



THE BEREHA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

A Resurrection-Focused Community

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From the foreground of second century Christian writings, we gain insight into the great importance attached to Jesus’s resurrection in the teaching and life of the church (on the use of foreground in biblical interpretation, see Ferguson 1986, 254–263). They associated Jesus’s resurrection with the original creation (Justin Martyr), and saw it as the basis for their “newness of hope” (Ignatius) and the reason for their communal “celebration” on the “eighth day” (Sunday) (*Barnabas*) (see [issue 6, 9](#)).

The emphasis on the resurrection in the New Testament writings shows why they saw it that way. We can begin to see their focus by comparing the number of important words that are used to refer to Jesus’s saving work. In the ESV, the words “cross,” “crucify,” “murder,” “death,” and “die” are used of Jesus in 53 New Testament verses; the words “raise” and “resurrection” are used in 58 (the relative occurrences are about the same when comparing the relevant Greek terms). When we focus just on Acts and Paul’s writings and look at occurrences of the words translated “raise” and “resurrection,” we discover that ἐγείρω (*egeirō*), ἀνάστασις (*anastasis*), and ἀνίστημι (*anistēmi*) are used to refer to Jesus’s resurrection 56 times—23 in Acts and 33 in Paul (this does not include occasions where the words refer to a general resurrection, a person rising or standing, a leader of a movement rising up, etc.).

While the number of times a word is used does not in itself present a complete picture of a thematic emphasis (see e.g., Paul’s use of “new creation” in Galatians 6.15 which suggests the idea of resurrection without using the word), additional study bears out our initial impression about the importance of resurrection based on the number of times the words appear. For example, as noted before in these pages ([issue 6, 3](#)), in his review of the “first-importance things” in the preached gospel in 1 Corinthians 15.3–11, Paul enumerates four events, using “that” (ὅτι, *hoti*) to delineate each: Jesus died; was buried; was raised on the third day; and was seen by multiple witnesses. When we then compare 1 Corinthians 15.3–8 with the thirteen evangelistic and defense speeches recorded in Acts, a resurrection-heightened emphasis is clear.

- Jesus’s death is mentioned or implied by the speaker or hearers in nine of them (Acts 2.23; 3.15; 4.10; 5.30; 10.39; 13.28; 17.3; 25.19; 26.23).
- His burial is mentioned in two (2.27–31; 13.29).
- References to post-resurrection witnesses are mentioned or implied in six (2.32; 3.15; 5.32; 10.41–42; 13.31; 22.8, 10 [cf. v. 15]).

- His resurrection is referred to in *all thirteen* (2.24–35.; 3.15; 4.10; 5.30; 10.40; 13.30, 32–37; 17.3 [Thessalonica], 18, 31 [Athens]; 22.6–10; 23.6; 24.21; 25.19; 26.8, 23).

But again, it's not just the references to the events, but where and how they are referenced that show the importance the earliest believers attached to Jesus's resurrection. In Acts 2, for example, the text uses just two verses to summarize Jesus's ministry and crucifixion (vv. 22–23) before devoting the remainder of Peter's sermon (before his conclusion, v. 36) to his resurrection and appearances (vv. 24–35). A comparable shift is evident in Acts 13.26–29, 30–37.

In addition to Acts 2 and 13, the first recorded sermons to Jewish audiences by Peter and Paul respectively, another text in Acts worth noting in more detail is 17.16–34. As Paul was waiting in Athens for his co-workers, he took note of his cultural surroundings and then reasoned (διαλέγομαι, *dialegomai*) in the synagogue and marketplace with Jews, devout persons, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, and others. When his views piqued the Athenians' curiosity, he was taken to the Areopagus and invited to explain the meaning of the “strange things” he was saying. Using an altar he had noticed that was dedicated to an “unknown god” as his starting point, Paul told them about the God who had made everything, his expectation that all people should repent, and the promise that he will one day judge the world by a man whom he has appointed. Some mocked Paul's message, others wanted to hear more, and some “joined him and believed.”

Jesus's resurrection is mentioned three times in this text. In verse 32, after his Areopagus speech, it is given as the reason some ridiculed Paul. In verse 31, it is the basis for the assurance that God will hold people accountable in judgment, a reference that implies that Paul had emphasized Jesus and his resurrection in his Areopagus address. That he would do so is not surprising given the philosophers' reaction to his initial teaching, recorded in verse 18: “And some said, ‘What does this babbler wish to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities’—because he was preaching [εὐηγγελίζετο, *euēnglizeto*] Jesus [Ἰησοῦν, *Iēsoun*] and the resurrection [ἀνάστασιν, *anastasin*].” Their statement is telling. In a place where people were accustomed to hearing about new ideas (cf. v. 21), they concluded that Paul was introducing two new deities. Literally the phrase that uses two articles, two accusative nouns, and an imperfect verb, reads, “because the Jesus and the Resurrection he was preaching” (*hoti ton Iēsoun kai tēn anastasin euēnglizeto*). The Athenians' cultural presuppositions led them to misunderstand what Paul was saying, but it is apparent from their conclusion that the claim of Jesus's resurrection had been prominent in his reasonings.

Elsewhere, Paul will show why he emphasized it so much—a discussion for another time.

Works Cited

Everett Ferguson. 1986. “Using Historical Foreground in New Testament Interpretation.” *Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Practice*. ed. F. Furman Kearley, Edward P. Myers, and Timothy D. Hadley. Baker Book House.

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From the Sermons and Class Notes, Biblical Text Studies page ([here](#)), “Comforting, But Not Comfortable” (Isaiah 40.12–31) — A sermon from my “God of All Comfort” series (Isa 40–45) (sermon link [here](#)).

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