

Over the years on the blog, I have reflected a number of times on the significance of the earliest Christians' belief in the resurrection. On this Easter morning, I thought it would be appropriate to return to one of those reflections.

The most important result of the disciples' belief that God had raised Jesus from the dead was that it radically changed their understanding of what it meant to say Jesus was the messiah. As I have explained before that in my view, Jesus did believe he was the messiah (in a certain sense), and his followers believed it. Given everything we know about Jewish beliefs at the time, that almost certainly mean that they thought that he was (or would become) the king of the Jewish people. That's certainly how the Roman governor Pontius Pilate took it. It was because Jesus made such a claim that Pilate ordered him crucified.

The crucifixion would have proved beyond any doubt — to anyone paying attention — that Jesus was not the messiah after all. Rather than overcoming the enemy to establish a new kingdom, he was squashed by the enemy, publicly humiliated and tortured to death. That was the opposite of what would happen with the messiah.

But then something equally dramatic happened. The disciples came to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. They started working out the implications of that belief for understanding Jesus, and it led, over a long series of reflections among a number of Jesus' growing band of followers, to rather amazing conclusions. It in fact is the beginning of the idea of a trinity.

For Jesus' first followers, the resurrection that God really had showered his special favor on Jesus (though in a complete unexpected way). That meant that, contrary to what they initially thought, he was not cursed by God (as one hanging on a tree) but was the one specially blessed by God. And that is absolutely the key to the disciples' subsequent train of thought.

They had previously thought, during Jesus' life, that he was the one anointed by God to perform his task on earth, his future king. They now came to think he really was the one anointed by God. In fact, he had been taken by God up to heaven — and as I pointed out before, ancient people, whether Jews or Gentiles, who came to think that someone was taken to heaven came to believe that he had been made a divine being, the Son of God, or a god himself.

That's what the followers of Jesus (those who came to believe in the resurrection) came to think of Jesus. For most Jews, the messiah was indeed to be the son of God — but only in the way that David had been the son of God, or that Solomon had been the son of God (see 2 Sam 7:11-14). That did not (for most Jews) make David or Solomon \*God\*. They were, instead, sons of God because they were the ones who mediated God's will on earth. But with Jesus it was different. He was not only the messiah/son of God (a human called by God to mediate his will). He actually had been made a divine being. He was THE Son of God!

And that means that he was a "messiah" in a different sense from what they disciples had originally thought, during his lifetime. At that time, the disciples thought that the future scenario was to be this: sometime during their, and Jesus', lifetime a cosmic divine figure called the Son of Man would arrive in judgment from heaven to destroy the forces of evil and set up God's kingdom on earth, with Jesus at the helm. But once the disciples came to believe in the resurrection they "knew" that he was himself a cosmic divine figure. And it was he himself who was coming \*back\* from heaven in judgment. Jesus himself was the Son of Man.

In the Gospels Jesus frequently speaks of himself as the Son of Man. Why is that? It is not, in my opinion, because the historical Jesus understood himself to be the Son of Man. Jesus thought someone \*else\* was that cosmic judge of the earth (as I have argued on the blog before; I better deal with this again in a subsequent post). But when his disciples came to think that he had been exalted to heaven, they also came to believe he was that one (the Son of Man), and so they transformed his sayings to reflect their beliefs.

Moreover, when Jesus was to return from heaven in judgment (a common belief in the early Christian communities) he would not establish someone \*else\* as the king over the people of God in God's new kingdom. He himself would be installed. In other words, the disciples still thought of Jesus as the future king. But he would be installed as king in a cosmic sense as a divine figure. This was a different kind of messiah from the one the disciples had originally imagined.

More than that, Jesus who had been exalted to God's right hand was already in some sense given power and authority, he was already ruling with God in the heavenly places, he already was sovereign over the earth, he was already the Lord, he was already the King. And so in that yet further sense Jesus was believed to be a cosmic, and all-powerful messiah. He wasn't simply the ruler of Israel. He was the ruler of All.

I have argued that the death and resurrection of Jesus in and of themselves would not have led anyone to call him the messiah, since these things were not supposed to happen to the messiah. They were the last things that could possibly happen to the messiah. But since they happened to someone who had already been \*thought\* to be the messiah, they came to be interpreted in light of that belief, and the belief itself - that Jesus was the messiah - in turn came to be interpreted in light of those events.

What emerged was an altogether new way to understand Jesus. He was not simply the one to be installed on the throne in some future act of God. He was to come from heaven himself to destroy the forces of evil and set up a utopian kingdom on earth, in which he, the powerful Son of Man, Lord, and King of All would rule forever. As exalted as the view was that the historical Jesus appears to have had of himself, it pales significantly in comparison with the view that his followers had of him after his death. He was the one God almighty had made the Lord of heaven and earth. Eventually they came to think he was actually equal with God himself, from eternity past. And this became the orthodox Christian understanding of Jesus down to this day.

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