

SBS JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND HUMANITIES

Vol.3, No. 2 (December 2023)



BIBLICAL STUDIES

ISSN 2636-7211

Published by the School of Biblical Studies Jos, an affiliate of the University of Jos, Nigeria

EXPLORING THE RESURRECTION NARRATIVES IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study delves into the resurrection accounts presented in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, aiming to provide a comprehensive and comparative analysis of these pivotal narratives. The resurrection of Jesus Christ stands as a cornerstone of Christian theology, yet the distinct perspectives offered by each Gospel contribute unique insights into the profound significance of this event. Through a meticulous examination of the synoptic Gospels, this research seeks to identify both commonalities and divergences in the resurrection narratives, shedding light on the theological nuances and historical contexts that shaped each account. The analysis begins by exploring the similarities in the basic sequence of events, examining the empty tomb, encounters with angelic beings, and the appearances of the risen Jesus. Simultaneously, the study investigates the distinctive elements within each Gospel, such as the specific details surrounding the resurrection, the reactions of the disciples, and the theological emphases that characterize each narrative. Special attention is given to the varying perspectives on the role of women as witnesses, the significance of the burial and the timing of the resurrection, providing a nuanced understanding of the Gospels' theological and literary intentions. Furthermore, this research addresses the potential challenges posed by apparent discrepancies among the synoptic accounts, offering interpretative approaches that reconcile these variations without compromising the integrity of the narratives. By placing the resurrection narratives in their historical and cultural context, this study seeks to enhance our comprehension of the theological diversity within the early Christian community and the evolving theological emphases as reflected in the synoptic Gospels.

Keywords: Resurrection, Synoptic Gospels, Narratives, Comparative Analysis, Exploration

Introduction

The resurrection narratives in the Synoptic Gospels, namely Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are central to the Christian faith and have been the subject of extensive study and analysis. These accounts provide insight into the events surrounding the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the impact it had on his disciples and the early Christian community. A comparative analysis of these narratives can shed light on the similarities and differences in the way the

Gospels present this pivotal event, offering a deeper understanding of the theological and historical perspectives of the respective authors. By examining the resurrection accounts in a comparative framework, this paper aims to explore the nuances of each narrative, the literary and theological choices made by the Gospel writers, and the implications of these differences for our interpretation of the resurrection.

This paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the resurrection narratives in the Synoptic Gospels, with a focus on identifying and examining the distinct features, theological emphases, and literary techniques employed by each Gospel writer. By closely examining the similarities and differences in the way the resurrection is portrayed in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how each author constructed their narrative and the potential reasons behind their unique presentations. Furthermore, this comparative analysis aims to contribute to the scholarly discourse on the Gospels and the resurrection by offering insights into the diverse perspectives and interpretive strategies at play in the early Christian tradition. Ultimately, this research endeavours to deepen our appreciation of the richness and complexity of the resurrection narratives and their significance for the development of Christian theology and belief.

Definition

According to the Americana Encyclopedia, the word 'Resurrection' is defined as the doctrine of the reunion of the soul and body of a man after their separation in death (422) while the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines it as the rising of Christ from his grave to life which is remembered with Ceremonies on Easter Sunday(1323) Specifically in this write-up, we will be concerned with the resurrection accounts of Christ as it is found in the Synoptic Gospels.

After death and burial, Jesus Christ arose from death in body and soul on the first day of the week. (Mtt.28:1-5). His resurrection was not a

mere resuscitation, as was the case with Lazarus and others whose resurrections were temporal and were to die again. Jesus Christ died and was raised to life eternal and everlasting glory (Romans 6:9; 10; Hebrews 7:16; I Peter 1:21; Revelation 1:18).

Though this account is a plain fact as the Gospels revealed to us, yet, skeptics viewed the resurrection with various explanations. They claimed the disciples and his enemies stole his body from the grave, others believed he was swooning due to the pain and torture, while others held the resurrection to be visionary (cox, 1988). But under careful examination, all these explanations can easily be dismissed on the ground that, the disciples of Jesus would have found it impossible to steal the body because of the Roman guard. As for the enemies, they had no intention to steal the body and if they had done so, they would have produced the body when the disciples began preaching that he had risen from the dead. Again, it is impossible to think of a man with nail-torn hands and feet, who had been flogged and pierced in the side to have the power to roll away a large stone from the tomb. How could he have overpowered the Roman guards, and how would the soldiers have mistaken Jesus for dead when he was still alive but they failed to break his leg? As for the visionary theorist who claimed Jesus did not actually rise but only appeared to his disciples in a vision, one wonders what explanation such people can give to the empty tomb and the fact that he appeared to more than five hundred people (1cor.15:6).

No matter what view people may hold concerning the resurrection of Christ, the fact still stands that he rose from death to life eternal. His bodily resurrection is the ultimate

test of his deity. If Jesus did rise, then we know for sure that God exists, we know what He is like and we know that Jesus' claims are true. If Jesus did not rise, then we can dismiss his claims and our faith in him as a lie.

Pre-Resurrection Events

Before our Lord Jesus Christ rose back to life, certain events took place to prepare the way for the final miracle. According to the Mattheian account, women, after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, went to the tomb only to find the stone rolled away. (Matthew 28:1). For before this visit, a great Earthquake had taken place and the stone rolled away. (Matthew 28:2-4). Other accounts in Mark and Luke confirmed that the women went to the tomb with spices to anoint the body of Christ. (Mark 16:1-2; Luke 24:1-2) and found the stone rolled away.

These women went inside the tomb to find out what had happened. To their surprise, they found an Angel sitting there, who informed them that Christ had risen as he earlier prophesied. The Angel commanded the women to go quickly and inform the disciples of the incident and that Christ promised to be waiting for them in Galilee, (Matthew 28:5-8) other accounts in Mark claimed the Angel was a young man, while Luke mentioned two men. It is to be understood that, both accounts are just saying the same thing. (Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4). With this situation now, Mary Magdalene and other women went back and reported to the Apostles, especially to Peter and John, who immediately ran down to the Tomb to see things for themselves. On reaching there, it was so (John 20:3-5).

The First Easter

Easter is described as a Christian feast celebrated to remember the day Jesus Christ rose from death to life. The first Easter as the gospel's account has it, was celebrated by the Apostles and disciples who first witnessed his resurrection from death on that first day of the week after his burial. On this day, the experiences of the disciples were a mixture of both positive and negative feelings. Matthew's account has it that, the women who discovered that Christ has risen were afraid and filled with joy. Mark says that they were trembling and astonishment had come upon them. Luke records that when the women narrated the news to the disciples, they considered it an idle tale and did not believe them (Mtt:28:8; Mk:16:8; Lk:24:11). But when Christ eventually appeared to all of them, their joy could no longer be controlled. Their experience of the resurrection now includes the personal encounter with Jesus who once died but has been risen to life again. They also encounter his love and fidelity, his blameless obedience in the darkness of death and the easter event itself. This shows us that, the disciple's experience of the first easter was not only external means of communication which can be forgotten after but the experience of faith also. They were made to encounter Jesus who was out of sight but now with them in body again.

However, it is interesting to note that this acclaimed Christian festival in honour of Christ's resurrection did not have any reference to a yearly celebration in the New Testament. The feast or term was derived from the Anglo-Saxon "EOSTRE", the name of the goddess of spring. In her honour sacrifices were offered at the time of the Vernal equinox. By the 8th century, the term came to be applied to the

anniversary of Christ's resurrection (Bromiley,6).

Though this practice was adopted by Christians, there was a bone of contention over the date for its celebration. Early Jewish Christians set the time of observance in line with the Hebrew Passover festival which began on the 14th day of Nisan. Gentiles Christians however, celebrated it on the resurrection Sunday. This heated debate was resolved at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Since then, the uniform date for the festival was fixed at March 21, every year, only to be disturbed in 1582 with the adoption of the Gregorian calendar(ibid,6).

The Importance of Resurrection in the Gospel Narratives

The resurrection of Jesus Christ occupies the central and all-important place both in the synoptic gospels and the New Testament in general. The gospels find their zenith in the description of Jesus's resurrection. The first Sermon by the Apostles was about the resurrection (Acts 2:24-32; 3:1-16). This is also true of Paul's letters. (I Corinthians 15:17-19); here he states that the whole Christian faith and salvation stands or falls with the resurrection of Christ (Romans 8:11).

It is interesting to realize that Christianity is the only religion that bases its claim to acceptance upon the resurrection of its founder. The foundation on which the entire doctrine of Christianity is based is on the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Myers:25). Paul rightly states that without the resurrection of Christ, the Christian's sins are not forgiven, their preaching of the gospel is vain. (1 Corinthians 15:7).

Indeed, the theology of the resurrection is very important to the life of a Christian and dealing with the subject calls for special attention. To be specific, the importance can be summarized under the following:

(a) Evidential: The resurrection is the proof to a Christian of his atoning character, death, deity and divine exaltation. (Romans 1:4).

(b) Evangelistic: The first gospel sermons were based on the resurrection, therefore, proving to the hearers the assurance of divine redemption. (I Corinthians 15:1-4; Romans 4:25).

(c) Spiritual: The resurrection of Jesus Christ is regarded as the source and standard of the holiness of the believer. Every aspect of his life, that is the Christian, is somehow associated with it. It is his source of victory over the grip of sin. (Romans 6).

(d) Eschatological: The Christian's resurrection is a model and guaranty through that of Christ (I Corinthians 15). As the bodies of the saints arose (Matthew 27:52); so ours are to be quickened (Romans 8:11), and made like Christ's glorified body (Philippians 3:21), thereby becoming their spiritual bodies (I Corinthians 15:44); that is, bodies ruled by their spirits and yeat bodies(Orr,2569).

Conclusion

Both the Devil and the enemies of Christ had a misconception that Christ died never to rise again. Therefore, when he was buried they greatly rejoice and sing songs of victory for defeating Jesus Christ at last. But this was not the case, he only submitted himself to death to fulfil the task that the Father sent him to come and accomplish for mankind. That was to die

for the sins of the world but after to rise again to life eternal. This was achieved by Christ and his resurrection served three main purposes

- (a) The resurrection was the sign of his deity (Romans 1:4)
- (b) The resurrection of Christ was a sign of fulfilled prophecy (Luke 24:25; Psalms 16: 9-10; Matthew 12:39-40).
- (c) The resurrection of Jesus proved Christ to be truthful and not a liar for he claimed he would rise from the dead, (Matthew 12:39-40; 17:9; Luke 9:22)(Myers,36).

To the Christians in this present day or generation, who have not seen Jesus appear to him in person as he did to the Apostles but only believe through the evidence, what stand can he claim? Being convinced of the resurrection facts, the Christian equally has a song of triumph to sing about Christ's resurrection which simply throbs with confidence and joy.

The song goes like this:

"Up from the grave He arose,

With a mighty triumph o'er His foes;

He arose a victor from the dark domain,

And He lives forever with His Saints to reign.

He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose".
(GSC, No.2, 145).

With this, it is right to conclude that the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is the Corner-Stone of the Christian Doctrine, the Gibraltar of Christian Evidence, and the Waterloo of infidelity and rationalism(Myers,16).

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