

Jesus Died Only to Rise Again. Where Did the Concept of the Resurrection Come From?

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The Long View



A pilgrim to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre runs his hand over crosses etched in the walls. Kathryn Cook/Agence VU, via Redux

To Homer, as to the rest of the ancient world, what became the Christian idea of personal resurrection was preposterous. "You must endure, and not be brokenhearted," Achilles tells Priam in the 24th book of the "Iliad," perhaps the West's most moving evocation of the tragic nature of life. Achilles, who has killed Priam's son Hector, speaks starkly, and for the ages: "Lamenting for your son will do no good at all. You will be dead yourself before you bring him back to life." Likewise, in Aeschylus' "The Eumenides," Apollo remarks, "Once a man has died, and the dust has soaked up his blood, there is no resurrection."

Then came the events of the Passion of Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified by Roman authorities in Jerusalem at the time of Passover around A.D. 33. As the world's two billion or so Christians commemorate Easter, they are participating in a perennial drama whose particular origins are only dimly understood. Those origins are wonderfully explored in several books that, given the ubiquity of the Christian feast, should be better known.

To many believers — and even to many nonbelievers — the story of Christianity seems monumental and unchanging, the stuff of oft-recited creeds and hymns. It's essential to appreciate, however, that there was no pre-existing expectation of an atoning messianic human sacrifice in the complex Judaism of the first century. No one was looking for a savior who would suffer, die and rise again to offer redemption from sin and eternal life. On the contrary, the prevailing thought was that a militaristic Davidic figure would emerge to throw off Roman rule and inaugurate what was known as "the kingdom of God," an era of justice marked by the defeat of evil, a general resurrection of the dead and the restoration of Israel. Before the formation of the Christian story, resurrection within Judaism was less about the rising from the dead of a specific person than about a glorified vision of a triumphant Israel.

For the Roman rulers of Judea, the political implications of the "kingdom" were potentially dire. In "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," published in 1999, the historian and scriptural scholar Paula Fredriksen examines the Passion narrative in historical terms. As best one can at such a distance, she seeks to return us to the fraught hours of that Jerusalem spring. It was Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who was in control — not, as millenniums of anti-Semitic sentiment have it, the Jewish high priests — and who was struggling to keep order in the city amid the emotions and crowds of the Passover season. The kingdom, it seems, was believed to be at hand. Perhaps Jesus had preached that this was to be the last Passover before the arrival of God's rule, Fredriksen speculates. "This news would have spread throughout the movement's human network, linking villages from the Galilee through Judea and up to Jerusalem," she

writes. "Pilgrims gathering in the city for Passover, hearing the news in advance of Jesus' own arrival, consequently greeted him, when he appeared, as the human agent of God's coming kingdom — perhaps, indeed, as its king."

The resulting outpouring of religious enthusiasm, with its attendant civil unrest and threat to the existing order, would have been the last thing Pilate needed. He was uninterested in theological disputes among the Jews; his task was to keep his territory in check. As the Jewish historian Josephus wrote, it was "on these festive occasions that sedition is most apt to break out." The elements for chaos were all there. "Jesus teaches in the Temple courtyard; the excited pilgrim crowds collect there," Fredriksen writes. "In the intensity of their expectation — that the kingdom was literally about to arrive? That Jesus was about to be revealed as messiah? That the restoration of Israel was at hand? — they are restive, potentially incendiary."

Thus, for reasons of governance, not theology or divinely ordained fate, Pilate (not the high priests, who had no such authority) sentenced Jesus to death. It was a signal — crucifixion being the most public kind of execution, with the cross as a vivid warning to those able to see — not to challenge Rome. On the Friday of Passover, Fredriksen writes, "the pilgrim throng would have streamed out of the city to the hill just outside, to the Place of the Skull, Golgotha. There they would have beheld the man, dying on a cross. ... As far as Pilate was concerned, that was the end of the matter."

But of course it wasn't. As N. T. Wright, the prolific biblical scholar and a former Anglican bishop of Durham, England, relates in his 2003 book, "The Resurrection of the Son of God," the story in many ways really begins when Jesus' female disciples find the empty tomb on Sunday morning. According to the Gospel of Luke, the male disciples at first treated the women's report as "an idle tale," and "did not believe them"; the Gospel of John says of Jesus' followers, "for as yet they did not understand ... that he must rise from the dead."

They dismissed the first report of the Resurrection because they'd been expecting a different new reality. They were still, in the painful hours after the Passion, crushed that their messiah, far from leading the forces of God to victory over the Romans, had instead been mocked and murdered. It was only in the shocked aftermath of the Crucifixion, of the empty tomb and of the post-Resurrection appearances, that the first followers seem to have worked out what it all meant. As late as the writings of Paul, believers held that a "Parousia," or apocalyptic Second Coming, was imminent. In this view, Jesus, rather than ushering in the kingdom as one of their number — the expectation before the Crucifixion — would return to earth at any hour and set things to rights. This never happened, leaving the disciples and their heirs in the decades after Jesus to construct an enduring faith for a world that would not end. They then recalled — or believed they recalled — words of Jesus (along with miracles such as the raising from the dead of Lazarus, Jairus' daughter and the son of the widow of Nain) that seemed to foreshadow the Resurrection and its significance.

For Wright, the Easter story is not only theologically but historically true. In part, the mystification of the disciples — presumably the ones who would have spirited away the corpse if it were all a hoax — is, from this perspective, the most compelling evidence of the accuracy of the events reported in the Gospels. So singular was the proposition that a particular person had been resurrected from the dead and that belief in him would lead to eternal salvation; it would hardly have been the early Christians' first choice of narratives to share. Why argue something so improbable, and so unexpected, unless they believed it had actually happened the way they told the story?

Those seeking an understanding of the historical elements of Jesus' saga might find it profitable to engage the vast work of David Friedrich Strauss, the German intellectual, whose monumental "The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined" was translated into English in the 19th century by George Eliot. (At times, the translation reads like a scholarly "Middlemarch," much to its credit.)

Strauss works his way through the scriptural accounts, systematically arguing that the miraculous elements of the New Testament were theological inventions, not historical reports. "Piety turns away with horror from so fearful an act of desecration," he writes archly, yet facts are facts and metaphors are metaphors. God will not be mocked, but if Strauss had his way neither would reason.

No matter where one stands in terms of faith, Jesus — be he God or man or, in the view of the church, both — was perhaps the most important figure who ever drew breath, and he will fascinate, enthrall and confound us to the end of time — and, if believers have it right, even beyond. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." That much seems inarguable.

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