

On this Easter Sunday I thought I should say something about the resurrection. It turns out I've said a lot over the years on the blog (I just checked!). Here's a post from about five years ago, giving not my personal views but those of another well-respected New Testament scholar who, like me (we are a rare breed), is not personally a believer.

One of the first books that I have re-read in thinking about how it is the man Jesus came to be thought of as God is Gerd Lüdemann's, *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry* (2004). Lüdemann is an important and interesting scholar. He was professor of New Testament at Göttingen in Germany, and for a number of years split his time between there and Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville. He is a major figure in scholarship, and is noteworthy for not being a Christian. He does not believe Jesus was literally, physically, raised from the dead, and he thinks that apart from belief in Jesus' physical resurrection, it is not possible for a person to be Christian.

This book is written for people with a lot of background in New Testament studies. It is exegetically based, meaning that he goes into a detailed examination of key passages to uncover their literary meaning; but he is ultimately interested in historical questions of what really happened. To follow his exegesis (his interpretation) requires a good knowledge of how NT scholars argue their points: the book is aimed at other NT scholars and, say, graduate students in the field.

The basic historical conclusions that Lüdemann draws - based on a careful analysis of all the relevant passages and a consideration of the historical events that lie behind them - is this:

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- o When Jesus was arrested and crucified his disciples fled. They did not go into hiding in Jerusalem - then went back home, to Galilee (where *else* would they go? They went home, to get out of Jerusalem!)
- o Soon after, it was in Galilee (not in Jerusalem) that belief in the resurrection occurred. It occurred because Peter had a vision of Jesus that included auditory features (he thought he saw and heard him).
- o This "vision" was induced by psychological factors. Peter felt terrifically guilty for having denied Jesus, and the "vision" he had brought forgiveness from his deep guilt.
- o This vision was like other visions that people have (all the time): visions of dead loved ones; visions of the Virgin Mary. In these visions, of course the loved ones do not *really* come back to life from the dead, and the Virgin Mary does not *really* show up at Lourdes, etc. These are psychologically induced visions.
- o Still, like other people who have visions, Peter took the vision to be real and assumed that Jesus was alive again, in heaven.
- o Peter brought the other disciples together, and maintained with them that the end time was near, as Jesus had originally preached, and that the kingdom of God was soon to appear. The evidence? The resurrection of the dead had already begun. The

evidence? Jesus had been raised. The evidence? He had appeared to Peter. All this is happening in Galilee.

- o The vision was infectious, and the mission got underway.

- o Even Jesus' brothers were caught up in the excitement and James became a believer in Jesus.

- o The other person who had a genuine vision of Jesus was much later, the apostle Paul, who too experienced a psychologically induced vision of Jesus. In this case, he found Jesus' teaching of forgiveness and mercy appealing, even as he was violently persecuting the church as an enemy. But forgiveness won out and in a cataclysmic break from his past, Paul had a vision of the living Jesus, convincing him that Peter and the others were right: Jesus was still alive, and therefore had been raised from the dead.

- o Some Christians thought that these visions showed that Jesus was spiritually exalted to heaven - not that his body had been physically raised from the dead.

- o Others, including Peter and Paul, insisted that in fact Jesus had experienced a physical resurrection of the body, which had been transformed into an immortal body before being exalted to heaven.

- o The implication was that the tomb was emptied before Jesus' started to make his appearances (other Christians also claimed to see him, but it is hard to establish that any of the others actually had any visions - they may have simply been building on Peter's original claim).

- o But by this time it was too late to know whether the tomb was really empty. For several reasons:

- We don't know how much after his death the vision to Peter came; Acts suggests that it was fifty days before the preaching began; if so, the body would have decomposed.

- No one knew where he was buried anyway (the story of Joseph of Arimathea may be a later account, not something that really happened; Jesus may have been buried in a common grave or somewhere no one knew).

- It is worth pointing out, Ludemann notes, that Christians in Jerusalem appear to have placed ZERO emphasis on the location of the tomb. It was not until 326, according to Eusebius, was the alleged site of burial "rediscovered" under a temple dedicated to Venus. Life of Constantine 3.26-28.

And so, the short story: Christianity started among Jesus' followers in Galilee, sometime after his death, after Peter had a vision of Jesus that was psychologically induced.

So, to be clear, I'm not saying I agree with this entire reconstruction. But it's very interesting, based on a detailed examination of all the evidence from the NT (and outside) by a skilled interpreter, and worth bearing in mind when trying to figure out what really happened both to Jesus' body and to the followers of Jesus to make them believe it had been raised from the dead.[\private]



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