

CHAPTER SIX - THE LIFE OF THE EARLIEST COMMUNITY

New Testament readings relevant to this chapter are Acts 1:1-8:40; 9:31-12:19.

Unlike many modern religious movements, there was never any planning stage in the life of the Christian community. There were antecedents, of course, in the experience of the little band of Jesus' followers during his career, but the Christian community appears to have sprung suddenly into existence, sharing from the outset a basic framework of convictions and practices. This enthusiastic group immediately found itself bound together by strong ties. As time went on, its members developed doctrine in an effort to understand what had happened, and found it necessary to delineate responsibilities and procedures. But the experiences that created the community came first.

The Risen Lord

(Acts 1:3)

THE ORIGIN OF THE RESURRECTION FAITH

Some scholars have suggested that the disciples recuperated slowly from their tragic disillusionment, and then, as the group began to regain momentum, invented the idea of the resurrection and other beliefs in an effort to justify their actions and to authenticate their claims for Jesus. All our records agree, however, that the sorrow and bitterness that overwhelmed the disciples at the time of the crucifixion were rapidly transformed into confident joy without any interim of scheming or reconnoitering. What could have effected so great and sudden a change? The obvious answer is that the community had become convinced that Jesus had been victorious over death and was alive! We must turn, then, to the evidence for such claims.

The oldest written record of the resurrection of Jesus is that given by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (15:3-8), where he lists the appearances of the resurrected Jesus to the various leaders of the early community. First on the list is Peter, and last is Paul himself. This chronological listing of the appearances is in keeping not only with the strategic role that Peter played in the circle of the twelve disciples, but more specifically with the Gospels' repeated emphasis on the fact that Christ appeared to Peter. The most primitive of the resurrection accounts, at first transmitted orally and much later written down, is the one found in Mark (16:1-8). Although this account does not state that Jesus appeared to Peter (also known as Cephas, Simon), it clearly implies that he shortly would do so (Mk. 16:7). The accounts of the post-resurrection appearance in Luke 24 and John 21 state directly that Peter saw the Risen Lord. In the story of Jesus' coming to the disciples gathered behind closed doors (John 20), as well as in Matthew's account of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in Galilee (28: 16-18), Peter is assumed to be among the number, although he is not singled out for specific mention as he is elsewhere. There is a clear implication in the statement of Jesus recorded in Luke 22:31 - a prophetic word spoken on the night of his betrayal - that Peter is to be the one who will rally the community around his leadership.

It is evident, therefore, that the appearance to Peter of Christ risen from the dead was a basic element in the cluster of traditions circulating in the early church about the strange and wonderful days that burst upon the followers of Jesus shortly after his shameful execution. Small wonder that Peter should be the one to speak for the group in making the first public proclamation that "This Jesus ... whom you crucified ... God has made both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:23, 36).

As Paul's list makes clear, however, and as the other traditions testify, Peter was just one among many who saw Jesus risen from the dead. Of these others, Paul mentions the twelve disciples, the "more than five hundred brethren," "all the apostles," and James. But the Gospels mention other appearances as well: the beautiful account of the unknown traveler on the Emmaus road, who in breaking bread reveals himself to be the Risen Christ (Luke 24:13-35); and John's record of the famous scene in which Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for the gardener (John 20: 11-18).

Still another set of traditions current in the early days of the community is concerned with the empty tomb. In contrast to the tradition of Christ's appearance to Peter, which Paul explicitly mentions but which the Gospels only imply, the tradition about the empty tomb is not referred to at all by Paul. But it is described in one form or another by all four of the Gospels. Perhaps the Gospel of Mark originally ended

with an account of the appearance of the Risen Lord to Peter, although the most reliable manuscripts extant end with a reference to the empty tomb.¹ The simple, straightforward account of the empty tomb given in Mark is supplemented with vivid detail by Matthew and Luke: the young man in Mark's account is described by Matthew as an angel with an appearance like lightning; Mark says his robe is white, but Luke calls it dazzling. Still further expansion of detail occurs in the apocryphal gospels, such as the Gospel of Peter.²

Paul's silence concerning the empty tomb has been interpreted as proof that he knew nothing about such a tradition. Such an inference, however, is precarious, since Paul's argument in I Corinthians 15, where he deals with the subject at great length, is designed to prove the bodily resurrection. What is placed in the grave is raised, although it is raised in a transformed condition (I Cor. 15:43, 44). There is no suggestion that Paul believed that the body decayed and the soul or spirit was raised. His insistence on the identity of what is buried with what is raised suggests that he would have expected the tomb of Jesus to have been empty after the resurrection. Whether Paul believed in the empty tomb or not cannot now be determined; that he did not consider the emptiness of the tomb a significant question is evident from his silence on the subject. For him, the indispensable and indisputable fact was that Jesus had appeared to chosen witnesses after his resurrection. Later generations of Christians were to appeal to the empty tomb as proof of the resurrection; Paul was much more concerned with the implications of the resurrection for human salvation and for the coming of the kingdom of God than he was with the circumstances surrounding the event.

The appearances of Jesus risen from the dead were for Paul the final proof that the new age had dawned. This unshakable conviction was shared by James, Jesus' brother, and by the "more than five hundred brethren" of whom Paul speaks who saw the Risen Lord. Such, then, was the belief about the resurrection of Jesus. What could have happened to create such a conviction?

RATIONAL EXPLANATIONS OF THE RESURRECTION

Several explanations are possible. The one that is most tempting at first sight is the theory that the impact of Jesus' personality was so powerful and real that his followers sensed that death had not separated him from them, and that he was still present in their midst. This feeling of continuing presence, however, is to be observed whenever a forceful person dies. *Rebecca*, a popular novel of a few years ago, is built around just this theme. Yet in spite of the universality of this experience, no one has ever made the kind of claims for a departed friend whose presence continued to be felt that Jesus' followers made for him. If the disciples had not thought Jesus was with them in a unique sense, they would scarcely have regarded the resurrection as the keystone of their faith and their gospel.

Students of comparative religion have suggested that the belief in the resurrection was invented to enable incipient Christianity to compete more effectively with other religions that worshiped a god who had died and had risen again.³ It has been demonstrated, however, that this analogy is not appropriate, since none of these deities is anchored in concrete historical and geographical situations as Jesus was. Moreover, their dying-and-rising is part of a recurrent series - often closely related to the cycles of the seasons - and not at all the once-for-all event that Christianity claimed for its saviour.

One matter-of-fact way to account for the resurrection faith without sharing it is to assume that the women and the disciples found the tomb empty because in their excitement they simply went to the wrong one,⁴ and that from this innocent mistake arose the whole movement that we know as the Christian church. It is difficult to believe, however, that even such a great emotional stress as the one through which Jesus' followers passed would cause them to forget where he had been buried. Especially would this have been true of the brave women who stood by him when all others had fled. Even the ancient claim of the enemies of the Christian community—that the disciples had removed the body secretly (Mt. 28: 11-15) - though scarcely credible, is more acceptable than the notion that the women forgot in which grave Jesus had been placed.

More nearly convincing than any of these suggestions is the theory that the story of the empty tomb was not a part of the most primitive tradition at all, but that it was presented by the early church to make external and concrete the inner experience of the resurrection that had come to the apostles and other witnesses of the Risen Lord. Some who follow this line of thought are convinced that the appearances were wholly subjective, and that they arose out of the conviction that God's justice would not permit such an exemplary and important career as that of Jesus to come to such an ignominious and fruitless close. Others

claim that the Spirit of the Risen Christ sent these visions to the disciples, so that they were inner experiences, though not merely mental images projected by the minds of credulous followers.

Such an explanation, rationally appealing as it may be, cannot account for what is called a resurrection without doing violence both to the New Testament evidence and to the biblical view of the nature of man. Jewish thinking rarely, if ever, portrays a separate, immaterial part of man, such as we usually mean when we speak of soul or spirit, as the enduring part of man in contrast to his mortal body. Except among the Essenes, it did not conceive of man as existing apart from his body. The Platonic notion was that the body was the prison of the soul, but this idea was not acceptable to the Hebrew mind. The body of man was created first, and then the breath of life was breathed into him (Gen. 2:7). Just as the breath was essential to life, so the body was indispensable if there was to be a living person. Death did not bring release for the soul; it transported man to a shadowy half-existence in Sheol, or Hades, the subterranean realm to which all the dead descended, and from which man could escape only when his soul and body were reunited in the resurrection.

DISTINGUISHING RESURRECTION FROM IMMORTALITY

Paul makes clear his conviction, however, that the body which man will have in the resurrection is not merely a resuscitated corpse; it is a body that is identifiable with the body that was laid to rest. But it is at the same time distinctively different, in that it is "imperishable," "glorious," "powerful," and "spiritual." Paul nowhere explains what he means by the phrase "spiritual body," but he does declare emphatically that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15: 50). He states flatly that he does not believe in the resurrection of the physical body (I Cor. 15:44). We are left with the conclusion, then, that the "spiritual body" was Paul's way of saying that in the resurrection the whole man was transformed in the new age of God. He would never have subscribed to the theory that man's body, like that of John Brown in the old song, "lies moulderin' in the grave, but his soul goes marching on." But neither would he have accepted the flesh-and-blood conception of the future life which expects little more than an endless extension of the life in this world.

In a well-known controversy with the Sadducees, Jesus rejected the idea that life "in the resurrection" would be under the same circumstances as earthly life as it is now known. When the intentionally absurd question was raised by the Sadducees about the marital status in heaven of the woman who had lost seven successive husbands, Jesus' reply was negative ("... when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage"). But the inference is clear that life in the new age is a transformed existence, and not merely survival after death (Mk. 12:18-25). Both the reply of Jesus just quoted and the Pauline concept of the "spiritual body" are attempts to affirm (1) that man is a unity, and (2) that there is a future life for man in his wholeness. The second affirmation would stand over against those who deny eternal life or who regard only the immaterial part of man as capable of survival after death.

Nowadays psychologists and physicians alike are stressing the interrelation of mind and body in man. The term "psychosomatic," used to describe diseases that have physical symptoms but are mental in origin, is formed by transliterating precisely those Greek words which Paul uses for soul (*psyche*) and body (*soma*). Even though we still distinguish abstractly between man's body and his mind, the growing recognition of the way in which the two interact leads to an understanding of man closely akin to the New Testament idea of man as a unity. The real man is not just a physical organism, nor is his real nature a soul that can be abstracted from the body in which it has taken up residence. Man is a body and a soul in their interrelations, and not just the two added together.

Paul could not believe that the future life would consist merely in a continuation under improved circumstances of life as he knew it; the moral and physical weakness he saw within himself convinced him that his body must be transformed before entering eternal life. But at the same time, he could not imagine human existence apart from a body. As a middle way between these unacceptable alternatives, Paul developed his doctrine of the spiritual body. The old would not simply pass away; it would be transformed in becoming a part of the new creation to which he looked forward with eager longing. The certainty of man's entering the life of the new age had been established when God raised Jesus from the dead, as guarantee and prototype of man's resurrection.

PROVING THE RESURRECTION

Toward the end of the first century, certain heretical elements in the Christian community began to deny the reality of Jesus' body. This heresy - called docetism, from the Greek word for *seem* (since its adherents claimed Jesus only seemed to have a body) - was quite properly rejected, because it denied the reality of the incarnation, and because it failed to include the transformation of the whole man in its concept of the resurrection. The community would settle for nothing less than the full manhood of Jesus, the reality of his body, and the resurrection of the whole man.

The community's insistence on the bodily nature of the resurrection was shaped in part by current Jewish notions of the afterlife. But it was also an essential element of the basic concept that in Jesus, God was revealed in history. The culmination of God's revelation through Jesus was the resurrection. But if the resurrection transported Jesus to a sphere totally unrelated to the historical situation, or if it changed him into something that was no longer identifiable as human, then the phrase "revelation in history" had lost its meaning. But the church insisted that the Risen Lord and Jesus of Nazareth were the same person. The Christ who was raised from the dead was a risen man, not a spirit assuming human form. The resurrection was looked upon, not as a miracle performed to prove that Jesus was divine, but as proof that through him a new kind of human existence - the life of the new age - had become a reality.

Since the resurrection was so central to the faith of the community, the early church was eager to demonstrate that there was abundant evidence for the claim that it continued to make that Jesus had risen from the dead. The prologue to Acts (1:3) mentions the "many proofs" of the resurrection, by which it means the appearances of Jesus to his disciples in order to confirm to them that he had been raised and in order to commission them to proclaim the gospel. In all four Gospels and in the Acts, the privilege of seeing the Risen Lord carried with it the weighty responsibility of serving as a herald of the Good News. The disciples were to go everywhere preaching; Peter was to feed Jesus' sheep; the chosen ones were to be witnesses "to the end of the earth." The resurrection is far more than a marvelous event, interesting for its own sake as a unique phenomenon; it is interpreted by the community as God's public declaration that Jesus is Son of God; it provides a living example of the life of the new age; it is the well-spring of the earliest Christian proclamation, the *kerygma*.

WITNESSES OF THE RESURRECTION

Perhaps it was the sacredness of the number twelve in the Hebrew tradition, added to the Christian identification of the twelve disciples with the twelve tribes of Israel, that led to the conviction that there had to be twelve apostles. The defection of Judas had left a gap in the inner circle of the followers of Jesus, and the community decided to choose a man by lot to replace Judas. The man chosen was Matthias, of whom nothing is known beyond the report in Acts of his being chosen. If he did not gain the fame of Peter or John, he at least avoided the infamy of his predecessor, Judas. Early Christian writers, including the author of Acts, took morbid delight in recounting the gory details of the death of Judas, the unlamented traitor. According to Matthew (27: 3-10) he hanged himself; Acts says that he swelled up and burst (1:18); another account reports that he swelled to such an enormous size that he became wedged in a narrow street and was run down by a chariot!

The requirements for membership in the circle of the apostles were two: (1) that each man should have been a follower of Jesus from the beginning of his public ministry following the baptism; (2) that each should have seen Jesus risen from the dead. In later years, it was the second of these qualifications that really mattered. Paul had obviously not been a follower of Jesus from the beginning, but because he had seen the Risen Lord he could qualify for apostleship (I Cor. 9:1). On the basis of their commission from the Risen Christ, the twelve witnesses of the resurrection - later joined by Paul - set about their task of preaching the gospel in Jerusalem and in ever-widening circles to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

¹ See M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*. New York: Scribners, 1935.

² See *The Apocryphal New Testament*, trans. by M. R. James. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950.

³ A. C. H. Drews, *The Christ-Myth*. Chicago: Open Court, 1911. On the dying-and-rising gods see Chapter 1, above.

⁴ K. Lake, *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, p. 250. London: William and Norgate, 1907.

Many Christian scholars and clergy nowadays interpret Scripture assuming that most everything in the Bible is to be understood as *metaphorical* and *ahistorical*. Such scholars and clergy believe that the accounts (admittedly embellished) of the Exodus and the Resurrection are *not* rooted in genuinely historical events, but are only psychological/emotional/spiritual commentaries.

This presupposition runs counter to the centuries in which Jews and Christians have understood certain pivotal events (especially the Exodus for the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus' Resurrection for the New Testament) were actual occurrences, even though admittedly reported within a providential perspective colored with some degree of human artistry.

I Corinthians 15¹⁴ “and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.” is no metaphor and refers to an actual happening, according to powerful words attributed to St. Paul. If the first Easter Day is only a testimony to “new beginnings” emerging from personal bondage or the rising of a new luster in one's life, if the proclamation “Jesus is the Risen Lord and Christ” is mere, poetic inner enlightenment, one could – as a humanist (or similar) - privately or among others celebrate and contemplate a blossoming plant or a sunrise! However, if one is persuaded that the testimonies about the Resurrection (and its meanings) are indeed true and originate beyond human interiority, the Good News of Christ is sacred revelation.

Additional Readings

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/reflections/easter.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/reflections/pdfs/Easter-Sermon-Leo-Frade-2008.pdf>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/reflections/easter2b.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/reflections/easter-rollerskating.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/reflections/easter2b-1988.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/thought/religious-biblical-religion.htm>

http://www.philosophy-religion.org/thought/does_history_matter_in_the_bible.htm

http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/pdfs/Resurrection_historical-event.pdf

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/bible/immortality-resurrection.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/bible/resurrection.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/calendar/easter.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/beliefs/resurrection.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/cherbonnier/mystical.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/facts.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/blik.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/pdfs/UNDERSTANDING-CHRISTIANITY.pdf>