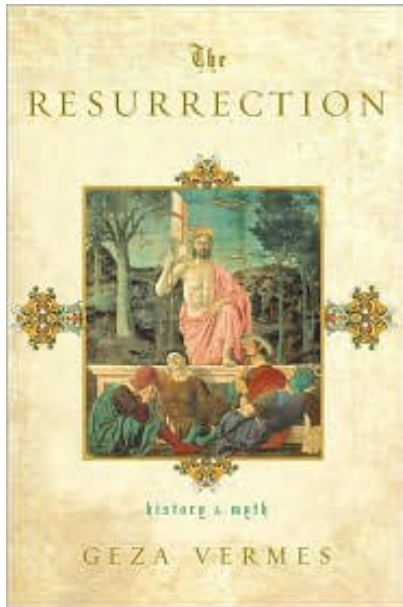


RBL 07/2008



Vermes, Geza

The Resurrection: History and Myth

New York: Doubleday, 2008. Pp. xix + 171. Hardcover.
\$18.95. ISBN 0385522428.

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Geza Vermes is no stranger to the scholarly world of biblical studies. He has written extensively in the area of biblical studies on a wide spectrum of issues, including the historical Jesus and the Judaism of his day and the relationship between early Christianity and Judaism. Vermes, among other scholars, has been vitally instrumental in steering scholarship back to the Jewish roots and identity of Jesus of Nazareth and interpreting him through the lenses of first century Judaism, as seen in the publications of his *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) and *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Vermes is also well known and respected for his work on the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran community. His most recent revised edition of the translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls into English (*The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* [London: Penguin, 2004]) has also been a great contribution to academia.

This most recent book by Vermes is significant in that it squarely address the topic of the resurrection of Jesus. Vermes has, of course, addressed this topic in his other books, but this is the first book by Vermes in which the resurrection of Jesus becomes the focal point and subject under discussion. The emergence of this book almost seemed inevitable and predictable in view of the book by Vermes that preceded it only two years prior: *The Nativity: History and Legend* (New York: Doubleday, 2006). The book is divided into two

parts. The first part (chs. 1–5) deals with the concept and development of resurrection prior to the time of Jesus, culminating with the Jewish attitudes to the afterlife in the age of Jesus. Part 3 (chs. 6–15 plus an epilogue) deals specifically with the New Testament materials related to the resurrection of Jesus.

As the subtitle suggests, Vermes attempts to show which materials in the New Testament relating to the resurrection of Jesus are historical and which are mythical. Vermes employs at his disposal various approaches to the question of the resurrection of Jesus by examining the Hebrew Bible and its views of the afterlife and resurrection and the New Testament texts themselves.

Vermes begins with a foreword in which he maintains the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. While he claims that the historian is confronted with a number of problems regarding the source materials dealing with several topics, such as the nativity, passion, and resurrection of Jesus, Vermes nonetheless maintains that the event of the death of Jesus “is in reality the simplest” (ix). The death of Jesus for Vermes and the vast number of scholars and historians is to be firmly placed in the category of history. In dealing with the passion and even the nativity narratives, Vermes is confident that historical truths are still retrievable, notwithstanding the legendary elements latent in the narratives, particularly the birth narratives. In dealing with the resurrection of Jesus, Vermes comments that that this event is “of a quite different nature” and that, unlike the crucifixion, “it is an unparalleled phenomenon in history” (x). The general two reactions to Jesus’ resurrection Vermes points out are generally faith or disbelief (x). Vermes states that his intent is to investigate what the authors of the New Testament are actually saying in their texts, “not what the interpretive Church tradition attributes to them” (x). This objection, however, seems somewhat overstated, since his own exegesis of the texts are interpretive by nature and since exegesis is interpretive. This interpretive approach is evident in Vermes’s own comments that what he wishes to accomplish in this book is the “construction of a tenable hypothesis” (x), but he leaves it up to readers to make up their minds and come to their own conclusions.

In the prologue Vermes begins by asserting the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus in the Christian faith, citing the early testimony of Paul in 1 Cor 15:13–14, 17 to show that the resurrection is in essence the *sine qua non* of Christianity. Vermes grounds the belief in resurrection, more precisely bodily resurrection, in Jewish belief. He defines resurrection as the corporeal revival of the dead, and he distinguishes it from the Greek concept enunciated by Plato as an escape of the immortal soul from the body. Later in the book Vermes shows that Hellenistic Jews such as Philo were so influenced by Greek thought that they opted for the immortality of the soul over bodily resurrection. In Palestinian Judaism, bodily resurrection was preferred, but it was held by some, not all,

Palestinian Jews. Vermes also argues that the concept of resurrection went through a developmental process, beginning first with the revivification of only the just martyrs and leading ultimately to a resurrection of the just and the unjust. Vermes helpfully shows that the resurrection of Jesus was dissimilar to first-century Jewish thought regarding resurrection in that it took place in *this* world, within history, rather than at the *eschaton* or end of the age. Another point of dissimilarity that Vermes could have mentioned at this point (although he does so later, on 60) is that, while first-century Judaism envisioned resurrection at the *eschaton* as corporate, that is, all the just would rise again, the early Christians maintained that an individual, Jesus of Nazareth, had been raised to immortality, or, as Paul puts it, Christ is the firstfruits of those who have died (1 Cor 15:20, 23).

In chapter 1 Vermes canvases the material in the Hebrew Bible related to the loss of immortality in the garden of Eden with the later development of resurrection. Vermes makes the odd statement that in the Adam and Eve story their “life was an endless holiday with no obligation to work” (4), when the biblical text clearly states regarding the garden of Eden that Adam was “to work it and take care of it” (Gen 2:15 NIV) or “work it and keep it” (ESV). Vermes addresses the Hebrew concept of Sheol as a gloomy place of no return where all the dead were destined to go. There is a gradual development of the notion of release from Sheol, and God is shown to be the only one who can deliver someone from the grips of Sheol. The optimal victory over Sheol was conceived of as a reanimation of the dead bodies of the righteous.

In chapter 2 Vermes addresses the issue of death in ancient Judaism and the views regarding the dead, including funerary rites and burial customs. Parallels to the burial of Jesus with Jewish funerary rites are made. Vermes also makes the interesting claim, as opposed to other scholars who claim that the Hebrew Bible espouses an annihilationist view of the person, that in biblical Jewish thought the dead do not merely turn into “nothingness” but rather become “emptied and weakened shades (the *rephaim*)” (12).

Chapter 3 deals with the biblical and postbiblical antecedents for the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Vermes cites the Hebrew Bible’s accounts of the raising of the dead by Elijah and Elisha. In addition to resurrection, Vermes deals with ascension or assumption, which are notably represented in the Hebrew Bible by Enoch and Elijah, who were translated or transferred alive to the “supraterrestrial” world. In postbiblical texts both Moses and Isaiah are transferred, but this occurs soon after their deaths. In speaking of the death of the prophet Isaiah, Vermes asserts that there is “no biblical evidence” describing how it took place, and he appeals rather to rabbinic tradition (27–28). The New Testament text of Heb 11:37, however, does allude to the manner of Isaiah’s death being “sawn in two,” although Isaiah is not mentioned or specified by name. The examples of Enoch,

Elijah, Moses, and Isaiah being rescued from Sheol indicate that the opportunity to escape Sheol was now being realized.

In chapter 4 Vermes investigates the flowering of resurrection during the Maccabean period and late Second Temple Judaism. The idea of resurrection as a reward for the faithfulness of the Maccabean martyrs is also treated, as well as the book of Daniel, which is the last of the canonical books of the Hebrew Bible that expresses belief in resurrection. The imagery in Ezek 37 of the dry bones coming together and reconstituting a whole nation, Vermes argues, offered a new and powerful image to the creators of belief in bodily resurrection. The distinction between the views of Hellenistic Judaism and Palestinian Judaism regarding the afterlife are treated, where the former opt for an incorporeal immortality of the soul and the latter for bodily resurrection. Vermes insists that bodily resurrection was “the main eschatological concept” of Palestinian Judaism and the New Testament (35).

In chapter 5 Vermes deals with the Jewish attitudes toward the afterlife in the age of Jesus. The two competing views were those of resurrection and immortality of the soul, although Vermes does introduce a third: the view espoused by the writer Ben Sira and the Sadducees, who held to no concept of an afterlife at all and opted instead for total cessation of existence. They were, according to Vermes, strict materialists. Vermes also deals with view of the Essenes regarding the afterlife, which he concludes is very difficult to determine, as some texts appear to support both views; in the end, Vermes believes the balance is tipped toward favoring immortality of the soul (45). He then goes on to deal with the main champions of bodily resurrection, the Pharisees, although he argues that statistically only a small portion of the populace of Palestinian Jewry espoused belief in bodily resurrection.

Chapter 6 begins by introducing readers to the teachings of Jesus regarding resurrection as they are found in the Gospels. In chapter 7 Vermes examines this teaching by first treating the Synoptic Gospels and then the Gospel of John. He then proceeds to treat the phrase “eternal life” as it appears in the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel. Vermes dismisses as “inauthentic” allusions to Jesus’ statements about his own rising from the dead (63). Vermes contends that the view Jesus probably held concerning resurrection, as recounted in the Synoptics, based on the story of Jesus’ dispute with the Sadducees on resurrection (Mark 12:18–25; Matt 22:23–30; Luke 20:27–36), was that those who would be resurrected from the dead were thought to be bodiless and resembling the angels, having “an angelic noncorporeal reality” and “purely bodiless beings” (66). In short, Vermes is of the view that corporeal or bodily resurrection was not a significant part of Jesus’ thinking (66–67). However, Vermes later admits that the view of bodily resurrection is presumed in one of the sayings of Jesus regarding losing limbs to enter into life (70).

The difficulty with Vermes's approach is that he offers up no alternate explanations by other scholars regarding this story found in the Synoptics. A reading of this story need not necessarily lead to a denial of bodily resurrection, since the allusion to the resurrected ones is one of comparison (evidenced by the comparative particle *hos* in Mark and Matthew), in that they are "like" or "as" the angels or as equal to angels (according to Luke). The allusion to angels, rather than implying a metamorphosis from human to angel, seems to show rather that the resurrected ones will be like or equal to angels in that they will no longer die and as angels do not marry, neither will there be marriage for the resurrected ones. In dealing with the resurrection in the Fourth Gospel, Vermes sees a different view of resurrection from that of the Synoptics. Jesus is the embodiment of the resurrection and the one who promises to raise his own from the dead.

In dealing with the phrase "eternal life" in the Synoptics, Vermes argues that it is synonymous with "kingdom of God." In John, eternal life is centered on belief in Jesus, which becomes the recipe for having this quality of life. Vermes makes the comment that in John "only the Jewish followers of Jesus are promised eternal life" (74). This seems to go counter to other passages in John where Jesus speaks of "other sheep" who are not presently in the same fold but who will hear his voice and come in so that there will be one flock and one shepherd (10:16). This passage is generally taken to refer to the admission of the Gentiles into the Christian community, as are other passages, such as John 11:51–52, which stipulates that Jesus would die not only for the nation of Israel but for all those who, although scattered abroad, would be brought in.

Chapter 8 addresses in more detail the predictions of Jesus regarding his resurrection in the Gospels. Vermes makes the comment that in the Markan Gospel the disciples are ignorant of the idea of Jesus rising again from the dead (9:10) and are afraid to ask him. Vermes deduces from this that the disciples did not know of resurrection at all and that it was therefore not prominent in the teaching of Jesus (78). This, however, does not seem to take into account the full reason as to why the disciples were confounded and were afraid to inquire of Jesus. The first disclosure of the death and resurrection of Jesus is given after the Petrine confession in Mark 8:29, after which the first prediction of the passion is given in which Jesus foretells that he would rise from the dead after three days (8:31). In the second passion prediction the statement is made again that Jesus would die and rise again after three days (9:31). It is then that Mark writes that the disciples did not understand this statement and were afraid to ask its meaning. This need not imply as Vermes suggests, that resurrection was an alien idea to the disciples. Two alternate possible explanations can be given. First, the idea of a dying and rising messiah would have most likely been foreign to them and thus contrary to the expectation of a military messiah who would liberate them from the Roman yoke. Later Vermes admits to this very point: "the absence of an actual Bible quotation in favor of the Resurrection of the Messiah suggests that there

existed no established tradition among the Jews about a dying and risen Christ” (128). Second, the idea of resurrection in first-century Judaism, as even Vermes admits, was one that entailed an eschatological event at the end of the age (136) in which the just would corporately rise again from the dead. The idea of an individual rising from the dead to immortal life prior to the *eschaton* was not a viable option in first-century Judaism. These two alternatives are possible explanations as to why the disciples could not grasp the idea of a resurrection to immortal life within history prior to the *eschaton*. Vermes appears to grasp this later in the chapter when he states that “the cross and the Resurrection were unexpected, perplexing, indeed incomprehensible to the apostles” (82), and much later he admits that the resurrection of Jesus was not expected by anyone (103).

Chapter 9 takes up the accounts of resurrection in the New Testament regarding persons other than Jesus. Vermes, however, rightfully refers to these as “resuscitations” (84), since those who were raised by Jesus inevitably died again. The resurrection of Jesus differs in that it was return to immortal life or nonending life. Among these Vermes mentions the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Nain, Lazarus, and the accounts of resuscitations in the book of Acts. In an appendix to this chapter, Vermes examines briefly the account in Matt 27:51–53, which speaks of the various portents that occurred after the death of Jesus, the most important of which was the opening up of the tombs from which the bodies of many “saints” or “holy ones” were raised and were consequently seen later in Jerusalem on Sunday, presumably after Jesus was raised from the dead. Vermes joins the majority of scholarship in tying this passage to a symbolic meaning between the resurrection of Jesus and the general resurrection of the dead (88–89).

In chapter 10 Vermes examines the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ resurrection. In his survey of the accounts, Vermes notes the various differences among the Gospels. In his treatment of the resurrection account in John, Vermes comments that Mary Magdalene visited the tomb of Jesus unaccompanied by the other Galilean women (92), but then he cites John 20:2, where, in reporting the empty tomb to Peter and the beloved disciples, Mary Magdalene asserts that “we do not know where they have laid him.” The presence of the first person plural “we” at least suggests that Mary Magdalene was accompanied to the tomb. Vermes also uses the terms “appearance” and “vision” synonymously when dealing with the encounters of the female and male disciples with the risen Jesus. Vermes ends this chapter with an appendix dealing with the ascension of Jesus and examines the main passages in Luke and Acts. Vermes could have also included an analysis of the “ascending” statement by Jesus in the Fourth Gospel (20:17) at this point. Vermes finally leaves the reader with two examples of two extreme approaches to the resurrection of Jesus. The first is that of N. T. Wright, who holds that the resurrection of Jesus was a historical event, the second that of David Friedrich Strauss, who concluded that it was beyond credibility.

Chapter 11 evaluates the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels and outlines the discrepancies between them. Some comments regarding the discrepancies at times appear overstated. Vermes correctly notes that there is no reference to any vision or postmortem appearance by Jesus in Mark's Gospel, but such an appearance is anticipated in 16:7, where a predicted appearance by the risen Jesus to Peter and the disciples will take place in Galilee. The assertion that Paul was ignorant of the empty tomb also appears overstated. It is possible that Paul, in citing the early creed in 1 Cor 15:3–5 in which he mentions the death, burial, resurrection, and appearances of Jesus in sequential order, may have been cognizant of the empty tomb

In chapter 12 Vermes examines the resurrection of Jesus in the book of Acts. He argues that the material found in Acts, especially the sermons, contain ideas that mirror the earliest thoughts of the Jewish-Christian communities in Palestine (112). Vermes notes that the resurrection of Jesus in Acts is inseparably connected with his exaltation and sitting at the right hand of God the Father. The resurrection of Jesus becomes central in Acts, as the refrain is given that it was God who raised Jesus from the dead (2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30; 33, 37).

Chapter 13 examines the resurrection of Jesus in the Pauline corpus. Vermes sees Paul as the one who established the resurrection as “the kernel of the Christian message” (119). He first deals with the material found in 1 Cor 15:3–8. Vermes again addresses the burial of Jesus by Paul in 1 Cor 15:4 and is not as dismissive, as at first, but comments that Paul either is ignorant of the empty tomb discovery or does not wish to mention it (120). Vermes examines Paul's extensive treatment of the resurrection in 1 Cor 15 and argues that for Paul resurrection was bodily in nature, although the resurrected body would be far superior to the one that died and would be endowed with new properties, such as being immortal, imperishable, glorious, patterned after the glorified Christ.

In chapter 14 Vermes canvases the remainder of the New Testament texts on Jesus' resurrection and views it as contributing little to the subject. He points out that in James, 2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude nothing is said. He states that the book of Revelation contains a single reference to general resurrection; however, Vermes failed to mention an important passages such as 1:18, where Christ appears to John in a vision and claims that he is the living one who was dead and is alive forever, certainly an allusion to resurrection.

Chapter 15 addresses the meaning and concept of resurrection in the New Testament. In this chapter Vermes makes a number of observations. He states that the discovery of the empty tomb by women witnesses is an early tradition (140). Although not explicitly mentioned by Vermes, he is applying the criteria of authenticity used by scholars in assessing the New Testament texts. The discovery of the tomb by women deemed

unreliable witnesses in a “male- dominated society” fits the criterion of embarrassment. The various Gospel accounts about this story of the women discovering the empty tomb also appear to be authentic, based on the criterion of multiple attestation. Vermes moves on to address six theories to explain the resurrection of Jesus (141–48), but before doing so he dismisses out of hand two extreme views on the resurrection of Jesus: the blind faith of the fundamentalist that ignores the difficulties inherent in the texts; and the unbelievers who treat the resurrection story as “the figment of early Christian imagination” (141). The six theories examined by Vermes are (1) the theft theory: the body of Jesus was removed by someone unknown to Jesus; (2) the conspiracy theory: the body of Jesus was stolen by his disciples; (3) the wrong tomb theory; (4) the swoon theory: that Jesus was buried alive and later resuscitated; (5) the migrant Jesus: Jesus recovered from a coma and traveled east and died in Kashmir; and (6) the disciples experienced spiritual appearances of Jesus and thus they conceived of the resurrection as a spiritual phenomenon, not as a physical resurrection. Vermes categorically dismisses all of them and argues that none of them stand up to scrutiny. Even after dismissing all of these theories, including the two extremes of blind faith and skepticism, Vermes leaves the reader wondering where he stands on the subject. He appears to seek to answer that question in the epilogue.

Vermes concludes his book with an epilogue wherein he ponders how the early Christian movement got started. Incredibly, Vermes cites Mark 16:18 as if it was an authentic saying of Jesus (150), whereas it is almost universally acknowledged as spurious. The epilogue appears to have been written too hastily, and the thoughts almost appeared scattered. Vermes proposes as an answer to the early Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus that what changed the disciples of Jesus and propelled them in their dissemination of their message was the spiritual presence of Jesus. Vermes remarks: “The conviction in the spiritual presence of the living Jesus accounts for the resurgence of the Jesus movement after the crucifixion” (151). Vermes also cites his late friend Paul Winter with the statement “Crucified, dead, and buried, he yet rose in the hearts of his disciples who had loved him and felt he was near” (151). Vermes proposes that what the disciples experienced was an existential phenomenon in which they believed the presence of Jesus was with them and that this constituted resurrection faith. This seems to support the sixth theory above, which Vermes himself dismissed as inadequate. In this book Vermes does not appear to deny the historical core of at least five points: the death of Jesus; his burial; the discovery of the empty tomb; the postmortem appearances in which the early disciples believed they saw the risen Jesus; and belief in the resurrection of Jesus as the origin of the Christian movement.

This book does make for interesting reading, but one of its cardinal weaknesses is that it fails to engage other scholars in the discussion and makes dogmatic assertions in various places when other viable explanations are available. It appears to be very fast-paced in

places and seeks to cover vast amounts of material in a very short space. One is struck by the brevity of the book in covering such a subject as that of the resurrection of Jesus. The bibliography is very short, the index is helpful, but the endnotes are notoriously difficult to follow, as there are no numbers accompanying the text throughout the book to properly guide the reader. Perhaps at a future date the scholarly community can look forward to a more exhaustive and serious treatment on the resurrection of Jesus by Vermes.