

Notes on Jesus' Resurrection 4: Paul's Understanding of Jesus' Resurrection

Wright's Opening Comments

Paul's Letters

Paul's letters are the earliest written record we have of Jesus' life and resurrection, written in the 50's

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written from the 60's to the 90's.

Pauls' "Gospel"

Paul's narrative of the "good news" – Paul's "gospel," has always included the Jesus' death, burial and resurrection of Jesus

The Resurrection is not "bolted on" in Paul's theology, but rather "woven in through the fabric of his thought." We can see this, for example, in:

- ◆ Romans 6: Paul's theology of baptism
- ◆ Colossians 3: living Christian Ethics
- ◆ Romans 11: the future of Israel

1 Corinthians 15: Introduction

Paul's main exposition of his views on the Resurrection

Why did Paul write this?

- ◆ The Corinthians had a tendency to "collapse" Christians teachings back into pagan religion. In particular, they had a tendency to view the afterlife as a bodiless immortality of the soul.
- ◆ Paul is trying to teach them "eschatology" -- the story of God's plan to put the world right in Jesus (Eschatology = the branch of theology dealing with the ultimate destiny of mankind and the world)
 - In the middle of this, he is trying to teach them the Christian view of our future – a bodily resurrection

The Climax of the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15: 1-11)

Paul starts 1 Corinthians 15 by reviewing his "gospel:" The Messiah died for our sins, was buried and was raised "according to the scriptures" – that is, these events were the culmination and climax of the whole story the scriptures had been telling

He marshals evidence: 500 eyewitnesses

He stresses his “seeing” of the risen Jesus as “last of all”

The Two Marks in the God’s Victory over Death (1 Corinthians 15:20-28)

This is the “big story.”

The enemy is death itself.

The victory of God over the forces of evil, over death, has split into two:

- ◆ Victory mark 1: began with Jesus’ resurrection
- ◆ Victory mark 2: our own resurrection (“corruption and decay will not have the final word in this universe.”)

“Jesus’ resurrection is the beginning of the end,” and the resurrection of all believers is (one feature of) the final end of the ‘end.’” [1]

We now live between these two marks. “The world as a whole has entered the last days, in which Jesus rules as Messiah and Lord. These days will continue until all that opposes or threatens his rule has been dealt with. Finally, death itself – the ultimately dehumanizing and anticreation power – will be destroyed, and God will be all in all.” [1]

Transformed Physicality (1 Corinthians 15:29-58)

What is this new resurrected body?

“The resurrection body possesses both continuity and discontinuity with the existing body.”

- ◆ For example the plant and its seed in 1 Cor. 15:38 give us an example of this continuity, discontinuity.
 - “The plant grows from the seed yet is a different sort of a thing.” [1]

The resurrection body should be thought of as a “transformation of the existing body into a new mode of physicality.” [1] – “transformed physicality.”

Main difference between the present body and our resurrected body is that the first body is a “soul” body; the resurrected body is a “spirit” body. That is, the difference is a difference in what “animates” the body, what holds the body in being.

- ◆ Verse:44: “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.” (NRSV)
 - Wright suggests this is a misleading translation:
 - “physical body” (*soma psychikon*); is better translated a “soulish” body
 - “spiritual body” (*soma pneumatikon*)
 - Our present body is animated by “soul”
 - Our future body will be animated / held in existence by God’s *pneuma* (God’s spirit)
- ◆ Verse 50: “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, . . .”
 - This does not mean the resurrection body is “nonphysical.” Flesh for Paul, does not mean corporeal, but rather that which can decay, is corruptible, perishable, and at times, rebellious.

What We Do Now Matters Because of the Continuity of This Life with the Next (1 Corinthians 15:58)

1 Cor. 15:58: “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

The point of this:

- ◆ “What you do in the present body matters. What you do in the present body is in continuity with who you are going to be in the future body.”
- ◆ “. . . the resurrection, precisely because it will possess continuity as well as discontinuity with the present life, and will therefore be the reaffirmation of the present, this worldly existence, gives not only hope for the future but a sense of purpose and meaning to the present.” [1]
- ◆ Paul further discusses the meaning of the transformation of the present body in:
 - End of Philippians Chap 3,
 - Beginning of 2 Corinthians Chapter 5

Summary:

Paul holds to a robustly bodily view of the resurrection. It is a very Jewish view that involves a bodily resurrection, and clearly implies an empty tomb.

Discussion

We Are People of the New Creation, Looking Forward to the Completion of the New Creation

Our culture lives in the “story” that world history reached its climax in the 18th century Enlightenment. But as Christians, we know the climax of history was Jesus’ Resurrection

The “story” we must live in is that:

- ◆ “God has begun the New Creation” with the first mark of victory over evil and death of Jesus’ Resurrection. “We are people of the New Creation, looking forward to the completion of the New Creation, and responsible in the present for bringing bits of that future into birth here and now.”

Paul was telling stories and acting symbolically

- ◆ His “planting” of churches, building communities in which men and women, people from different cultures could live as family (very counter cultural for the times) was symbolic of the new humanity, “The body of Christ;” of God’s New Creation

Living within this story today will require:

- ◆ poetic sensibility
- ◆ resources of the imagination, music, art

to reconstruct the imaginative (not imaginary) sense of the world necessary to grasp the truth

The Present Body and the Resurrected Body: Seed and Corn; Tent and Temple. The Present Body as Shadow of Our Future Self.

The corn and seed analogy

- ◆ Looking just at a seed of corn and having no other knowledge, it would be hard to imagine its future transformed physicality as a stalk of corn.

The Tent and the Temple

- ◆ 2 Cor. 5:1-4: “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling – if indeed, when we have taken it off, we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed. . .”
- ◆ This passage has echoes of the Old Testament stories of the tabernacle in the wilderness, which is finally placed within the physical temple

Those sick are often described as “shadows” of their former self.

- ◆ But compared to the transformed physicality of the future, “you are just the shadow of your future self”

What We Do Now Does Make a Difference and Will Be Lasting

What we do in this life, in this body:

- ◆ acts of justice, mercy
- ◆ creation of art, beauty
- ◆ writing about truth
- ◆ living a holy life

will not be meaningless. We are not “simply oiling the wheels of a machine that will one day go off a cliff”

1 Cor. 3:10-13: Paul talks of laying a foundation and building on it with gold and silver and precious stones (a temple image).

- ◆ We do not know how, but we are promised that what we do now that is worthy will someday be embodied in the New Creation. There will be continuity between the present creation and the new (God will not chunk the present creation in the trash and start all over again)

Our Lives are Part of the Story of God's Covenantal Plan for Creation

We must live with integrity because the story in which we as Christians live is the story that includes God's story with God's Creation, with Israel, with Jesus. And as part of that story, we are making a new story for those after us

The Transformation Which God will Effect in the End Should Infect Us Now

Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world [age], but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." (NRSV)

Means:

- ◆ "This transformation which God will effect at the end, is to "infect" you now."
- ◆ That "infection" should be in our minds, so we understand God's will (God's plan and purpose)

A Bit of the Past, a Bit of the Future Coming Together in the Present

The Resurrection includes

- ◆ Jesus' Resurrection coming up to us from the past,
- ◆ our own Resurrection coming down to us in the future,
- ◆ both meeting us in the present, washing over us and changing us.

Because we live between the past of Jesus' resurrection, and the future of our own resurrection (God final victory over death) we should live as "Exodus People; we have left Egypt behind. We no longer belong to the land of slavery.

- ◆ We can find Exodus language in
 - Romans 6
 - 1 Corinthian 10's discussion of Baptism

Our life is already somehow bound up in the Christ who has died and who has risen

- ◆ Colossians 3:3-4: "for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory." (NRSV).
- ◆ Means: "Your true life is already somehow already bound up with Christ, the risen Christ, in the heavenly places, with God."

This is what sacraments are all about, bringing to us in the present a bit of the future and a bit of the past

- ◆ For example, Eucharist: a bit of the future (the feast to come), a bit of the past (the Last Supper)

Conclusion

“We live in this odd interval in God’s purpose in history, between the resurrection of Jesus in the past, and our own future resurrection, and God’s remaking of the whole world in the future, and these two together hold us in a newly storied world, in a new imaginative world, in which we can live and work as Christians and in which we know that what we do in the present is not in vain, is not going to be thrown away. We are building, hopefully with gold and silver and precious stones, and when the day appears, then that work will appear with it.”

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 second section of Chapter 7 (“The Transforming Reality of the Bodily Resurrection”)*