

Translation vs. resurrection

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November 15, 2013

Someone recently asked me about why Jesus' death was understood by Christians as a resurrection rather than a "bodily translation to heaven" or something of the sort.

It's a fascinating question, and so I thought I would share some of my answer here.

The reference in Jude to a Jewish tradition about Michael and the Devil disputing over Moses' body is presumably relevant, as are Enoch and Elijah, in addition to the Testament of Job. In all these cases, there seems to have been a rescuing of bodies and not just souls, and their transportation to heaven.

And so why did the early Christians understand Jesus' death not as something of this sort, but as an eschatological event, part of the final resurrection? Why did the early Christians view what they believed happened to Jesus not as simply the vindication of Jesus by his body being rescued from dishonorable burial and brought to heaven, but as the start of the resurrection expected at the end of time?

Of course, the question of whether this characterization of things is correct does not have as straightforward and singular an answer as is sometimes supposed. Paul is our earliest source, and he clearly views Jesus' resurrection as the start of the general resurrection of the dead. But did the author of the Gospel of Mark share this view? Is this a case of something being widely accepted from the beginning, or a minority view that spread and came to predominate?

If we assume for the moment that early Christians in general shared this view of Jesus' resurrection as connected to the resurrection of the dead at the end of human history, then we must go on to ask why that should be so.

One possible answer is that Jesus' own teaching focused on the near end, and so in making sense of what happened to Jesus, his followers interpreted his death eschatologically. A slightly more specific possibility is that Jesus himself spoke about the final resurrection and dawn of the kingdom of God as near, with his own death

and resurrection anticipated as part of it. [Jesus' nazirite vow at the last supper](#) envisages his not having the chance to fulfill his vow and drink wine again before the kingdom of God is present. But is that expected to dawn on earth while he is alive, or is he expecting to participate in it posthumously, assuming the saying is authentic? Such material might have provided enough basis for the early Christians after the crucifixion to come to view Jesus' expectation as having been fulfilled, but only for him thus far.

For some, these questions may seem unnecessary, and for others they may seem impossible to answer. But whatever your view about the nature of the experiences that persuaded the earliest Christians that Jesus had been raised from the dead, a historian of early Christianity needs to ask the question of why Christians interpreted those experiences in the way that they did.

How would you answer such questions?

*Originally posted at [Exploring Our Matrix](#)*