

# Notes on Jesus' Resurrection 2: Jesus, the Resurrected Messiah

## Wright's Opening Comments

### What Kind of Movement was Early Christianity? Why Did it Arise?

Early Christianity was:

- ◆ a *Messiah* movement
- ◆ a *Kingdom of God* movement
- ◆ a *Resurrection* movement

All of these terms -- "messiah," "Kingdom of God," and "Resurrection," had particular meanings and expectations for first century Jews that Jesus' life did not seem to fulfil. Yet, early Christians confidently and joyfully believed Jesus was the Messiah, that the Kingdom of God had arrived, and the Resurrection had taken place. What had happened that allowed early Christianity -- which grew out of first century Judaism -- to have such a faith?

### Christianity was a Messiah Movement

There were many messianic movements in the century and a half before and after Jesus:

- ◆ Judas Maccabeus 160's BC
- ◆ Simeon bar Kochba 130's AD

In general, Jewish expectations of a Messiah were that a Messiah would:

- ◆ defeat the enemy (in Jesus' day: Rome)
- ◆ purify / rebuild the temple

So: "The crucifixion of a Messiah did not say to a first-century Jew that he was the true Messiah and that the kingdom had come. It said exactly the opposite." [1]

The failed Messiah might be considered a very righteous man, a man living in heaven with God, but *by definition* he was not the Messiah.

When a messianic movement's founder died or was executed:

- ◆ the movement usually ended.
- ◆ the movement occasionally gathered about a new Messiah, often a relative of the original Messiah (for example, the messianic movement of Judas the Galilean in 6 AD passed to his sons and grandsons in the 50's, to a descendant Menahem in the war of 66-70, then to Eleazar. [1])

Christianity could have done the latter -- James, the brother of Jesus, was head of the church in Jerusalem. Yet early Christianity never considered James the Messiah.

Even though Jesus had failed the Jewish expectations of a Messiah, had been crucified by the Roman, early Christians continued to proclaim him as the Messiah to both Jews and Gentiles. Why? What had happened to cause them to confidently make this claim?

(The early Christian answer: because of the Jesus' Resurrection)

## **Christianity was a Kingdom of God Movement**

### ***The Kingdom of God: A Revolutionary Slogan***

For first century Jews, the "Kingdom of God" or the "Kingdom of Heaven" was a revolutionary slogan with heavy political import: it was not talk about a *place* where God ruled, but rather a declaration that *God would rule* -- and not Caesar or Herod

### ***The Kingdom of God: Isaianic "Good News"***

For many first century Jews (including Jesus), the term "Kingdom of God" also drew meaning from Old Testament Scripture, including Isaiah's vision of the "Kingdom of God in Isaiah 40-55 (summarized in the passage Isaiah 52:7-12).

The "Kingdom of God" in Isaiah ("Isaianic gospel or "good news") included three hopes:

- ◆ 1. a return from Israel's exile; a new Exodus
- ◆ 2. the defeat of evil
- ◆ 3. the return of God to Zion

### ***The Kingdom of God: Renewal of the Cosmos***

More broadly, for first century Jews, the "Kingdom of God" ultimately implied

- ◆ "the renewal of the world,
- ◆ the establishment of God's justice for the cosmos." [2].

### ***Paul: The Kingdom of God as Shorthand for what Christianity Was All About***

Early Christianity thought of itself as a "Kingdom of God" movement. Paul used the term "Kingdom of God" as shorthand for what Christianity was all about.

Christians declared that in some significant sense the "Kingdom of God" had already come (Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 describes the coming of the Kingdom as a two stage process, Jesus the first stage, and a coming second stage in which the Jewish hopes for the renewal of the cosmos and the full rule of God would be fulfilled).

Yet how could the Christians -- coming from their first century Jewish background -- believe the Kingdom of God had, in some significant sense -- already come? Rome still ruled. Evil still had not been defeated. Justice for the cosmos still had not come.

(The early Christian answer: because of the Jesus' Resurrection)

## **Christianity was a Resurrection Movement**

In the earliest writings in the Old Testament (Paul's letters), Jesus' death and Resurrection are woven throughout Christian theology and worship.

First century Jews had specific ideas about the meaning of "resurrection:"

- ◆ a metaphor for the return from exile,
- ◆ a sense the righteous and martyrs would get their bodies back at the end of history

Christians declared that the "Resurrection" *had already occurred*. Yet anyone could see that Jewish expectations for resurrection had not occurred:

- ◆ Israel was still "in exile," under the domination of a pagan empire,
- ◆ it was not the end of history with martyrs walking about with new bodies

So why would Christians say the Resurrection *had already occurred*? And why had they made "resurrection" such an integral part of their worship practice and theology?

(The early Christian answer: because of Jesus' Resurrection).

## **Christianity was not a Personality Cult**

The details of Jesus' life, his personality, his charisma -- however compelling they may have been to those living in the first century -- cannot by themselves explain the movement of Christianity.

Without the Resurrection, the movement of Christianity could never have arisen in the form it did.

## **Concluding Question**

"What precisely did they [the early Christians] mean by Resurrection, and what do we say about the great claims that they made?"

## **Questions and Discussion**

### **The Title of Messiah**

There was a great deal of Messianic expectations in Judaism during Jesus' time. Basic Jewish expectation for a Messiah (which continues through Judaism today) are that the Messiah will:

- ◆ defeat the enemy
- ◆ rebuild the temple

Some sects or movements in Judaism have redefined

- ◆ who the enemy is,
- ◆ what the true temple is,

but all have retained these basic expectations.

## **Jesus and the Temple**

In Jesus' time, some Jewish groups had redefined what the true temple was. For example

- ◆ Pharisees (a lay movement, based away from Jerusalem) -- when praying, fasting, giving alms, studying the Torah, it is as if you are in the temple)
- ◆ Essenes -- their community was the real temple (Herod's physical temple considered corrupt)

Jesus' sense of the "true temple" was also probably not the "bricks and mortar" building, but rather the community of the people of God. So Jesus' reference to the rebuilding of the temple was a reference to a reconstitution of the community of the people of God.

The very early Christian community also seemed to think of itself as a "counter-temple" movement -- believing that the community itself was the "true" temple.

- ◆ For example Paul in Galatians speaks of Peter, James and John as the "pillars," suggesting the community they led was the true temple.

## **The Disciples' Confusion Over Jesus' Reference to His End**

The disciples likely did not understand what Jesus meant when he referred to the raising of the Son of Man. They had the Jewish ideas of Resurrection:

- ◆ a symbol for the return from exile, or
- ◆ the bodily raising of the righteous at the end of history.

The idea of Resurrection as an individual coming back from the dead in the middle of history was not a ready concept to them.

The Resurrection may have thus started as a metaphor for the restoration of Israel (the "return from exile"), and then the "metaphor" became literal. The disciples weren't expecting such a thing.

## **The Longing for the Messiah in the Canticles of Luke's Gospels and Christian Joy**

In the Canticles (The Song of Zechariah, for example, in the Book of Common Prayer p.92) we see poetical descriptions of the longing of Israel for the Messiah, for the freedom to worship God without fear.

In early Christianity, you find joy. Why? What was the source of their joy, despite persecution. The answer of Christians: Jesus' Resurrection.

## **Apocalyptic Expectations of Jesus and the Early Church**

Did Jesus or the early Church feel the end of the world was coming soon?

Wright feels the language about the end has been misinterpreted by many, that the language would have been understood by first century Jews as references to "decisive, climatic, earth-shattering events" within history, not to events that are going to occur at the end of time.

Second and third generations Christians were not in general worried that the end had not come.

Early Christians felt more they were living in the first days of God's New World.

## **The Post Resurrection Stories in the Gospel**

Jesus' post Resurrection appearances occurred over a brief period of time. We find:

- ◆ in Luke - Emmaus Road story
- ◆ most of the stories in John's gospel
- ◆ we may have lost stories at the end of Mark (Wright best guess is that we have lost the beginning and the end to Mark -- a common problems with scrolls)

## **Challenges Faced by the Early Church**

In Acts we seen the early Church faced with the beginning of God's new world, without a road map.

There was also the problem of trying the explain the resurrection to the Gentile world that did not have the groundwork of Jewish thinking -- for example, Paul trying to explain the Resurrection to the people of Athens.

## **Jesus' Divinity versus Jesus' Resurrection**

Divinity does not imply resurrection from the dead.

Early Christians did not have to bring up Jesus' resurrection to explain that Jesus was God.

## **Christianity was Not an Angel Movement**

Somewhat like today, in Jesus' day, there was a great deal of speculation about angels. Yet the early Christians did not try to revere Jesus by saying he had become an angel.

### **Further Reading**

1. Chapter 6 "The Challenge of Easter" in **The Challenge of Jesus. Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is.** N. T. Wright, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1999.