

The Resurrection of Christ, An Historical Inquiry **Gerd Ludemann**

Book Review

Gerd Ludemann writes, “historical research shows with definite clarity that Jesus was not raised from the dead...we must acknowledge...a worldwide historical hoax”, (190). A summary review of his treatment will be sufficient to demonstrate that his conclusion is preposterously more forceful than even his strongest individual argument can support.

Three streams of thought permeate “The Resurrection of Christ”: gospel writers each reworked tradition so as to embellish, invent, or explain away; Peter and Paul experienced hallucination and “vision” experiences proceeding from self deception; belief in the supernatural is for the ignorant and unscientific. Each of these bespeaks either erroneous assumptions, or avoidance of two hundred years of scholarly response against counter-Christian polemic.

In his chapter “Translation and analysis of the Early Christian texts on the Resurrection”, Ludemann applies a pattern of subtexts that he titles “purpose and tradition reworked” (re. Gospel writers), and “historical elements”. In the former he charges the gospel writers with adding to early tradition simply to reinforce their individual apologetic, or perhaps (he intimates) to cover up some element of embarrassment. For example, Ludemann asserts that we may conclude that Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Jewish Council (which condemned Jesus), but that Mark (earliest gospel) “likely” invented notions that the same was waiting for the kingdom of God and had become a disciple of Jesus. But Ludemann needs to discredit such notions, for all four gospel writers record Joseph as the rich council member that buried Jesus in his own tomb. Ludemann’s case will be much weaker if Jesus is actually buried in a tomb that could be checked later to refute resurrection claims or appearances. Ludemann gets carried away with himself when he, in tabloid fashion, suggests that perhaps the gospel writer is trying to “disinfect a tradition...of a dishonorable burial” of Jesus. This is entirely ad hoc and enjoys absolutely no support from the texts he purports to analyze. Ludemann goes so far as to accuse Matthew, Mark and Luke of being anti-Jewish! (Refer to the ridiculous Appendix 3).

Is Christianity a “history of self deception”? Ludemann invests in the rather high-risk prospect of hallucination; for the burden is on Ludemann to successfully argue against several strains of evidence for the physical appearances of Jesus available in the New Testament. That any explanation can be posited does not equal all explanations are equally valid. Ludemann simply fails to evince that we ought to prefer hallucination as that which is best attested to by the various strata of available evidence. 1 Corinthians 15 is the New Testament text historians consistently refer to as central to the discussion of Jesus’ multiple appearances. Even critical scholars date the creedal portion of the text (vs. 3-5) to the early 30’s AD. The discussion advances from death to burial to resurrection, three physical events. Also, the post resurrection gospel narratives speak of Jesus eating and offering his body for examination, as well as being hugged! Ludemann though, convinced that he has dispensed with those gospel narratives after the fashion mentioned above, introduces hallucination. What accounts for these hallucinations? “Peter’s vision is an example of unsuccessful mourning” (165). Paul’s “event had a character of light and, like the vision of John, happened in the spirit, i.e., in ecstasy” (47). But Paul does not report “I was in the Spirit” as John does (see Revelation 1). John is deliberately conveying a non-physical experience. Paul is not. When Paul does have opportunity to convey an actual “in the spirit” experience, he does so in terms appropriate to that experience (2 Corinthians 12:2). So we have record of Paul’s ability to intentionally differentiate between the physical and the purely spiritual. Ludemann employs his fanciful tendencies beyond credulity when he engages “modern depth psychology” to explain Paul’s conversion from zealous persecutor of Christians to “Apostle-in-Chief of a new program of salvation” (170-171). So, we may more accurately adduce historical veracity from a study of Paul’s subconscious state, than from the widely accepted facts of Jesus death, burial, empty tomb and appearances!

Ludemann’s examination of history fails for he maintains a priori rejection of the supernatural. Historians look for the best explanation of the evidence. Yet Ludemann writes, “who decides at what point of historical study a ‘theological explanation’ ought to begin” (201). This is rife with misunderstanding. One

need only confirm that an event occurred in history, regardless of theological implications. Also, simple and sophisticated philosophic arguments conclude that theism (thus supernaturalism) is an entirely logical proposition. Yet Ludemann quotes another author, “[the disciples] believed in phantoms; ... imagined that they were surrounded by miracles; ... took no part whatsoever in the positive science of the time.” (175). This ignores the New Testament textual evidence that initially Jesus’ disciples did not believe the resurrection had happened, and in other places they marveled at his many miraculous works. Even their primitive sense of science informed their lack of expectation for such a miracle!

Ludemann is exactly right when he agrees with Paul that if there is no resurrection, we should abandon Christianity. Sadly, he reaches the wrong conclusion. Self deluded by a proliferation of “one can imagine”, “seems to indicate”, “likely enough”, and “one thus suspects” reasoning, Ludemann boasts, “accepting my perishability gives rise to a truer Easter vision”. (210). May the reader decide otherwise.

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