

Notes on Jesus' Resurrection 3: The Jewish Understanding of the Resurrection

Wright's Opening Comments

Resurrection Means More Than Just Life After Death

“Resurrection” today is often used loosely as a reference to life after death.

But for first century Jews, it had a very specific meaning: the “concrete reembodiment of those who have died.”

Jewish Views on Life After Death

There was a range of first century Jewish beliefs on life after death:

- ◆ **Sadducees**, the ruling elite, based mostly in Jerusalem, believed in no life after death.
- ◆ **Pharisees**, believed in a bodily resurrection.
- ◆ Many believed in a continued existence in a “disembodied bliss.” The Alexandrian philosopher Philo, who blended Plato’s philosophy and Jewish tradition, was among those who took this view.

The Scriptural Basis for the First Century Jewish Belief in Resurrection

Passages in the Prophetic Literature:

- ◆ Ezekiel 37 The Valley of the Dry Bones. (Here the stories of corpses coming back to life may be metaphor for the renewal of Israel).
- ◆ Isaiah 25, 26
- ◆ Daniel 12 (last chapter)

Stories of the Maccabean martyrs. (Here, “Resurrection” clearly used as a concrete word for re-embodiment.)

A quote:

- ◆ Daniel 12:3: “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

The Pharisees' (and later the Rabbis') Belief in Bodily Resurrection

It was not a belief in the raising to life of a particular individual, but a belief in the raising of all the righteous to a New World where God would rule.

It was “part of the larger package in which Israel’s God would create a new state of affairs in the space-time world, bringing about justice and people, overthrowing oppression and wickedness – and raising to life, in order to enjoy this new day, all the righteous dead. . . Resurrection, for the Pharisees, was thus part of their belief both in the goodness of the created, physical world and in the ultimate triumph of the justice of God.” [Ref 1, p. 112].

The Rabbis, the successors to the Pharisees, even debated how God would re-create the new physical body.

The Shocking Claim of First Century Christians

Early Christians made the shocking claim: the Resurrection had, in some sense, already happened.

Discussion

A New Heaven and a New Earth, Not Just “Going to Heaven”

Resurrection involved not just redemption for individuals, but a new nation; a new creation. The Bible talks primarily about a new heaven and new earth and a reemodiment in that new heaven and new earth, not about “going to heaven.”

The Lord’s Prayer: “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

- ◆ Does not mean give us a little taste of heaven down here on earth, since we hope to live up in heaven someday. Rather, it means “praying the present life of heaven down onto this earth.” God wants holiness and peace to live *here*.

In Revelations the church comes down to the earth to a shining new Jerusalem. It is a “downward movement, not an upper.”

Resurrection and the new Temple

When Jews spoke of the New Creation, they spoke of a new temple in the middle of it (as in the book of Ezekiel)

In John’s gospel, Jesus said: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will build it again.”

John suggests Jesus was referring to the temple of His body.

- ◆ Thus the Jewish idea of the destroying and rebuilding the temple became, for Christians, a metaphor for the Crucifixion and Resurrection

Resurrection and the Kingdom of God

For God to be king of a new creation, God must defeat those things that deface the creation, in particular human lives. This includes decay, corruption, and death.

“Resurrection is the gift of God in the New World, which is the sign that God really is ruling the World in the way that He always intended, so that the Kingdom of God entails the Resurrection.”

When God is truly king, death will be defeated.

The Symbolic Rhythm of Feasting and Fasting in Christian Life

Celtic saints:

- ◆ affirmed the goodness of God’s creation
- ◆ also knew they need to be holy, and were acetic.
- ◆ They valued God’s creation without being hedonistic

Pharisees had a symbolic rhythm of feasting and fasting. Christianity at its best shares this same rhythm:

- ◆ feast: to affirm the world is God’s world
- ◆ fast: to affirm the world is not what God wants it be.

For Christians, the greatest feast of all is the Resurrection Feast – Easter

“We live as feasting people who sometimes fast because we know there is more to come.”

Resurrection and Death

Modern culture often suppresses, hides the reality of death -- analogous to Christians who try to ignore Good Friday.

- ◆ “You only get Easter if you actually agonize through Good Friday.”

In first century, death, often horrible, was a daily reality.

For a Jew in the first century, who believed that humans beings were made in God’s image, that human life was good, God-given, wonderful, death of a loved one was not only horrible, but was a *theological affront*.

- ◆ “Then you feel the promise of the Resurrection coming through the middle.”

The Holocaust and the Promise of Resurrection

Where was God in the holocaust?

God’s presence in suffering, God’s suffering with people, is a modern insight into God. (although some first century Jews may have been prepared to say a little bit of it), an insight that both Jews and Christians can share. It also offers a way we can dialog with the Jews about Resurrection.

The First Century as the “Right Time”

Jesus came in the fullness of time. Paul, in Galatians 4:4-5: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.” (NRSV)

“The history of God and world, the history of God and Israel, had strangely been moving towards this point.” Perhaps the Jews “needed to go through the experience of exile in order then to know that there was a new life on the other side, that there was something out beyond that was different.”

Summary

In the first century Jewish world, Resurrection was not a loose way of talking about life after death. “It was about God remaking, re-embodying human beings to a new sort of life to live in the new world that God was going to make.”

Further Reading

- 1. The Meaning of Jesus. Two Visions.** Marcus J. Borg; N. T. Wright. Harper San Francisco, 1998. *The main points of Wright’s opening comments in the video are also presented in the first section of Chapter 7 (“The Transforming Reality of the Bodily Resurrection”)*