

In this week's Readers Mailbag I will deal with two rather massively significant questions, one on the life and message of Paul and the other on the different understandings of Jesus crucifixion in the New Testament.

If you have any question(s) you would like me to address in the future, let me know!

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### **QUESTION:**

I am wondering what you would consider the most important things to know about the Apostle Paul. Sometimes when I am forced to give a succinct answer to a question, it can have a lot of value. So while I will be going into some depth in the Sunday School class, including referencing some of your work, I would love to hear your expertise on Paul distilled into a brief summary (if at all possible).

### **RESPONSE:**

Right! Obviously some scholars have written very long books on Paul's life, message, and mission. So, let me give here the very basic essentials, as I see them, in bullet point form.

- Paul started life as a highly religious Jew, zealous to follow the law of God as given by Moses in the Torah.
- When he first heard of Jews declaring Jesus the messiah, he was incensed and did what he could to stamp out this false religion.
- But he then had a vision of Jesus (as he himself says) that convinced him that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead.
- He realized that God had done a great miracle for Jesus, which showed him that Jesus really was the Son of God, and that his death must have been according to the divine plan.
- Paul came to think that the death of Jesus was a sacrifice for the sins of others (that's why God had his chosen one die), which God honored by raising Jesus from the dead.
- A person needed to believe in this act of God through Christ in order to have salvation.
- But that meant...

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- But that meant being a member of God's people was not by keeping the Jewish Law rigorously, but by believing in God's dying and rising messiah.
- Paul immediately saw the implications of this for gentiles: they did not have to adopt the ways of Judaism to be right with God. All they needed was to believe in the death and resurrection of the Christ.
- Paul considered himself called by God to proclaim this message to the gentiles.
- He began a life of missionary preaching, proclaiming his gospel in principally gentile cities in Arabia, Cilicia, Syria, Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Macedonia, and Achaia (modern Greece).
- After he would leave one community of believers that he founded he would go to another city to start anew.
- When he heard of problems in the churches he had previously established, he would write

letters to them do explain what they should believe and how they should behave.

- We have seven of those letters still in the New Testament; six other letters of the New Testament claim to be written by Paul but probably were not. Their authors used Paul's name in order to provide authority for their views.
- During his ministry Paul encountered a good deal of opposition, some of it from other Christian spokespersons who believed that to follow the Jewish messiah Jesus, a person had to become Jewish (and thus keep the Jewish law, including the law of circumcision).
- Paul was also opposed by local ruling authorities who saw him as a troublemaker and subjected him to judicial punishment.
- The early church tradition indicates that he eventually travelled to Rome, where he experienced martyrdom under the Roman emperor Nero.

### **QUESTION:**

Can you compare and go over what you believe was the theological meaning intended of the crucifixion/resurrection as between the different gospels and the epistle writers?

### **RESPONSE:**

Ah, again, this is not easy in 400 words! My sense is that there are very large differences among the authors of the New Testament.

- Our earliest author, Paul, understands Jesus' death in a variety of ways. On one hand it brings an atonement for sin, making it possible for a person to be restored to a right standing before God (in that it was some kind of sacrificial offering accepted by God), as seen in the fact that he raised Jesus from the dead. On the other hand it was also the means by which God conquered the powers that are aligned against him, the cosmic powers of sin and death. Christ took "sin" onto himself and died, thereby killing sin. And he conquered death when he was raised from the dead. His followers can participate in this victory over sin and death by being baptized, since at that point a person experiences a mystical union with Christ and is united then with him in his death to sin.
- Our earliest Gospel, Mark, understands Jesus' death principally as an atonement for sin: Christ died for the sake of others in order to provide them with direct access to God. That is why, when Jesus dies in Mark, the curtain in the temple separating the holy of holies (where God dwelt) is torn in half, to show that it is the death of Jesus that makes God directly available to those who believe.
- Our final Gospel, John, still understands that Jesus' death was for the sake of others, his life being given that others might never die. But he also understands that Jesus' death was, for him, Jesus, personally, the beginning of his return to glory. Jesus for John was the incarnation of the Word of God, a divine being who descended from heaven to become temporarily human. Once his work on earth is accomplished, he returns to heaven, starting with the crucifixion where, as John says, Jesus is "lifted up." This is an intentionally ironic view: Jesus is "exalted" at his crucifixion in that he is raised above the ground, and this marks the beginning of his return to the heavenly realm whence he came.
- In some ways the most distinctive understanding of the crucifixion-resurrection is in the Gospel of Luke. This author eliminated all references to the atoning character of Jesus death and to the idea that Jesus died "for" others. Instead, Jesus crucifixion is portrayed as a grotesque miscarriage of justice against an innocent man. Salvation comes when a person

realizes just how unjust Jesus' execution was, feels guilt for the sin that she or he has committed, repents of that sin, and turns to God for forgiveness. The death of Jesus here is not an atonement for sin; it is the occasion for turning to God in repentance so that he might forgive.



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