

Four Essays on Easter

After Jesus' death, many people wrote accounts telling of his life. Indeed, we have nearly two dozen records of the life of Jesus. As to be expected, these accounts contain a great deal of overlap, even as they tell the same story with different emphasis. In other situations, the accounts tell unique stories, potentially offering more information about the historical Jesus.

Of the accounts, most people are familiar with the four canonical gospels in the New Testament. Indeed, it is quite common for people to start with these four accounts and argue for their specialness. For example, many authors (e.g., Strobel in his *Case for Christ*; McDowell in his *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*) assure readers they can uniquely trust the gospel accounts because these individuals were holy and inspired. Not only do I find this assertion question begging, it does nothing to help someone reading the accounts to conclude what's a real tradition about Jesus. Even worse, there is no simple rule one could use to accept the canonical accounts and discount other accounts.

Since there's a great deal of overlap in the canonical and non-canonical accounts one cannot simply say that one can trust canonical accounts and distrust non-canonical accounts. Many of the sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, are in the canonical gospels. Further, we cannot rely on authorship, as the canonical gospels are anonymous and many of the non-canonical gospels also claim to have been written by his disciples. The gospels of *Mark* and *Peter* offer a nice comparison in this regard.

According to multiple accounts, Peter was a follower of Jesus but an alleged first-person account of his life of Jesus did not make it into the New Testament. Meanwhile, the gospel of Mark is linked to one of Peter's followers in only one early church father, Papias. Even in this, Papias is less than complimentary. First, he reports that Mark only wrote down Peter's teachings because people begged him "to leave behind a written record of the teaching given to them orally, and did not quit till they had persuaded the man" (Holmes, p. 317). Second, Papias argues that although Mark wrote down everything as he remembered it, he did not write them down in the proper order (Holmes, p. 310; Taylor, 1966, p. 2). Inerrancy is a later concept.

Indeed, other gospel writers corrected Mark when using him as their guide when writing their gospels. This is apparent in their treatment of stories and in their chronologies in the books of Matthew and Luke. This is even more obvious when one reads the gospels in parallel (e.g., using a synopsis of the four gospels). This makes more peculiar an unquestioned fact: why did the early Church keep four different accounts of the life of Jesus?

As we enter the last two weeks of Jesus' life, I want to use this time to introduce some of these issues to explore the life of Jesus from the perspective of someone who admires him and reads the multiple accounts of his life as real people trying to really understand the events that dramatically shaped their lives. Easter, as we will see, is far more historically fascinating and important than any other event in the Christian calendar.

Judas

Imagine that you are an early Christian and you have just heard the story of Jesus' life and death. You know how the story ends, and you would probably have questions about individuals discussed throughout the story. In particular, you might have questions about Judas. As it turns out, the disciple Judas provides us with a way to understand general issues with understanding the accounts of Jesus' life. In particular, when did Judas decide to betray Jesus, why did he do so, what did he betray, and what happened to Judas after. Judas allows us to ask questions about motivations and free-will. We are better after spending time thinking about Judas.

As an early Christian, one might wonder if Jesus was god did he know that Judas would betray him. The accounts answer this question very differently. For Matthew and Mark (and perhaps Luke), there is no indication that he expected Judas to betray him. Indeed, Jesus even says that Judas and the other disciples will sit upon 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel (Matthew 19: 2). Indeed, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, by all indications Judas was as good of a disciple as the others. John answers this question by asserting that Jesus knew Judas was a devil from the start, even though Judas seems unaware of this. Most of the gospels, then, report that at some point Judas turned against Jesus and decided to betray him.

I have long researched the Christian records as the records written by people in order to understand what had happened to Jesus, a pivotal figure they all revered. We have nearly two dozen records where each person tells

the story as they best know it, and several of these accounts were later grouped together to give us the four that most people know. After hearing the story of Jesus in any of these accounts, it would be natural to ask “why would Judas betray him”, and in few other places do we see the humanness of the records than in trying to understand why and when Judas decided to betray Jesus.

Matthew and Mark are quite clear that Judas decided to betray Jesus after a woman came into Simon the Leper’s house in Bethany and anointed Jesus with oil. In both accounts, some or all the disciples were “indignant” that this oil had been wasted instead of being sold and the money given to the poor. John tells the same story, but moves the setting to the home of Mary and Martha, and it’s Mary who breaks the ointment and Judas alone who protests that the money is wasted. John uses the occasion to take another swipe at Judas and says that Judas only complains because he was a thief who stole from the money box. Clearly, John has issues with Judas.

In all these accounts, however, Jesus responds to these complaints with an allusion to the Jewish scriptures that read, “For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:11). Jesus, however, completely perverts the meaning of the passage and says, “The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me” and that the woman was preparing his body for burial.

For Mark and Matthew, it is then that Judas decided to betray Jesus. In Luke, however, Judas didn’t decide to betray Jesus, but Satan entered into Judas making him betray Jesus. In John, the situation is even more murky, with Judas either being a devil from the start (John 6: 70), or Satan having put into his heart to betray Jesus (13: 2) and Satan only entering Judas after he had been singled out as the betrayer at the final supper (13:27). All the accounts remember that Jesus indicated the one who would betray him using bread somehow, but they differ on whether Judas dipped his bread with Jesus or whether Jesus singled him out by giving him bread. These are just the types of memory variations one would expect.

Clearly, these narratives offer different answers to questions about Judas responsibility and his motives. In Matthew and Mark, Judas seems to betray Jesus because Jesus betrayed his cause: the poor. In Luke and John, Judas seems to have had less choice, but also Judas seems to care less about the poor. Similarly, our narratives offer different answers to questions about how Judas felt about betraying Jesus and what happened to Judas.

In Matthew, Judas repented of his actions, gave the silver back to the chief priests and elders, and then went and hung himself; with the money, the priests bought a dirt field to make into a poor person’s cemetery that came to be known as the Field of Blood (27: 3ff). Luke, however, however, doesn’t indicate that Judas felt any guilt at all; Luke reports that Judas buys the same land himself and seems to trip and fall, giving it its name “Field of Blood” (Acts 1: 16ff). Both accounts agree that this fulfils prophecy, they just disagree on which one. Even early Church fathers were aware of these conflicts, and attempted to reconcile by saying, he was hung and then the rope was cut and he fell. On any account, we have one other account of Judas’ death that says that Judas became a walking example of the consequences of ungodliness. It’s worth presenting this passage from Papias in full:

Judas was a terrible walking example of ungodliness in this world. His flesh so bloated he was not able to pass through a place where a wagon passes easily; not even his bloated head by itself. For his eyelids, they say, were so swollen that he could not see the light at all, and his eyes could not be seen even by a doctor using an optical instrument, so far had they sunk below the outer surface. His genitals appeared more loathsome and larger than anyone else’s and when he relieved himself, there passed through it puss and worms from every part of his body, much to his shame. After much agony and punishment, they say, he finally died in his own place and because of the stench the area is deserted and uninhabitable even now. In fact even to this day, no one can pass that place without holding one’s nose- so great was the discharge from his body and so far did it spread over the ground. (Holmes, p. 316).

There’s so much here, from issues of guilt and freewill, to issues of determining to will of one’s god (e.g., the disciples follow the common practice of casting lots to allow their god to make clear his choice to replace Judas). How many of our actions do we really have control over and how many are determined by forces outside our control, and as a consequence how much should we blame and punish ourselves and others. Perhaps the cosmos will punish in its own time. I don’t see these conflicting accounts as evidence that the reports are flawed and so

the Bible generally untrustworthy. I see these accounts as evidence that they were written by people trying to make sense of what had happened to them, and trying to answer questions that reasonable people must have asked: Did Jesus know Judas would betray him? Why did Judas betray him? What happened to Judas afterwards? When I read the accounts as accounts written by people, I catch a glimpse of what Jesus meant to them and what they saw as their role in a cosmic drama that they believed would soon come to an end.

15 April 2014

Where Did Jesus Go When He Died?

After Jesus' death, some traditions hold that he followed the well-worn path to the underworld. He followed a path traveled by Gilgamesh in his quest for immortality, he followed the path that the master musician Orpheus followed in his quest to recover his beloved Eurydice, he followed the path Odysseus took when he visited the soothsayer Teiresias to discover how he could reach home after two decades of war and shipwreck, he followed the path Aeneas took to consult his deceased father; we follow Dante's path through an afterworld.

As should be clear, this journey is common in epics because the truth is none of us know what happens after we die. In some traditions an immortal soul lives on in a shadowy underworld. This world is uniformly described in negative terms, with no less a hero than Achilles declaring that he would rather be a slave of a slave among the living than king in the underworld. In other traditions, such as that of the Jewish Sadducees and the Greek Epicureans, nothing happens after we die, and our atoms simply disperse. In other traditions, an immortal soul enters other bodies. The Greek historian Herodotus reports that the Egyptians believed that as one body dies it enters the soul of another body until it has entered the soul of every type of creature on the land, in the sea, and in the air. Building on Hindu traditions, Buddhists argue that a similar cycle of samsara continues until one achieves enlightenment. For their part, the Taoists admit their ignorance and often phrase their teachings on death admitting their ignorance, "how can I tell if a man who fears death is not like a man who left home and fears returning?" Though many Christians now believe when we die we immediately go to our eternal reward or punishment, the apostle Paul thought that when we die we are as if asleep until a resurrection of the dead where people are judged and rewarded or punished.

One's thoughts on what happens after we die naturally touch on many deeply held beliefs about ourselves and the universe. If we exist after we die, did we exist before we were born? Though this world doesn't seem to be just, the evil prosper and the good suffer, is there a cosmic justice when the accounts are made right?

Though these thoughts often influence how people believe they should live, they do not lead to any clear ethical principles. Both the Epicureans and the Sadducees believed that our souls ended after we died, and yet one argued that we should pursue the modest pleasures of life (friends, good food and wine, books), while the other argued that we should simply follow their god's commandments because one simply should. Even within our culture, most people believe in some form of an afterlife, and there doesn't appear to be a wide agreement on how to get rewarded while one is there. Even the quickest trip around the globe reveals many people living fulfilled lives in very different ways in a pursuit of very different after lives.

These beliefs also show the all too human bias in our ethics. We pervert the reasonable idea that since we are humans we should live as humans into a hierarchy of being where some humans are more human and these are as better to the same degree that being human is better than being another animal. In many cultures being born as a woman is seen as much a punishment as it would be for a woman to be demoted and born as another animal. I'm quite sure that just as women would disagree with this sentiment, other animals would also emphasize the joys of their ways of living. Who hasn't ever wanted to soar the heavens in a bird migration and swim the depths of the oceans with whales?

Even notions of paradise, however, leave me unfulfilled. In his Divine Comedy, Dante presents what was his religion's view of paradise: singing around the throne of god for all eternity. In their pyramids, the Egyptian pharaoh's took what they thought would make them eternally happy: gold and local foods. I cannot but think people would make different choices if they knew the variety of goods produced since then, and agree with Mark Twain that even few days of only harp music might be a trifle much and can not get excited about an eternity of it.

Even when people imagine seeing their friends and family they imagine their grandparents as old and themselves as young; probably different from how the grandparents conceive of it. Although it would be exciting to see old friends, are we to presume that we would not long to meet new people? However you consider it, presumably even 72 virgins would not stay virgins through all eternity; if they did, this might be more like Tantalus' punishment than any heaven, and if you only valued women for their virginity why would you not tire of them after they no longer had it.

I don't know what happened to Jesus after he was crucified for the same way I don't know what happens to people when they die today. I cannot think of a reason why people should ever fight over this, and am astounded at how many friendships are ended and wars are fought for just this reason.

I don't know what happens after we die. I can, however, try to live a good life in the world that I know about. I don't always know the answer to that question, but welcome fellow travelers who want to walk with me in this messy world to find it.

Happy Easter, or whatever you call this time of year.

19 April 2014

What Happened the First Easter?

Today is Easter, the essential holiday of the Christian religion. On this day, Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead. Given the importance of this day for the early Christians, it is worth asking what they believed happened on this day. As one reads the accounts, we find an authenticity in the details, details that tell of people who believed they experienced a special event—even as they disagree on exactly what happened. We find humans telling other humans how they learned their master's tomb was empty and they would see him again. By humanizing the gospels, we redeem them as epics as worthy to study along with the other great epics.

While the gospels consistently report that women were the first to discover the empty tomb, they differ widely on which women discovered it, the circumstances around this discovery, and whether or not the disciples expected it. They make just the kinds of changes we would expect in an oral tradition where people are independently spreading a message. In this case, as the message of Jesus spread throughout the Roman empire, people remembered the details of events differently. Reading the accounts this way makes them seem all the more human, all the more accounts of real people reporting real memories of events that happened two thousand years ago. It allows me to connect with these authors.

In Mark's account, three women (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome) brought spices to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body. In the midst of their conversation about how they would remove the stone blocking the tomb, they see that it has already been removed. They enter the tomb, and a man in a white robe told them that Jesus had been risen and told them to go tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus would meet them in Galilee. As Mark's gospel ends in our earliest and best sources, the three women then fled the tomb, and "said nothing to no one, for they were afraid." Indeed, "for they were afraid" are the last words of the gospel even in Greek.

Matthew gives a very different story. Mary Magdalene is present, as is the "other Mary", but otherwise unknown Salome and Jesus' mother are absent (unless she's the "other Mary"). When they arrive at the tomb an angel descends from the heavens, rolls back the stone, petrifies the guards with fear, and then speaks to the women in a passage similar to Mark's.

Luke gives a story similar to Mark's, though he does trade Joanna for Salome. This substitution is most interesting and says something about this story in the oral tradition. Joanna is the wife of Herod's steward Chuza and mentioned as a follower of Jesus (Luke 8: 2-3). While some argue that Mark's Salome is otherwise unknown, this isn't quite true. We know of a Salome: Herod's granddaughter. This substitution then makes perfect sense: the oral tradition recorded that someone from Herod's household visited Jesus' grave and offered different solutions to who this was.

Interestingly, Luke then continues that when Mary Magdalene and the others told the disciples, they didn't believe them. As Luke says, their words "seemed to them as an idle tale."

John's account is one of the most personal, containing details that continue his gospel-long digs at Peter. In his, when Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and sees the stone rolled away, she runs and tells Peter and John ("the disciple who Jesus loved"). The two then have a footrace to the tomb, and John makes a point of saying he ran faster than Peter: "They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first." While we like to envision the disciples all working together towards one goal, the truth is that throughout the New Testament we find these little sections where Paul also emphasizes his place relative to Peter and the other disciples, and each is jockeying to emphasize their interpretation of Jesus' life and message. As a case in point, Luke only reports that Peter ran to the tomb. A decade later when John wrote his gospel, we saw that he corrected this over-sight.

Luke and John each contain a detail that differs greatly from Paul's earlier traditions about the resurrection of Jesus. Twenty years after Jesus' death, Paul wrote to the Corinthians using special language to indicate that he is passing on the tradition that he has received. He writes that "he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; [a]fter that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles" (1 Corinthians 15: 3-7). Luke's later tradition is at best ambiguous on whether Jesus first appears to Cleopas and another disciple on the road to Emmaus or to Peter. John, however, says clearly that Jesus was posing as a gardener and first revealed himself to Mary Magdalene when she asked him where he had taken her Lord. The divergences in these accounts are just what one would expect from oral traditions; Paul, Luke, and John are difficult to integrate chronologically.

Before we reflexively attempt to integrate these accounts, we have to realize that there are many other accounts of what happened that day, accounts that have as much claim to apostolicity as the canonical accounts have. Consider, for example, the scene of the resurrection in the Gospel of Peter. Although this text was considered canonical by some and used in churches, and even those who rejected it admit it was a mostly orthodox text, it was ultimately rejected as canonical. Of interest to us, however, are the details of the first Easter. Similar to Matthew, two angels descend from the sky, the stone guarding the tomb rolls itself away, and the two angels enter the tomb. A few moments later, "three men emerge from the tomb, two of them supporting the other, with a cross following behind them. The heads of the two reached up into the sky, but the head of the one they were leading went above the skies." At this point, they are asked if they had preached to the people who had already died, and the cross answered that yes they had. At this point, Mary Magdalene and other women make their way to the tomb in a scene very similar to that told in Mark.

What are we to make of all this? The simplest story is that Mary Magdalene and other women went to Jesus' tomb to do the things that "women customarily do for loved ones who die" (e.g., weep and beat their breasts). When they got there, the stone had been rolled away, and they were told that Jesus was alive and to tell the now-in-hiding and disciples that they would see Jesus again. In all the accounts, the disciples seem truly shocked that Jesus was dead unaware of a belief that he would rise again. Whatever happened after this point, whether Mary Magdalene or some other saw him first, the women persuaded the men and events persuaded them that this Jesus of Nazareth was more than another apocalyptic prophet.

While they and millions since them would disagree over the meaning of Jesus' message, by reading the accounts as the accounts of people coming to terms with a pivotal event in their lives, we experience far more powerfully the influence of Jesus' life and catch of glimpse of why many of these men spent the rest of their lives spreading his message. As for me personally, reading these accounts as the records of real people, with all of real people's memories and biases and fantastical additions, has redeemed these works and placed them on par with the other great epics. They are worth reading and meditating on, and I have benefited greatly spending the past year humanizing the gospels.

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