

The Resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament

The resurrection of Jesus is central to Christian faith and the New Testament. That God raised Jesus from the dead is the implicit - and often explicit - presupposition of all the New Testament writings. The resurrection is thus in a different category altogether from, for example Jesus miraculous conception, which is never referred to again after the birth stories in Matthew and Luke. The resurrection is not merely another example of the miracle stories told about Jesus, not even his last and greatest. **The resurrection is primarily a claim about God**, so that the phrase “who raised Jesus from the dead” becomes the new defining characteristic of God (e.g. 1Thess 1:9-10; Gal 1:1; 2 Cor 4:14; Rom 4:24; Eph 1:20, 1Pet 1:21)

Points necessary for understanding New Testament affirmations of the resurrection of Jesus

- The resurrection was an event. The formation and continuation of the Christian community was not dogged determination on the part of the disciples to hold on to Jesus’ ideals but their response in faith to God’s act in raising Jesus from the dead. From the beginning Christian faith was not good advice but Good News!
- The event was understood as an act of God, not as Jesus’ final accomplishment. The early Christian faith in the resurrection was about God, not something extra about Jesus.
- The resurrection was a unique transcendent event – a unique act of God, impinging on this world but not locatable in this world the way space-time events can be located. It is thus not the kind of event that can be studied by historians. They can only study those who believed in the event and the effects of their belief.
- From the beginning, the event was an interpreted event. As an act of God, it can be perceived and appropriated only in terms of the conceptuality of those who believed it, concepts they already had and which derived from their religious traditions and worldview.
- The concept of resurrection was already present in Jewish faith when Jesus appeared and was a commonplace in the theology of the Pharisees (Dan 2:2, Mark 12:18-27, John 11:17-24). Jewish faith in the resurrection was not a theory about the immortality of the human soul but a way of affirming the faithfulness of God. Thus the affirmation that God had raised Jesus was not merely a claim that the disciples had recovered their idealism, or that something spectacular had happened to Jesus, but a testimony to the act of God.
- The resurrection was perceived and interpreted in a (limited) variety of ways, all of them within the general framework of Jewish apocalyptic thought. Some streams of late Old Testament and early Jewish faith pictured God’ victory at the end of history as involving the resurrection of the dead, God’s final victory over the enemies of life and the vindication of God’s faithful people. It is very important to see that for the early Christians, the resurrection was not merely a spectacular thing that God did for Jesus, but represented the leading of this eschatological event, the beginning of the new age.
- Stories of discovering the empty tomb are one way of expressing faith in the resurrection, but resurrection faith is not to be identified with faith in an empty tomb or with any particular way of conceptualising the post-Easter body of Jesus. On the one hand in order to emphasize that the Risen One transcends all human and earthly modes of reality, Paul makes no reference to an empty tomb, declares that the resurrection is not a matter of flesh and blood (1Cor 15:37-50) and declares that wanting to know “how it happened” and “what kind of body” is involved is an expression of arrogant human foolishness (1Cor 15:35-36). On the other hand Luke, in order to emphasize that the resurrection really happened, that the risen Jesus was not a ghost, portrays a flesh and blood Jesus who eats fish (Luke 24:36-43). These are only two modes of the NT’s manifold witness to the resurrection. These different

ways of conceptualizing and narrating resurrection faith are not be harmonized; each points beyond itself to the transcendent reality of God's act in raising Christ from the dead. Resurrection faith is not identical with affirming the historical factuality of any of the Gospels' resurrection stories. The story is the vehicle of the faith but is not to be identified with it.

- Since the resurrection affirms the transcendent act of God, every expression of the resurrection carries the same problem of all "God-talk": speaking of the otherworldly in this-worldly terms; that is, it involves the use of mythological language. To guard against misinterpretation, it is helpful to point out some things that resurrection faith is not:
- Resurrection faith **is not** a belief in immortality, that Jesus' "immortal soul" somehow survived death.
- Resurrection faith **is not** the merely subjective experience of the powerful memory of Jesus living on in the hearts of his disciples, or the belief that Jesus calls people to commit themselves to his cause. It is not only an experience that happened to the disciples; it happened to Jesus, prior to and apart from the disciples' experience, for which it was the generating cause.
- Resurrection faith **has nothing to do** with ghosts, seances, and various para-psychological experiences.
- Resurrection faith **is not** a matter of resuscitation, a restoration to a this-worldly life.

Relevant Scriptural Texts to this background:

Second Century BC: Beginning beliefs in continued life after death and/or resurrection from the dead for individuals:

Daniel 12:2 - "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

2 Macabbees 7:14 - "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by him."

2 Macabbees 12:43-45 - "...taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought."

Wisdom 3:1-8 - "But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God... In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died... but they are at peace... their hope is full of immortality... In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble. They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them for ever."

Ground for this prepared by such texts as Pss 22, 31, 73, 118, Job 19:25-28
Also the communal focus present in Ezekiel 37

Notes based on

An Introduction to the New Testament, Eugene M. Boring WJK, Louisville 2012 (pp136-140).

See also

The Resurrection of the Messiah, Francis J. Moloney SBD, Paulist Press NY 2013.

