

Empty Tomb and Resurrection

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In 1976, Fergus Kerr reviewed Hubert Richard's *The First Easter* in *New Blackfriars*, and followed the review, in 1977, with two articles on the empty tomb and the appearance stories in recent Catholic writing. Hubert Richard's book made available to the British public the method and results of form-critical study of these narratives. The method had been developed in Germany and taken up by English-speaking scholars like R. H. Fuller and C. F. Evans. The form-critical method still dominates study of the resurrection narratives, although, during the past twenty years, New Testament scholars have adopted different methods for interpreting the rest of the Gospels and the epistles. The books by Fuller and Evans have been reprinted, and as recently as June 1981, Professor Kenneth Grayston offered a spirited and compressed form-critical study of the empty tomb tradition (*Expository Times*, June 1981, pp 263-267). The form-critical method isolates the pericope from its context and examines its form with a view to discovering its purpose and giving it a place in a history of tradition. It is part of a quest to discover what happened in history, but it is often also very useful in elucidating the genre of the passage. It presupposes that fragments of tradition can be separated from the Gospels and the epistles and that such separation and analysis can lead to accurate relative dating e.g. Professor Grayston's comments on I Cor. 15:3-5 (p 263f). The criteria for this kind of separation are sometimes doubtful and the results uncertain, but the method has a more serious limitation. It involves losing sight of the whole for the parts, and since any statement made in isolation becomes difficult to interpret with confidence, in losing sight of the whole, meaning is lost. 'He died – he was buried. He was raised – he appeared' (p 264), taken out of the context the formula provides (viz the Old Testament: 'according to the Scriptures') could mean almost anything. Instead of interpreting narratives as they are presented and trying to make sense of the inter-relationship of various parts of the narrative, some parts are dismissed: 'Matthew's story about the guard cannot be taken seriously' (p 266). This presumably means that Professor Grayston thinks that the story of the guard is historically false, and having made that judgment, nothing more is said. But to interpret Matthew's meaning, it is necessary to make sense of all the details he gives. Should we make the judgment that 'Shakespeare's story about the ghost

of Hamlet's father cannot be taken seriously', and then say nothing more about it, we should find ourselves at a loss to interpret the play. And it seems odd that an article can be written about the final chapters of literary works with next to no reference to what has happened in the earlier chapters, but that is what the method demands.

May I offer a single example of an alternative approach. Since it treats the literary composition as a whole and does not isolate pericopae from their contexts, it would need a book to cover the material touched upon in Professor Grayston's article. I shall take the Gospel of Matthew as an example and try to elucidate his account of the Empty Tomb as part of the climax of his teaching about Jesus, with a view to discovering what the story means, and in particular what it shows about Matthew's understanding of the relationship between empty tomb and resurrection. One reason why I choose the Matthean account is because some useful groundwork has been done in C. H. Giblin's article (*Structural and Thematic Correlations in the Matthean Burial-Resurrection Narrative*. Mt. 27:57 – 28:20. *New Testament Studies* 21 pp 406-420. 1974-5) which demonstrates the care with which Matthew has structured and integrated whatever material he received from tradition. It remains to draw out the anthropological and theological implications of Matthew's presentation.

Let me begin by stating the obvious. Matthew accepted the Old Testament (the LXX) as scripture and the theological paradigms of the Old Testament structure Matthew's thought. He sees the world as the creation of a God who recreates and sustains it. When he presents Jesus to the reader as Emmanuel, God with us, he both sets Jesus within Old Testament paradigms and sees these paradigms anew through the life of Jesus (e.g. Jesus as the obedient son of God, the new Israel, in the Temptation story, Matthew 4:1ff). Because God's creative activity is presupposed and the Old Testament methods of depicting this belief are taken over, special acts of creation by God can find a place in the Gospel in a way that is foreign to a naturalistic presentation; at the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus is conceived of a virgin by the direct action of God, and throughout the Gospel, Jesus, God with us, performs miracles of healing, feeding, protecting and judging the people. These wonders focus the reader's attention on God's sustaining care, which is not brought to an end by death (the raising of the ruler's daughter, 9:18ff, the discussion with the Sadducees, 22:29ff). Ironically, even Herod believes in the resurrection, although his faith is prompted more by guilt than by trust (14:1ff). It is in this theological context that Matthew prepares the reader for the climax of his Gospel, the Passion narrative, through a series of pre-

dictions given to the disciples (16:21-28; 17:9 and 22-23; 20:17-19): as the son of man, Jesus is to suffer and die, to be crucified, and, on the third day, be raised. This is the way that the disciples must follow: the way to the kingdom of heaven leads through suffering and death to glory. Giblin's article demonstrates how carefully Matthew has made predictions and fulfilment coincide. G. W. E. Nickelsburg (*Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism*, O.U.P. 1972) has shown that many of the expressions of belief in resurrection in Jewish texts occur in a context in which the righteous suffer. He traces one development of a tradition from Old Testament wisdom stories about the persecution and exaltation of a righteous man in this life (e.g. Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37ff, the book of Esther, Daniel in the lion's den in Daniel 6) to a belief in post-mortem exaltation for a righteous man persecuted in this life (Wisdom of Solomon 1-6, II Maccabees 7). Particularly important as background to Wisdom 1-6 is the Servant Song in Isaiah 52-53 which describes the humiliation and exaltation of the servant. Matthew's picture of Jesus' fate is part of this tradition.

Is there a tension in Matthew's presentation between his picture of the God of life whom Jesus makes known in his healing ministry and this prediction that the son of man must face suffering and death? Jesus offers man life, but the way to life is through death. The tension lies in the fact that for Matthew, as for the Old Testament, the world, including human society, is God's world, but man has turned from God to himself and denied God's sovereignty: the rejection of God's sovereignty inevitably results in the rejection of 'God with us'. However, for Matthew, this inevitable result is not the final result because God is the God who gives life even to the dead. An appeal is made to the disciple's experience in the saying: 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' (16:25): loss of selfishness, which the disciple experiences in loving, is an experience which enriches life. Nevertheless, the difficulty of the struggle between 'worldliness' and obedience to the will of God is dramatically depicted at the beginning and the end of Jesus' ministry (the Temptation narrative: 4:1ff; the Gethsemane narrative: 26:36ff).

The predictions of the Passion are also predictions of the resurrection. Mark's 'after three days', which emphasises that Jesus was well and truly dead before his resurrection, is altered by Matthew (if he used Mark as a source) to 'on the third day'. E. Schillebeeckx (*Jesus*, Collins 1979) suggests that in Old Testament idiomatic usage 'the third day' means the crucial day, the decisive day on which something new can begin, and he cites Hosea 6:1-2, Genesis 42:18, II Samuel 1:1ff, I Kings 12:12, II Kings 20:5, Esther 5:1.

In addition to these passages, Genesis 22:4 should be cited since it forms part of the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, an haggadic version of which may have formed part of Passover celebrations in the 1st century C.E.

Before turning to the narrative in Matthew 27:55 – 28:20, there is one other reference to resurrection which calls for comment: 27:50ff. Matthew associates the faithful 'Saints' of the past with Jesus at his death. The earthquake is one way of depicting God's action (e.g. Exodus 19:18). The Jewish saints of the past are made to bear witness to Jesus at a time when the Jews of Jesus' own day rejected him.

The account of Jesus' death is concluded with a reference to many women who were witnesses (27:55-56 cf Mark 15:40-41), and three are particularly mentioned: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Since the disciples had fled (26:56 and 26:75), the women are the only followers of Jesus who witness his death. In addition, two of the women named, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, also witness the burial (27:61), see the empty tomb (28:1ff) and are the first to become witnesses of the resurrection (28:7-10). Through these two female witnesses, Matthew makes clear that the resurrected one is none other than the crucified Jesus.

Matthew's account of the burial of Jesus' body is like that of Mark, except that Joseph of Arimathaea is called a disciple: Giblin has shown how important the term 'disciple' is in providing a unifying theme in Matthew's account of the burial and resurrection. Matthew departs from the Markan scheme, though, in sandwiching his account of the empty tomb between an account of the setting of a guard (27:62-66) and the result of its report (28:11-15). This happens at the behest of the chief priests and the Pharisees. Giblin has shown the connexion between the reference to the third day in 27:64 and Jesus' response to the request for a sign in terms of the sign of Jonah (12:38ff and 16:1ff). In general, this story sums up the attitude of the Jewish leaders to Jesus as depicted in the Gospel. The scribes and Pharisees, and later the chief priests, see Jesus as an evil-doer who leads the people astray and who should be destroyed. To people who have rejected Jesus during his earthly ministry, a story of an empty tomb can mean nothing other than that the disciples have removed the body. Just as Matthew had juxtaposed faith and rejection in the narratives of Jesus' earthly ministry (e.g. Chapter 9), so he juxtaposes faith and rejection in the resurrection narrative. For Matthew, the empty tomb is no proof of the resurrection: it is a datum open to various explanations. Only faith in Jesus interprets the datum of the empty tomb to mean resurrection. In his account of the empty tomb Matthew

brings out that such faith is a matter of divine initiative. 'The angel of the Lord' is a symbol of God's activity, as in the birth narratives. The angel interprets the empty tomb to mean the resurrection of Jesus (28:5-7): in other words, faith in Jesus' resurrection is brought about by God and is not the supposition of credulous women. I mentioned that for Matthew the empty tomb is no proof of the resurrection, but it is presented as a datum, the only datum, which calls for an explanation. It is not true that for Matthew the empty tomb is irrelevant. For Matthew, the production of Jesus' dead body would be a *disproof* of his resurrection.

Matthew's Gospel contains two accounts of resurrection 'appearances' of Jesus: the first to the two women (28:9-10), and the second to the eleven disciples in Galilee (28:16-20). I put the word 'appearance' in inverted commas because in neither story is Jesus' appearance described. What is described in the first story is the response of the women in worship (v. 9) and Jesus' words which repeat the message of the angel, with the significant change from the angel's 'disciples' to Jesus' 'brothers' (see Gibling): the disciples who had fled at Jesus' arrest are nevertheless called brothers and commissioned to make disciples of all nations. Jesus acts mercifully, as in the rest of the Gospel (e.g. 9:6, and 12-13; 12:1-14). In the second appearance story, again the two features of the narrative are the disciples' worship and doubt, and the words of Jesus. J. E. Alsup (*The Post-resurrection appearance stories of the Gospel Tradition* SPCK 1975) has drawn attention to the form of these stories and has demonstrated that they conform to Old Testament stories of theophanies (e.g. Genesis 18, Exodus 3, Judges 6, 13, and I Samuel 3). This is an important connexion. Again, Matthew is working within a theological literary tradition provided by the Old Testament. Theophanies serve to emphasise that religious faith is dependent on divine initiative. It is not surprising that Matthew mentions that 'some doubted' (28:17) since what they are being asked to believe: that God brings life out of death, involves conforming their lives to that belief (16:24ff). The Gospel ends as it had begun: Jesus is God with us, and he promises to be with his disciples till the close of the age.

It is clear from these narratives that Matthew does not believe that Jesus was brought back from the dead to live an ordinary life on earth, as the ruler's daughter had been. It would be appropriate to ask of the ruler's daughter: where did she live? Did she marry? It would not be appropriate to ask these questions of the risen Jesus. The resurrected Jesus is not only brought back from the dead, but his presence with the disciples is no longer limited in the way that it had been during his life in Palestine. Yet, Matthew presents Jesus' resurrection as a bodily resurrection. This means that

for Matthew, the resurrection of Jesus involves post-mortem *personal* survival. Matthew is no Cartesian dualist. For him, as for Old Testament writers, a man *is* a body, he does not have a body which he can discard while remaining a person. For Matthew, to be a person is to live a bodily existence. The disappearance of Jesus' dead body shows for those who believe, that the person Jesus survives death. But Matthew does not identify 'body' and 'flesh'. The personal survival of Jesus is not a resuscitation but a transformation (see Jesus' reply to the Sadducees, 22:30). After death, Jesus' personal (i.e. bodily) presence with his disciples is a transformed presence. Of course, there is no language which adequately describes a different order of life. In I Corinthians 15, Paul's discussion of the resurrection attempts to capture both the idea of personal continuity and of transformation with the terms: *sōma psychikon* and *sōma pneumatikon*. Matthew describes the empty tomb and two theophanies.

I began this sketch of Matthaean theology with a reference to his belief in creation. It is because of his belief in creation that Matthew believes in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and not in the survival of disembodied, undifferentiated spirit. For Matthew, Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the beginning of the redemption of God's *world*. The life which Matthew hopes for is not a rejection of God's world, but a transformation of the world. Hence, Jesus' resurrection is not just a matter of his personal survival, but an indication of the significance of his life for the disciple, for the reader and for the world.

This outline of Matthaean belief in the resurrection is however, only a beginning. In order to understand his teaching, it is necessary for us to enter into a dialogue with him on the issues he raises. What sense can be made of the Old Testament and Matthaean belief in creation? What is a person? What language is appropriate to express personal identity and can this language be used of post-mortem existence? In what sense can it be said that Jesus is God with us? If I do not begin to answer these questions here, it is not only lack of space that prevents me.