cf. Pyysiäinen 2006). Given the importance of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus for the Christian religion, it is important to ask what the facts about mentally representing dead agents might have to offer for explaining
the early origins of Christianity. I start with the legend of the empty tomb and then proceed to analyze the resurrection narratives.

If Jesus was not simply left hanging on the cross, the Romans may have thrown the body in a lime pit (Sawicki 1994: 257), or the Jews might have buried it in a mass grave of executed criminals (Myllykoski 1991–1994: 2.105–6, 2002: 45–46, 81–82; see m. Sanh. 6:5–6). Many of the poor urban citizens of Rome in the late Republic (first century B.C.E.) had their corpses thrown into collective pits (puticuli) outside the city; especially during epidemics, mass death necessitated mass burials (Hopkins 1983: 207–11). The Romans also habitually left the bodies of crucified criminals unburied (Crossan 1995: 160–63; see Myllykoski 2002: 78–81).

However, the Romans also respected politically harmless Jewish customs. Therefore, if the Jews had asked for the body of Jesus in order to bury it, the Romans would quite likely have agreed. As Jewish customs did not favor the leaving of dead bodies lying around unburied during the Passover festival, it is quite likely that the high priests and other members of the Sanhedrin took care of the burial of the body of Jesus in a mass grave (Myllykoski 2002: 80–81). The rather enigmatic figure of Joseph of Arimathea, “a respected member of the council,” may have had something to do with this although the details of the gospel accounts are problematic (Myllykoski 2002: 71–76). However, it suggests that the disciples did not know the exact location of the grave of Jesus. It is, then, at least a plausible hypothesis that the legend of the empty tomb originated when the disciples tried in vain to find the place where Jesus was buried.

Although our mental representations of the agentive properties of dead agents are decoupled from the physical body, we often try to preserve them by connecting them with something concrete, such as a tomb or some kind of memento, a small item that used to belong to the deceased, and so forth (see Fustel de Coulanges 1866: Book I, Ch. 2; Cumont 1922: 3–4, 44–69). Even the collective tombs in the Roman world had individual pigeon-holes marked by inscriptions, testifying to a concern for preserving individuality after death (Hopkins 1983: 216–17).

However, the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem seems not to have known the location of the tomb of Jesus; the place that is presently known as such was first identified by Constantine’s mother Helena in 325 (see Myllykoski 2002: 47; cf. Walker 1990: 235–81). There is no evidence of the grave having been venerated as a holy place by the