

DEATH AND RESURRECTION

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The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" What ever could such a strange report mean, 1900 years ago or now? If we are honest with ourselves, it doesn't mean much. Nevertheless, this report turned the world upside down, as some unbelieving Thessalonians once put it.

The most frequently presented meaning that I have encountered in the churches and among Christian people is about as follows. Jesus was the son of God (whatever that may mean - and we usually don't really think about it), and the point of his being around was that people should believe that he was. Despite astonishing miracles, most people still didn't believe it, so after he was killed, God arranged to reanimate the corpse, and the resuscitated Jesus visited his friends. This would convince anyone, for everyone knows that dead people stay dead; therefore if one gets up from his grave, he must be supernatural -- hence the son of God. And in consequence of this, it behooves us to believe it also.

Altogether aside from the question whether or not this is what the New Testament offers as the significance of the resurrection (and I have grave doubts about it), the trouble with such a view is that it really doesn't convince us -- and convinced no one in the first century, either. Change the names, and the point becomes clear. John Smith was executed recently for sedition, by electrocution. And now his friends are going around saying he is the son of God, because his grave is empty and they have seen him since. What is our response? Well, first we suspect that, if all this is true, the executioner didn't do his job properly -- John wasn't dead when they took him to his tomb. Or, if our doubts here are resolved, we suspect his friends of snitching the corpse from the casket, or the mortician of saving suit-money by dumping the body in the lime-pit. Or perhaps we suspect grave-robbers who needed a cadaver. And what of their seeing John Smith? We may say the friends are liars; or we may believe them, and thus invite them to visit a psychiatrist. Or perhaps we may believe they really saw John -- hence we suggest that the Psychological Research Society look into it, along with the many other reports of ghosts and assorted dead men who return.

Or perhaps we do something else, but let's face it -- we certainly wouldn't decide he was the son of God. And we wouldn't start a new religion. Even if we came to believe that John Smith's body really did come back to life, it would scarcely become the central point of meaning in our lives. It would not occasion a revolution that would enable us to upset the world.

Another interpretation that I often meet with appears a little more respectable. It is that since Jesus rose from the dead, we may be assured that we have immortal souls and will not really be dead when we die.

Such believers scarcely mean we too will visit our friends after we die and have meals with them. The imperishable something in me usually called a soul hardly expresses itself by eating fish. The non sequitur of this viewpoint should give us pause. Even more striking, though, is its radical disagreement with the New Testament itself. Paul's great discussion of the resurrection (I. Cor. 15) is directed against this very view -- that we have immortal souls which live on. Such a view fits well into Platonism; it is at odds with the New Testament. And it has no logical connection with the resurrection of Jesus as narrated in the Gospels.

A variant of this viewpoint, which avoids its worst pitfalls, is the one which says the meaning of Jesus' resurrection is that it proves we shall likewise be resurrected (thus avoiding the Platonic "immortal soul"), and the obvious gap between the crassness of Jesus' appearances and the "life of the soul". If we could believe this -- and I doubt that we can, although many of us would like to very much -- we are faced with the plain fact that the Gospels do not tell the story this way. Do they have Jesus appearing to his disciples and telling them, "Just as I have survived death, you too will rise up?" Do they preach, "You too will live again!"? On the contrary, they talk of such remote things as judgment, and repentance, and baptism, and entering the community of believers, and eating with them, and thus "knowing the Lord" -- odd language indeed, with little apparent connection with a raised dead man.

No, none of the above viewpoints is the proclamation of the New Testament. The resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of the New Testament kerygma, and none of these is the kerygma. The first of them is only possible against a backdrop of eighteenth-century natural law (plus a dash of mythology in the form of believing in a "son of God"); the Galilean fishermen were scarcely so trained. The second hinges on a Platonic framework for understanding, and Peter was a poor candidate for the Academy; the New Testament as a whole is thoroughly uncongenial to "immortality" and its friends. The variant form of the second is more akin to what one would run into in first-century Palestine; but it could have had little meaning outside, where the gospel quickly spread (for example, see Acts 17 -- resurrection of dead men is cause only for mockery among Greeks; and even 1 Cor. 15 shows that the Greek Christians found real trouble with the notion of resurrection).

The New Testament proclamation is instead made intelligible primarily by the same categories as those in which it was first formulated -- the categories provided by the Scriptures, the Old Testament. And while there plainly were many other influences at work in early Christianity, often quite profoundly affecting the way in which the message was expounded, it is nevertheless true that without understanding first of all the Old Testament apprehension of revelatory event, we cannot possibly come to grips with the real intent of the resurrection message. We shall therefore examine some connections between the two, as they present themselves in the New Testament.

It has become increasingly clear in recent years that the decisive and formative event in the Hebrew memory was the Exodus. The first article in this series, exodus--look to the rock, by Bernhard Anderson spelled out the meaning of this event for the Community of Israel; it is suggested that the reader refresh his understanding by re-reading that article. The Hebrew apprehension of God's acts was forever stamped with the form of the Exodus. It was the revelatory event par excellence, providing the clue to understanding all other events. It was not even so much a matter of showing the character of God as of showing how he acted.

One of the striking things about the prophetic interpretation of the Babylonian exile and the Return which followed is that the whole experience was explained in terms of the Exodus memory. Once more the children of Israel were in slavery in a strange land; and there was nothing to expect but that once more the Lord would mightily deliver. The parallels are drawn in great detail, particularly by Second-Isaiah. (May I suggest that the reader open his Bible and read the passages cited?)

As the people were enslaved in Egypt and their leaders complained, and the Lord's name was despised, while the Lord determined that they should know His name and that it was He that spoke -- just so was it now and so again they would know that it is the Lord who speaks (Isa.52:3-6). As the Lord defeated the powers of the deep in the creation, and had opened the bottom of the sea as a highway for the redeemed to pass over in the Exodus, so would He do now (Isa.51:9-12). The desert, with its mountains and valleys, is the new barrier, not the sea; very well--the Lord will flatten out the mountains, and fill up the valleys, so that there will be a highway for His people to make their Exodus (Isa.40:1-5). As the Lord had led His people through the wilderness, caring for them, even giving them light from the pillar of fire in the night-time, even so will He do again (Isa.42:14-16). As He gave water to His people in the desert that they might not thirst, so will He again (Isa.43:19-21); despite the constant grumbling of the people, He nevertheless forgives them, as of old (vv. 22-28). He destroyed their enemies in the sea, chariots, horses, and army -- so will He again (Isa.43:14-17; 63:1-6). Such parallels can be multiplied at great length; the most fruitful way to grasp the significance of the Exodus for Second-Isaiah's understanding of the Exile and Return is to read over the story of the Exodus, and follow it by reading of Second-Isaiah (Isa.40-66--actually this section involves more than one writer, but the whole block is imbued with the same Exodus-faith in relation to the events surrounding the Return).

It may seem a bit silly to us that they should have been so "literal" in their application of God's great Act of old to the present; but I am not so sure they were "literal"--for example, I doubt that the Prophet expected mountains to tumble down into the valleys for the Jews' benefit. Rather, this is a dramatic way of affirming the activity of the same Lord in again delivering His people. The old "cosmological myth" of God defeating Rahab becomes a "dramaturgical myth" portraying God's defeat of the powers

that enslave His people. The old myths, legends, and memories are used to describe the present, and in so doing, the faith that arose from the Exodus animates the understanding of the present -- we see God as acting in the present in like fashion as He did among our fathers.

When we realize that the Old Testament writers utilized the Exodus memory as a framework to affirm God's "new thing" in the present, it should not surprise us when we discover the New Testament writers doing the same thing. The extent to which they do so, however, may escape our notice, partly because we are so prone to suppose that the Evangelists are historians. They are not; they quite deliberately chose their materials and told their story in the way they did in order to declare what God had done among them and the new life they had received in this deed. They are preachers of a Gospel -- good news of what God has done.

"What God has done" -- but, what has God done? To every member of the Hebrew faith-community, it was plain -- God visited His people in Egypt, and brought them out with a mighty deliverance, as the Passover reminded them over and over, as the Psalms they sang told them. The way in which God acts is known -- He acts Exodus-wise.

The Gospel of Mark works through this theme many times, and a look at some of its variations may make more comprehensible Paul's cryptic remark about the Rock our fathers drank from in the wilderness -- "that Rock was Christ", he says (I Cor. 10:1-5).

The first time through, it is in quite brief and unobtrusive form-- we can easily miss it. Jesus first appears in 1:9; his first act is to enter the water, coming out only to be driven into the wilderness, there to remain forty days for "testing." For us the point is easily overlooked; but for one who remembers God's might Act of old -- the Act -- it is plain as day. Israel went through the waters of the sea, "baptized in the sea" as Paul says (I Cor. 10:1-2), coming out only to be driven into the wilderness, there to remain forty years for "testing" (cf. Hebrews 3:7-11, from Psalm 95). Of course, you and I know that Israel failed in its testing (as Hebrews tells us, quoting the Psalm and echoing Exodus to Deuteronomy), whereas we are not told how Jesus came out in his testing -- but we learn very shortly.

Another instance is a little plainer -- in Mark 3 Jesus withdraws with his disciples to the sea, which protects him from their pursuit, he ascends "the mountain" ("the hills", RSV, is not literal) where he covenants with his twelve disciples. Moses leading the twelve tribes to the sea, crossing to bar pursuit, and going up on "the mountain" (Sinai or Horeb) to make a covenant with the twelve tribes, is immediately apparent. We might even incline to recall the preceding two signs done before the elders of Israel (one involving a sick hand!), and the two signs Jesus does before the elders of Israel (2:1-12; 3:1-6) -- but the elders of old believed, the new elders instead plan to destroy the one God has sent.

Again, in 4:35-5:20, the theme of crossing the Red Sea appears once more. The Twelve are crossing the sea with Jesus; the wind and sea frighten them so in an echo of Psalm 44:23-26 they wake him from sleep. Jesus commands the wind and sea, which obey him, and they cross in safety. They inquire, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" But reaching the other side, they discover a Legion of demons, the enemies of man; at the Lord's command, they are drowned in the very sea from which the Twelve have been delivered. The question asked by the disciples comes from their hardness of heart (6:52 and often); they should have remembered:

"We have heard with our ears, O God,  
Our fathers have told us,  
What deeds thou didst perform in their days,  
In the days of old." (Psalm 44)

If they failed to remember the crossing of the Sea, and Who commanded the wind and waves, they might have remembered the Psalms -- 44, 65, 69, 89, 106, and many others rehearse the acts of God in delivering His People at the Sea. Since you and I are remembering, the picture is plain -- once again the twelve tribes cross through the sea, in safety despite the threatening waves; the Lord commands the wind and waves, which obey Him. Reaching the other side in safety, the Lord casts their enemies, the Legions of Pharoah, into the sea, where they drown. Of course, when Mark asks questions like, "Who then is this, inasmuch as wind and wave obey him?" he is asking us, trying to elicit from us a remembrance and a response; likewise his "Do you not yet understand?" (8:21).

Another phase of the Exodus is recalled by the wilderness feedings. In Mark 6 Jesus feeds a vast multitude where there is no food -- yet all are filled with bread and meat. Can we avoid recalling Exodus 16, where the Lord feeds Israel in the wilderness with bread (manna) and meat (quail)? Occasion arises again, in Mark 8, for Jesus to feed a multitude with bread and meat; and Numbers 11 gives a second rehearsal of the multitude of old being given bread and meat in the wilderness.

Mark 10 finds Jesus across the Jordan (where Moses was at the last), and the topic is the law -- the law of Deuteronomy, in fact. And Jesus reinterprets the law for his followers. Just so, Moses stood in Trans-Jordan and reinterpreted the law, delivering Deuteronomy as a "second Law." At this point Joshua took over from Moses in the original Exodus story -- he crossed the river and marched up to Jericho, taking it, and from there defeating the other kings of the region, including the king of Jerusalem. Jesus (the Greek form of Joshua) also crosses over, goes up to Jericho, and from there goes on to Jerusalem -- which he enters as King.

Although we have sampled only a few places in Mark where he works on the basis of an Exodus model, it is clear that this pattern was an important one for him. It seems that Jesus re-enacts the roles of Moses, Joshua, and the whole children of Israel. My own study of Mark persuades me that the

last is the most significant role for Mark's understanding of the meaning of Jesus and God's act in him.

Now what could be the point of all this? It might be a scheme of allegories; but I think not. It is, rather, another instance of what we saw happening in the days of the Exile and Return, and what happened over and over in Israel's history -- the present is understood as a new act of God, and it is presented as a New Exodus. The parallels between Israel in Egypt and Israel in Babylon are obviously easier to present than those between Israel in Egypt and all Mankind in Mark's day. Mark's device was one I should not have thought of; but then, nobody has asked me to write a Gospel. So we might summarize Mark's purpose in all this (remembering that we are missing the wonder and the power of it by skipping the actual details) by saying that he presents Jesus, the man who lived and died in Palestine, as an act of the same God who brought our fathers up out of Egypt, as an act which brings about in our day what the act of old did then -- a New People is brought into being, a People which calls itself Israel (or New Israel), related to the God who created it by a Covenant (or New Covenant), a People which before this was No People but now is God's People, which before this had not received mercy but now has received mercy (I Peter 2:10).

The Creation of the People of God -- this is what the Exodus was, and this is what Mark offers as the meaning of Jesus.

But there is a final, climactic passing through the sea for Mark, an event which brings the No-People in Egypt through the dark waters of death up into life as a People. All the other Exodus themes point toward this, just as do many of the healing stories of Mark (where he repeatedly uses the word "raise up" which occurs in 16:6 for Jesus' resurrection). As Paul called the crossing through the sea a "baptism" (I Cor.10:1-2), so Mark calls the final event -- the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus -- a "baptism" (Mark 10:38-40). The final crossing of the Great Sea is done by Jesus alone, in darkness through the realm of Death. Yet he is not alone--for we have been united with him, by "baptism" (how striking, that our union with the great Exodus accomplished by God in Jesus Christ should be by going into the water, and rising out of it!). "All of us who have been baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:3-4). "We know that our self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin... But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him...The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God." (Romans 6:6-10).

The final crossing of the sea, and deliverance from the power of our enemies is Jesus' death and resurrection; but our baptism, says Paul,

means that we participate in this Exodus. That is, his death and resurrection are ours. Before we were No-People, enslaved to the powers that are our enemies; now, we are a People, free from those powers, free for a new future, free to the possibilities of life. We are a People who have come through the sea of Death, and have risen to life -- genuine, authentic life -- to find that we have made a Covenant with the One who brought us here, sealed with the blood of one who died. As this New People, we celebrate this New Exodus, in a New Passover, drinking the Blood of the New Covenant from the Cup of Death (Mark 10:38-39; 14:23-24; 14:36; I Cor. 11: 25-26).

That we are a New People, we never forget; the future is open to us, for we remember our past -- that with him we passed through the dark sea of death, and with him we have been raised into a new life, life as His people Who so delivered us.

Hence the meaning of the resurrection, whether it be as presented by Mark or Paul or by any other New Testament preacher, is one which is concerned primarily with the creation of a Church, with the redemption of us men, with our change from death to life. The historical event which centered in Jesus was declared in this way; that the modern historian would try to describe that event without explaining it in this way matters not at all -- though, as moderns ourselves, with modern questions such as "What literally happened?", we shall certainly ask the historian's aid in answering this secondary question. But in any case, the fundamental problem is the meaning the first Christians saw in the event; for no kind of event in the "literal" sense, not even a revived corpse, would suffice to account for such a faith and such a proclamation.

Such a faith, such a proclamation -- such an understanding of a recent happening, such an understanding of ourselves in the present -- these are inexplicable. They are, indeed, a miracle. And it is the significance of the report which is our first concern. No conclusion of the historian could stagger us more than this meaning found in one event of history.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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