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Christ's Resurrection:

Some different views

Many Christians believe that Jesus' body literally regained life after death. That the Resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples and others in physical form after His execution by crucifixion. Indeed, upon talking with Christians it seems a physical Resurrection provides a crucial basis for their faith- without a literal “brought back to life” body risen from a tomb there is no faith at all!

This is indeed at the very core of Church doctrine, but perhaps, just maybe, present day church followers are falling into essentially the same trap the Jewish Pharisees did so long ago when they failed to recognize their “long waited prayed for Messiah” simply because he did not fulfill the expectation of the popular excepted orthodoxy of the time. Once again, literal interpretation is preached to an accepting congregation. A remarkable collection of books canonized by the church is seen as “The Book”. Every letter of every letter is revered as the inerrant Word of God.

It is so important to realize the “Word of God” is forever beyond the grasp of a mortal mankind. The Bible; and other authentic Scripture such as the Bhagavad_Gita, Qu'ran etc. are rich in allegorical meanings. What The Spirit of Truth has to say cannot be understood from the standpoint of physical temporal understanding. The apparent literal text is a vehicle bringing to us wisdom hidden in the depths of discernment, or residing in the heights of heaven where only the pure in heart may catch a glimpse of its true meaning.

Of course, to “open” the book to understand the inner meanings of terms such as “forty”, “Bread of Life”, “Holy Spirit,” “coming from and returning to heaven” etc. must be treated symbolically for the real message to become evident.

Note: this “Faiths Issues” article will not spend time on the arguments and evidence supporting a literal bodily Resurrection. Information of this nature is readily available by visiting most any local church. That being said, let us investigate alternative explanations for what is revealed in the Gospels.

Lets look at a few of the scriptures the church holds as supporting the doctrine of a bodily resurrected Jesus.

First: an alternative Christian view:

Hedley Beare, a Professor Emeritus of Education, University of Melbourne; and an Anglican layperson.

A problem with 'bodily resurrection'?

On May 23 the Church celebrates the event described in Acts Ch.2 where the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles fifty days (or exactly seven weeks) after Easter day. It coincided with the Feast of Pentecost. Ten days earlier - Thursday 13 May - we celebrate Ascension Day, when Jesus' resurrected body was supposedly taken up into heaven forty days and forty nights after Easter (Acts 1: 4-11). There is new scholarly evidence about those resurrection events and why the stories emerged so late in the piece, decades after Jesus' death.

Belief cannot be based on something that is unbelievable; faith results from what you know to be reliable and defensible, from 'what works'. So a lot of people can't bring themselves to believe the stories about a bodily resurrection. Do those stories stretch your credibility?

We need not be literal about the 'forty days and forty nights'; it is a Hebrew term for 'a very long time' - the amount of time Moses was on Mt Sinai, Elijah was in the desert for fear of Jezebel, the time Nineveh took to repent at Jonah's preaching, and the time Jesus was tested in the wilderness. That experiences of the risen Jesus continued to occur much later than the Ascension is suggested in the rediscovered manuscripts of the apostles who went down into Egypt and formed the Coptic Church. The 'gnostic gospel' called The Secret Book of James (chs. 1-10) describes a lengthy appearance of the risen Jesus to the twelve disciples 550 days 'after he arose from the dead' - about eighteen months later, in fact. Other manuscripts quote 540 and 545 days, and Pissis Sophia twelve years.

What of the Ascension, then? Having Jesus' body 'taken up' is based on the cosmology of a flat earth with heaven above it and hell below. Jesus' body did not have to be physically taken away if you believe in quantum physics, or that all matter is energy. And it is a simplistic rendering of the Trinity to argue that the Holy Spirit could not 'come' until the body of Jesus had been removed. The Ascension, then, is a resurrection story expressed in the symbolism of the day; be wary of literal interpretations of the language.

The same holds true of other resurrection stories. The earliest narrative gospel, Mark's, records no resurrection experiences at all (Mark 16: 9-20 is now acknowledged as a later addition); and Matthew's has only one (Ch. 28). Not until John's gospel, written around the turn of the first century, do we get the main corpus of those stories, and the Ascension is not among them. Why the omission? And why such a delay in the emphasis on a physical body?

Or consider Paul's witness. He was converted three or four years after the death of Jesus. His letters, written and read between 34 and 60 CE., are in a sense his Gospel - his interpretation of who Jesus was, penned well before the gospel of Mark was written, three decades before Matthew's and Luke's, and possibly half a century before John's. Paul had no experience of Jesus in the flesh; he was not one of the disciples, he was not a witness to the crucifixion, he did not participate in any of the resurrection appearances or in Pentecost, and he makes no specific reference to the Ascension. Yet of all the NT authors, his writings are the closest in time to Jesus' life. Is it not strange that his letters make almost no mention of anything Jesus said, and almost nothing of what Jesus did? He gives scant attention to the Ascension and Pentecost narratives.

What convinced him about Jesus, then? His conversion on the Damascus Road (Acts ch. 9; Gal 1: 11-18) had for him all the power of a direct confrontation with the living Jesus - a resurrection appearance, indeed.

Being a Jewish scholar, a graduate student of Professor Gamaliel, Paul recognized that Jesus' death and resurrection not only made him an anointed one, a messiah or a christos, but the consummate 'saviour' of Judaic tradition. A principal thesis of his letters is that Jesus was the culmination of the Jewish messiahs, what the law and the prophets had been leading up to. And even if the Spirit-filling experience did happen at that Pentecost festival fifty days after Easter, the 'Spirit of the Lord' had been continually inspiring the prophets, judges and national saviours throughout the Old Testament. Such a 'spirit' did not have to 'come' because it was already here. But powerful manifestations of that Spirit occurred as a sign whenever one of Jehovah's champions emerged - as with Samson, or Gideon, or Elijah, or Elisha.

So the 'coming of the Holy Spirit' was not a one-off event but rather a proclamation of who Jesus is. For Paul, there was tangible evidence that Jesus is alive and is active as a saviour. It was the continual experience of the Spirit filling people, or taking possession of events as Paul travelled and preached, and as people chose to be 'in Christ'.

The Ascension and Pentecost, then, may become more real for us if we unmask the unnecessary literalisms imposed on these stories. Resurrection experiences - encounters with a living Jesus - have never ceased. The story of the Ascension is based on a different astrophysics from ours; but it is still possible to discern its meaning. And the Spirit-presence at Pentecost sends a special message that Jesus is messiah. For Paul, 'little Pentecosts' were regular confirmations that the Holy Spirit is present to those who deliberately associate themselves with Jesus Christos.

All of this invites some prayerful attention. When we take time to relive those recent experiences of our own which we would describe as (a) events when we were confronted with resurrection, encounters with the risen Jesus, and (b) events where

the 'coming of the Holy Spirit' was real for us, then Resurrection and Pentecost become events that are neither remote nor exotic; they occur now.

Second: Here is a passage from the Qur'an expressing the Islamic understanding.

(The Qur'an (E.H. Palmer tr), Sura 3 - Imran's Family)

"When God said, O Jesus! I will make Thee die and take Thee up again to me and will clear thee of those who misbelieve, and will make those who follow thee above those who misbelieve, at the day of judgment, then to me is your return. I will decide between you concerning that wherein ye disagree. And as for those who misbelieve, I will punish them with grievous punishment in this world and the next, and they shall have none to help them. But as for those who believe and do what is right, He will pay them their reward, for God loves not the unjust.

That is what we recite to thee of the signs and of the wise reminder. Verily the likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him from earth, then He said to him BE, and he was;- the truth from thy Lord, so be thou not of those who are in doubt.

Third: are presented views from two authoritative representatives from the Baha'i Faith

Shogi Effendi states: **"Bahá'ís do not believe in a Bodily Resurrection after the Crucifixion...We do not believe that there was a bodily resurrection after the Crucifixion of Christ, but that there was a time after His Ascension when His disciples perceived spiritually His true greatness and realized He was eternal in being. This is what has been reported symbolically in the New Testament and has been misunderstood. His eating with His disciples after resurrection is the same thing."**

(From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, October 9, 1947)

"Concerning the resurrection of Christ, he wishes to call your attention to the fact that in this as well as in practically all the so-called miraculous events recorded in the Gospel we should, as Bahá'ís, seek to find a spiritual meaning and to entirely discard the physical interpretation attached to them by many of the Christian sects. The resurrection of Christ was, indeed, not physical but essentially spiritual, and is symbolic of the truth that the reality of man is to be found not in his physical constitution, but in his soul. A careful perusal of the 'Íqán' and of the 'Some Answered Questions' makes this indubitably clear."

(Compilations, Lights of Guidance, p. 492)

Abdul-Baha on THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

Question. -- What is the meaning of Christ's resurrection after three days?

Answer. - *"The resurrections of the Divine Manifestations are not of the body. All Their states, Their conditions, Their acts, the things They have established, Their teachings, Their expressions, Their parables and Their instructions have a spiritual and divine signification, and have no connection with material things.*

For example, there is the subject of Christ's coming from heaven: it is clearly stated in many places in the Gospel that the Son of man came from heaven, He is in heaven, and He will go to heaven. So in chapter 6, verse 38, of the Gospel of John it is written: "For I came down from heaven"; and also in verse 42 we find: "And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven?" Also in John, chapter 3, verse 13: "And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven."

Observe that it is said, "The Son of man is in heaven," while at that time Christ was on earth. Notice also that it is said that Christ came from heaven, though He came from the womb of Mary, and His body was born of Mary. It is clear, then, that when it is said that the Son of man is come from heaven, this has not an outward but an inward signification; it is a spiritual, not a material, fact.

The meaning is that though, apparently, Christ was born from the womb of Mary, in reality He came from heaven, from the center of the Sun of Reality, from the Divine World, and the Spiritual Kingdom.

And as it has become evident that Christ came from the spiritual heaven of the Divine Kingdom, therefore, His disappearance under the earth for three days has an inner signification and is not an outward fact.

In the same way, His resurrection from the interior of the earth is also symbolical; it is a spiritual and divine fact, and not material; and likewise His ascension to heaven is a spiritual and not material ascension.

Beside these explanations, it has been established and proved by science that the visible heaven is a limitless area, void and empty, where innumerable stars and planets revolve.

herefore, we say that the meaning of Christ's resurrection is as follows: the disciples were troubled and agitated after the martyrdom of Christ. The Reality of Christ, which signifies His teachings, His bounties, His perfections and His spiritual power,

was hidden and concealed for two or three days after His martyrdom, and was not resplendent and manifest.

No, rather it was lost, for the believers were few in number and were troubled and agitated. The Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body; and when after three days the disciples became assured and steadfast, and began to serve the Cause of Christ, and resolved to spread the divine teachings, putting His counsels into practice, and arising to serve Him, the Reality of Christ became resplendent and His bounty appeared; His religion found life; His teachings and His admonitions became evident and visible. In other words, the Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body until the life and the bounty of the Holy Spirit surrounded it.

Such is the meaning of the resurrection of Christ, and this was a true resurrection. But as the clergy have neither understood the meaning of the Gospels nor comprehended 105 the symbols, therefore, it has been said that religion is in contradiction to science, and science in opposition to religion, as, for example, this subject of the ascension of Christ with an elemental body to the visible heaven is contrary to the science of mathematics. But when the truth of this subject becomes clear, and the symbol is explained, science in no way contradicts it; but, on the contrary, science and the intelligence affirm it.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, p. 103-104)

THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT UPON THE APOSTLES

Question. -- What is the manner, and what is the meaning, of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, as described in the Gospel?

Answer. - *“The descent of the Holy Spirit is not like the entrance of air into man; it is an expression and a simile, rather than an exact or a literal image. No, rather it is like the entrance of the image of the sun into the mirror -- that is to say, its splendor becomes apparent in it.*

After the death of Christ the disciples were troubled, and their ideas and thoughts were discordant and contradictory; later they became firm and united, and at the feast of Pentecost they gathered together and detached themselves from the things of this world. Disregarding themselves, they renounced their comfort and worldly happiness, sacrificing their body and soul to the Beloved, abandoning their houses, and becoming wanderers and homeless, even forgetting their own existence.

Then they received the help of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit became manifested; the spirituality of Christ triumphed, and the love of God reigned. They were given help at that time and dispersed in different directions, teaching the Cause of God, and giving forth proofs and evidences.

So the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles means their attraction by the Christ Spirit, whereby they acquired stability and firmness. Through the spirit of the love of God they gained a new life, and they saw Christ living, helping and protecting them. They were like drops, and they became seas; they were like feeble insects, and they became majestic eagles; they were weak and became powerful. They were like mirrors facing the sun; verily, some of the light became manifest in them."

(Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, p. 106)

There is so much left to understand! Each one of us has his/her own level of understanding. Reality is infinitely larger than we can ever hope to grasp...is it not?

References sites: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>