



Seeking the Living Among the Dead: The Passion Narrative Revisited

Robert M. Wills

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The Passion narrative is Christianity's most important story. Is that "story" historically and factually true, or is it a faith story, told to foster and inspire commitment to Jesus Christ? Most Christians consider the Passion as historically and objectively told in the canonical gospels. That is Christianity's default position. The author asks the reader to consider the case for a fresh look at the Passion story—one that reflects what is now known about Jesus, his times, his culture, and the process of recording Jesus's story in a Hellenistic world, not the Palestinian world of Jesus's actual life. This approach, using contemporary biblical scholarship, does not destroy the Passion story. It opens it up to a deeper understanding of Jesus of Nazareth, his disciples, his purpose in going to Jerusalem, why he went into a clearly dangerous situation against his disciples' counsel, and what Jesus intended to convey through his actions. The first four chapters of this survey examine the nature of ancient literature, myth, and biography and compare it to contemporary nonfiction. It further examines the message of each gospel, beginning with Mark, and continuing with Matthew, Luke, and John (the chronological path of gospel writings) showing how the Passion story was shaped and modified by successive generations of Christians as they coped with and tried to make sense of the distinct elements of time, location, and circumstances surrounding each independent gospel. Thus, each gospel is read, not only for what it believes about Jesus, but what it has to tell us about the historical situation which formed its particular views. Part Two of the book comprises sixteen separate elements, or vignettes, contained within the Passion narratives of the four canonical gospels. Each element (such as Jesus's predictions, the anointing in Bethany, the temple incident, the cursing of the fig tree, the role of Judas, the trials, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension) is assessed in its own chapter with an eye toward addressing the naturalistic explanation for each event or idea, what we know of the historical development surrounding the event or idea, and the theological point each element fashions. This kind of analysis is representative of modern progressive thinking, the purpose of which is to raise our comprehension of religious truth to higher level of consciousness. Another way of seeing the nature of such study is to assist the reader in achieving a more advanced level of Christian maturity.

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