

Notes on Jesus' Resurrection 5: The Gospel Writer's Understanding of Jesus' Resurrection

Wright's Opening Comments

Introductory Matters

Gospels were written later than Paul.

The stories of the Resurrection in the gospels are very "simple," unadorned with theological comments or Old Testament references.

The Resurrection itself not described. Rather, they describe the discovery of the empty tomb and meetings with Jesus

Do not Fit with Standard Jewish Expectations of Resurrection

The gospels accounts do not fit in with the standard Jewish expectation on resurrection, derived from Daniel 12, where the righteous who are resurrected will shine like stars. Jesus does not shine like a star – as one might expect he would if the stories had been made up.

Are Not Like Pagan Stories of Apparitions of Dead Heroes

The gospel accounts are quite unlike pagan stories where recently departed heroes come back as apparitions

Free of Old Testament Illusions and Echoes

The resurrection accounts in the Gospels are free of Old Testament illusions and echoes. We cannot accuse that the stories are just weavings of Old Testaments texts.

Emphasize the Surprise of the Disciples

The gospels emphasize the surprise of the disciples to the Resurrection. They were shocked by Jesus' Resurrection and were clearly not expecting it.

Women, Although Not Considered Reliable Witnesses at the Time, Play Front and Center Role in Telling the Story

The gospels accounts have women going to the tomb first and telling the story first.

Yet women were not considered reliable witnesses in the culture.

It is unlikely someone would “make up” a story with women playing such a front and center role.

Strangeness of the Nature of Jesus’ Body

The stories in the gospels accounts of the Resurrection are at their strangest when they talk about the nature of Jesus’ resurrected body.

It seems to be the same body (still has the marks of the crucifixion) but with different properties:

- ◆ pass through locked doors
- ◆ not immediately recognizable in some strange way
 - In John they were afraid to ask who he was (why did they feel any need to ask?) because they knew it was the Lord.

The stories are about a transformed physicality (as Paul discusses), but without all of Paul’s theology and analysis. The mood of the stories seems to be what you might expect from stories derived from eyewitnesses accounts, presented “as is,” unbelievable as they may be. The alternative is the very unlikely hypothesis that each gospel writer took Paul’s earlier accounts, and stripped out all the theology and explanation of the strangeness of the stories to come up with the accounts we find in the gospels.

Puzzles and Problems in the Gospel Accounts

It is difficult to reconcile the various Gospel accounts on matters of:

- ◆ where did Jesus appear after his resurrection? Galilee? Jerusalem? Both?
- ◆ how many women came to the tomb. Which angels did they see?

Yet even today newspapers reports of same event can differ. The discrepancies in such details between the Gospel accounts have a certain “truth” in them: they are the kinds of discrepancies in details one might expect in different accounts of the same event.

Differences Among the Gospels

Matthew and Mark are similar accounts; but Mark breaks off (Wright feels we have lost the actual ending of Mark)

Luke tells the story of the Resurrection as story of a New Creation.

John has more character vignettes. “John’s invitation come and have breakfast sounds . . . like the invitation to anyone who has toiled all night and taken nothing now needs to meet the mysterious stranger on the beach.”

Discussion

Why Four Gospels and Not Just One?

The four gospels are a four-fold witness that gives us the full Jesus.

Consider biographies – each may tell us something about the person that the others do not.

The apocryphal Gospel of Thomas – Wright feels is a late gospel, largely derived from the other Gospels.

Wright doubts the existence of a source “Q” (a hypothetical source of stories and sayings about Jesus that was available to Matthew and Luke but not to Mark).

Some Elements in the Stories That Provide Continuity with Jewish Tradition

Women would be expected to anoint the dead body

Jesus does not dazzle; although God’s messengers do, as they do in Old Testament Stories from Jewish tradition.

A Gospel Without the Resurrection?

If there had not been an resurrection, one might still imagine continued stories about Jesus. But it would not be good news (“gospel”) – it would just be a story of another failed Messiah – descriptions of poignant or perhaps provocative memories. It would be part of a greater story – the Old Testament longing for a Messiah who would bring God’s justice and peace to the world – that was still in search of an ending.

The Jesus Seminar

Jesus Seminar starts with assumption that dead people don’t rise.

Attempts to then explain the resurrection stories starting with this assumption has lead to wildly improbable scenarios.

God is Always Mysteriously Present

God is not outside the world, occasionally intervening.

God is always a mysterious presence, sometimes a grieving presence, and at times a powerful presence where God does things we did not expect – as in the story of Israel, and most unexpected of all, in Jesus and the Resurrection.

How Does a Suffering God Help Us?

God suffers with God's people. But the Resurrection tells us God suffers *in order to* take the evil and pain of the world and deal with it.

God does not suffer just to “wallow” along with us.

A powerful God who strides through the world oblivious to pain is not appealing. At the same time, if there had not been a Resurrection, a suffering God would be a “negative pantheistic god” -- a god who feels our pain but will never do anything about it.

Event and Meaning

There is a great challenge in getting the message of the Resurrection across to modern skeptics and “Bored Christians.”

We should read John's gospel as poetry, feeling the symbolism and metaphoric meaning.

We have tended to separate event and meaning in our culture: but we can believe both that the events in the bible happened, and the levels of meaning implied in the stories.

John is very alert to the symbolism of numbers. Note that in the Burial and Resurrection of Jesus in John, on the seventh day God rested in the tomb – the work of creation finished. Then Jesus rises on the first day of the week: the beginning of the New Creation. We are the beneficiaries and agents of God's New Creation.

How Do We Know Things?

What is truth? A modern point of view is that truth is only the stuff you can put in a “test tube” (or the historical equivalent of a test tube): scientific truth and objective history.

Bernard Lonergan, a Catholic philosopher, turns this modern notion around when he claims that the *primary mode of knowing is love*.

This Resurrection stories are about the love of the creator God, saying to whole cosmos “its okay. I've got you. We're coming through this one.”

The “truth” of the beauty of music, scenery, literature, a sunrise, is far more “important” than just the “truth” of objective facts. The Resurrection encompasses both kinds of truth.

Summary

Wright's Closing Comments:

“Now there is a whole new world. That whole new world began on Easter morning. It is continuing with the work of the Spirit, God's spirit, Jesus' spirit, giving new life to people and to the world now. It will reach its own consummation in God's eventual

New World, but in this process -- although of course we learn to be suspicious of knowledge of this sort and that, and to test things out -- we are basically offered a way of looking at the world which is a way modeled on love, on the love of God for creation, on the love of God for Jesus, and on that Jesus-shaped suffering and victorious love of God, coming out through Jesus, coming out of the tomb on Easter morning to say to us, its okay, we're coming through this one and you are my people now for the world.

Reference

Video. **Jesus' Resurrection. Then and Now.** N. T. Wright. Tabgha Foundation, Minneapolis. Available from CARES (Center for Advanced Religious External Studies), P.O. Box 863, Forest, VA, 24551. 800-665-2149. <http://www.caresonline.com/>