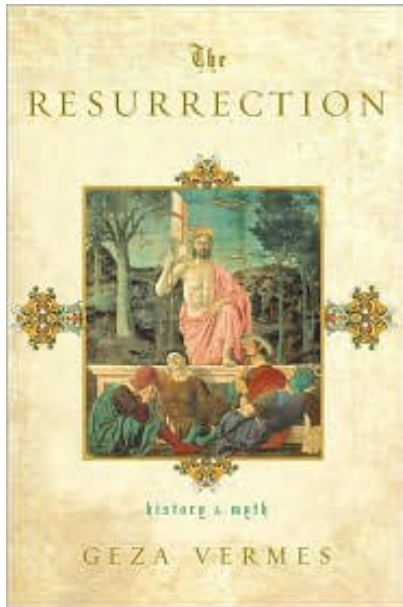


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Vermes, Geza

The Resurrection: History and Myth

New York: Doubleday, 2008. Pp. xix + 171. Hardcover.
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Although Vermes jettisoned his Christian faith in 1957, his desire to study Jesus remained and has resulted in numerous books on the subject: *Jesus the Jew* (1973); *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (1983); *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (1993); *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (2001); *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (2003); *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus* (2004); *The Passion* (2005); and *The Nativity* (2006). *The Resurrection*, Vermes's latest contribution, investigates the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. While it is not a cursory treatment of the subject, it does not go much further and is more suited for those wanting an overview of numerous topics involved in the discussion.

Vermes refers to Jesus' resurrection as "an unparalleled phenomenon in history" (x), with respect to the emphasis laid upon it and its centrality in the teachings of the early church (xv). His goal is to unravel "the true meaning" behind the New Testament reports that Jesus rose from the dead and to construct a "tenable hypothesis" of what actually occurred to Jesus, in contrast to "extreme reactions" offered by N. T. Wright (2003) and Price and Lowder (2005; Vermes, x, 153).

The book is divided into two parts and includes an epilogue. In part 1, Vermes discusses numerous Jewish concepts of the afterlife leading up to and including the time of Jesus,

such as death as the end of everything, the view of the Sadducees; unspecified postmortem existence; and disembodied existence. The view held by the Essenes is “difficult to establish” (42), since we have conflicting reports between Josephus and Hippolytus. Vermes does not comment pertaining to which of the two he regards as more reliable on the matter (43–44). Moreover, the Qumran texts yield “a surprisingly small amount of relevant information” pertaining to an afterlife. Finally, resurrection was also a Jewish idea that involves the reunification of the soul with the revived corpse (xvi).

The “first definite expression” of belief in the resurrection of the dead appears in Dan 12:1–2 (33), but outside of the Jewish-Christian New Testament literature, the importance of belief in the resurrection of the body is not seen until the Mishnah. If the literature provides little assistance in understanding the breadth and width of resurrection belief in first-century Jewish thought, perhaps archaeology can help (51–55). Vermes identifies “two or possibly three occurrences in the Corpus of Jewish inscriptions, the Palestinian ossuaries, and the Beth Shearim material” (54). He concludes that *bodily resurrection* was “alien to first-century Hellenistic Jews and was on the whole unfamiliar in most layers of Palestinian Jewry” (55).

Vermes then gives consideration to the concepts of *resurrection* and *eternal life* in the New Testament. Resurrection is to be distinguished from resuscitation, where the dead are raised only to die again. Since resurrection involves death, it should likewise be distinguished from Elijah and Enoch, who did not experience death (60). The resurrection is reported as a historical event in space and time. It accounts for the Christian movement that is still thriving after two thousand years. “This situation is profoundly perplexing and the historian must come to grips with this puzzle” (60).

Vermes tackles the question pertaining to what part *resurrection* played in the teachings of Jesus. In Luke 14:7–14, rewards come at the end of time when the just are resurrected. Although Vermes views Jesus’ dialogue on the general resurrection with the Sadducees as inauthentic, he adds that the ideas expressed by Jesus in the dialogue corresponded to Jesus’ eschatological thought (65). However, given views parallel to this pericope as they are expressed in 1 En. 51:4 and 2 Bar. 51:5, 10, 12, “for Jesus, or at least for his later disciples, the sons of the resurrection had an angelic, noncorporeal quality.” Accordingly, “[t]he only sustainable conclusion is that corporal resurrection played no significant part in the thinking of Jesus, although he was undoubtedly aware of the idea” (66–67; see also 73). Vermes notes a lone exception in the Synoptics where bodily resurrection is implied: in Mark 9:43–48 (see also Matt 18:8–9), one can enter “life” maimed (70).

Jesus’ predictions pertaining to his imminent and violent death as well as his subsequent resurrection by God have been the subject of much debate. Vermes notes some “oddities”

(81). On the one hand, if Jesus predicted his death and resurrection in the clear manner reported by the Evangelists, his disciples would have expected these events. However, the Evangelists likewise report that the disciples' responses were precisely the opposite of our expectations and thus create a contradiction. However, this does not place historians at an impasse. "Since it is hardly likely that the dishonorable behavior of the apostles does not correspond to reality, but is a mere invention, one must conclude that the predictions by Jesus of his death and Resurrection and his reference to biblical prophecies about his suffering and glorification are authentic.... Jesus informed his confidants about the cross and the Resurrection" (82). These predictions were included in the Gospels in order "[t]o serve the apologetical needs of the Church in explaining the cross and the subsequent rising of the Messiah" (112).

Vermes then turns to the New Testament accounts where the dead are raised either by Jesus, Peter, or Paul (84–87). Jesus raises the daughter of Jairus, the son of a widow at Nain, and Lazarus. Peter raised Tabitha/Dorcas, and Paul raised Eutychus. Vermes also mentions the enigmatic dead saints whom, Matthew reports, were raised at the moment of Jesus' death. Matthew's report "is best understood as symbolical" and "hints at a link between the death and consequent Resurrection of Jesus and the general raising of the dead" (89).

With his preliminary research complete, Vermes outlines the resurrection narratives in the canonical Gospels and the ascension in Acts, noting that "existing interpretations represent the full scale of the spectrum," with N. T. Wright and D. F. Strauss representing "two extremes" (101). The proof of the resurrection offered by the Gospels is twofold: the empty tomb and the appearances via "visions and apparitions" (108). In Acts, Jesus' resurrection is a step that occurred between his death and exaltation/enthronement by God (115–16). "It was the inward motor that propelled the budding Church to preach the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles" (117).

The Evangelists present Jesus' resurrection from a different perspective than we find in Acts, Paul, and the other New Testament literature. The former presents resurrection in terms of Jesus' teachings on and his predictions of it and outline the event itself. The latter take the event for granted and articulate theological understandings to be gained from it (118–19). Moreover, "whereas the idea of the Resurrection lay at the periphery of the preaching of Jesus ... Saint Paul turned it into the centerpiece of his mystical and theological vision" (128).

What actually happened to Jesus? Vermes holds that the tomb was empty and refers to claims that it is nothing more than "an apologetic legend" as a fragile theory "exposed by its intrinsic weakness" (140). The female witnesses who "had no standing in a male-

dominated Jewish society” (and were “legally worthless” [120]) and the disparity of their number in the Gospels militates against wholesale manufacturing. Had the narratives been the result of complete invention, they would certainly have been more uniform and included reliable witnesses (140–41).

Notwithstanding, the reports of the empty tomb “convince only the already converted. The same must be said about the visions.” Since these do not pass the standards of legal or scientific inquiry, we may only speculate what happened (141). Vermes notes eight theories. However, he only considers six, judging blind faith and outright rejection as the “two extremes that are not susceptible to rational judgment” (141): (1) a nondisciple(s) of Jesus took his corpse; (2) Jesus’ corpse was stolen by his disciples; (3) the wrong tomb was visited and discovered empty; (4) Jesus was not dead when buried and emerged from the tomb; (5) a variant of (4), adding that Jesus left Palestine and went to India (à la Ahmadiyya Muslims) or Rome, where he married, divorced, remarried, and bore children (à la Thiering); (6) spiritual rather than bodily resurrection (142–48). Vermes asserts that none of the six “stands up to stringent scrutiny” (148), then asks whether the “traditional Resurrection concept [is] doomed to failure in the rational world of today” (148). He answers that the evidence does not meet the standards of legal or scientific inquiry (141), leaving historians unable to determine whether Jesus actually rose from the dead. Still, they can speculate on the cause(s) behind “the birth and survival of Christianity” (148).

Vermes asserts that the empty tomb and apparitions of the missing Jesus gave his disciples hope, although doubts continued. A short time after Jesus’ crucifixion at Pentecost, his disciples had “a powerful mystical experience in Jerusalem” that changed them from a terrified and cowardly group to a band of “ecstatic spiritual warriors” (149). When they resumed their ministry of preaching the gospel in the name of Jesus, they realized that “his charisma was working again,” felt his presence, and were convinced that he truly had been raised. This conviction “accounts for the resurgence of the Jesus movement after the crucifixion.” But it was Paul’s turning the resurrection into the centerpiece of Christian doctrine that prompted Christianity to grow into the powerful world religion it is today (150–51).

As previously commented, this book is by no means the comprehensive treatment of the subject promised by its publisher. Specialists on the subject will be disappointed if looking for anything more than the opinion of another scholar weighing in on the subject. Nothing new is offered. Vermes can be commended for covering a lot of ground in little space, methodically discussing ancient Jewish views on the afterlife, to the meaning of resurrection by Jews and Christians, to an assessment of the New Testament evidence, to postulating on what he thinks actually happened.

But the book has its weaknesses. Vermes does not attempt to explain evidence contrary to his hypothesis. For example, while granting the historicity of Jesus' passion predictions, he could have attempted to explain the conflicting data he notes, such as why the disciples failed to grasp his predictions. Although concluding that Jesus thought of resurrection in terms of disembodied existence (66–67, 73), he makes no attempt to explain the contrary evidence he notes (70). Neither does Vermes attempt to explain how Jesus' tomb may have become empty if not from his bodily resurrection. As a result, his treatments are sometimes weak and appear lackadaisical, as though attempting to get another book to press rather than making a substantive contribution to the discussion.

Vermes also fails to acknowledge the impact horizons have on historical investigations. While Vermes may be correct that the empty tomb and visions “convince only the already converted,” this should not exclude serious consideration for the bodily resurrection hypothesis among scholars. Historians are aware that one's horizon has a tremendous amount of influence on nearly every aspect of historical inquiry, even in nonreligious matters. Accordingly, when the subject is Jesus' resurrection, it can only be expected that scholars will more often than not divide among party lines.

Without argument, Vermes excludes the bodily resurrection hypothesis from his consideration, dismissing it with a single brush stroke by specifically referring to Wright's careful and lengthy treatment as an “extreme” reaction (x [compare with 153], 101; see also 141). This is disappointing. Irrespective of whether one buys Wright's arguments or conclusions, Wright does an admirable job in his case for Jesus' bodily resurrection (2003), beginning with discussions on the philosophy of history and historical method, followed by careful historical analyses and argumentation. We can hardly accuse Wright of working out of “blind faith,” as Vermes seems to suggest (141).

In summary, this is an interesting book that is helpful only in providing a brief outline of a number of issues discussed in relation to the question pertaining to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. For more thorough and carefully written treatments on the subject, interested readers may refer to the following: Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005); William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Mellen, 1989); Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Christ* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2004); Robert B. Stewart, ed., *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006); N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).