

Ludemann, Gerd. *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology*. Trans. J. Bowden. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994. viii + 264 pp.

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Summary

Gerd Ludemann is Professor of History and Literature of Early Christianity at the University of Göttingen and taught previously at Vanderbilt Divinity School. He is also a member of the Jesus Seminar. The book was originally published earlier in the same year in German as *Die Auferstehung Jesu: Historie, Erfahrung, Theologie*. The fact that a popular version of the book was published the following year (German title *Was mit Jesus wirklich geschah; die Auferstehung historisch betrachtet* [Stuttgart: Radius-Verlag, 1995], with the English translation titled *What Really Happened to Jesus: A Historical Approach to the Resurrection* [Louisville: WKJP, 1995]) and the fact that both were immediately translated into English say something about the publishers' estimate of the importance and appeal of the topic. In fact, its appearance in German created quite a such a furor that calls were issued for Ludemann to resign from the chair of Professor of New Testament, when he then held, at Göttingen. So far the North American response has been less passionate.

Ludemann's purpose for writing the book stamps from his dissatisfaction of a general failure among New Testament scholars to take seriously the historical nature of the New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. He objects to those who admit resurrection as having occurred but not open to historical investigation because it is miraculous and unique, and those who simply relegates resurrection to the realm of faith, thereby severing the central affirmation of Christianity from the historical nature of its source: the New Testament. In his own words, Ludemann is embarking on "a ruthlessly honest 'quest for the truth' of the resurrection of Jesus", investigating what is ascertainable (by assigning probabilities) and to distinguish later theological statements like "God raised Jesus from the dead" from the initial experiences of the disciples (*Resurrection*, 19f). His thesis is a simple one: since the resurrection of Jesus comes to us in the form of historicizing reports, historical-critical questions must be raised regarding its truth, otherwise the theology of resurrection becomes groundless speculation (*Resurrection*, 9).

After an introductory account of the issues involved, Ludemann moves on in Chapter three to give a survey of the New Testament sources for the resurrection of Jesus. Following Jeremias, Ludemann builds his analysis from the observation that the resurrection stories are much more varied compared with the passion narrative. For him, such variation indicates that these Easter stories are probably narratives of faith rather than historical accounts, although historical elements cannot be excluded. Ludemann then classifies these texts into six groups according to characteristics of

form, the purpose being to ascertain the historical value of each text by subjecting them to tradition-historical analysis to place them in relationship with each other. The result is an assignment of probabilities to a number of possible scenarios, with the primary conclusion that "a large number of existing narratives do not come from eye-witnesses but passed through the hand of the community and/or a theological personality" (*Resurrection*, 30). Only a few of Paul's accounts are regarded as eye-witness reports, with 1 Cor 15:1-11 taken as the point of entry. These texts are then examined (historical-) critically in the next chapter, which constitutes over seventy-five percent of the book.

Over seventy-five pages are devoted to the historical-critical analysis of 1 Cor 15:1-11. Taking his cue from Strauss, Ludemann regards Paul's use of the verb ὄφθη in 1 Cor 15:5-8 for a variety of different phenomena (in his words, "individual encounters, mass manifestations" [49]) indicates that he regarded the earlier appearances to be of the same nature as his own encounter. Furthermore, Ludemann regards the meaning of ὄφθη as referring to a vision, a subjective perception with no sensual or objective reality of the kind commonly found in parallels from the Hellenistic and Roman environment of the NT (*Resurrection*, 69, see esp. n. 244). Moreover, Paul's sudden conversion from this vision may be understood historical-critically in terms of depth psychology, in which Paul's unconscious "Christ complex" was resolved by his Damascus vision. Peter's vision of the risen Christ can be similarly explained by depth psychology in terms of guilt and grief over the death of his master (*Resurrection*, 96ff). Regarding the appearance to more than five hundred brethren, Ludemann thinks it comes from the Pentecostal tradition recorded in Acts 2. As far as the other (Gospel) accounts are concerned, Ludemann is satisfied that the triad of redaction, traditions, and historical analyses have shown that they are all "in some way removed from the real Easter situation and historically speaking no longer contain primary reports" (*Resurrection*, 177). These later Easter appearances were formally due to the "infectious" character of the first vision of Peter, which in turn may be explained psychologically.

By way of summary, the history and nature of the earliest Christian belief in the resurrection is traced in Chapter five. Ludemann rejects a simple reductionist explanation of the earliest Christian belief in terms of wishful thinking, or "projection". He even more forcefully rejects a conservative hermeneutic that treats the visions as objective reality initiated by God himself. For Ludemann all the appearance stories, given their hierarchy of dependence as depicted in the previous chapter, may be explained by "psychological processes which ran their course with a degree of regularity – completely without divine intervention" (*Resurrection*, 176, see also *What Really Happened*, 130).

The contemporary relevance of the investigation is then spelled out in the last chapter. Ludemann's conclusion is simple: The resurrection of Jesus is completely unnecessary as an assumption to account for the biblical stories of resurrection

appearances. Moreover, the modern person cannot honestly believe in the resurrection of Jesus in a literal sense (*Resurrection*, 180, cf. n. 259 on the "morality of thought"). However, the message of Easter is not lost. As experienced by Peter, we can even now experience the same Easter experience (the forgiveness of sin, experience of life, experience of eternity) through Jesus as the objective power, as the clue to God in our life. It remains true, however, that eternal life (being non-historical) can only be understood poetically. In this fashion, an elemental Christian faith is achieved, free from a harmful "split personality" and liberated by the recognition of "truth".

Evaluation

Like all scholarly endeavors, Ludemann claims to be on the side of objectivity as he moves through his study. His was an "honest quest for truth". However, not all the cards are laid out on the table. This much is clear: the primary assumption about this "honest quest" is that a historian this side of Enlightenment must disallow any supernatural explanation to an historical event. In other words, the modern outlook is naturalistic. However, what is not clearly set forth is the fact whether this presupposition is shared by the writers of the texts being analyzed. For Ludemann, the modern historian must proceed without regards to the original understanding of the event, and hence the question of the ancient writer's perspective is irrelevant as far as it concerns the issue of causality. This is the essence of *Sachkritik*: what the thing says is not what it means. In his own words, "everything is to be treated with scepticism". Thus regardless of whether the Damascus vision was understood concretely and objectively by Paul and his biographer Luke, Ludemann would insist on calling it, along with all other appearance stories (since Paul's account is the earliest, and so the logic goes), an ecstatic vision that is purely interior. This assumes a privileged access to truth that was not available to the people of earlier (i.e. pre-Enlightenment) times.

Ludemann allows that the work of the historian is one of reconstruction, and thus require the use and assessments of hypotheses and probabilities (*Resurrection*, 16). But often in the course of his study, the hypotheses are asserted without an assessment of their probabilities of being more likely than competing hypotheses. For example, depth psychology is assumed to be the appropriate framework to understand Paul's conversion experience, including his vision(s) of the risen Christ. The gist is that what Paul had desired unconsciously (to be a loving person, in accordance with the Law, etc.) had become reality in a person (i.e. Christ), and this Christ complex was brought to boil by the Christians whom he persecuted (*Resurrection*, 83). What depth psychology remains unable to explain is the fact of timing and occasion for the vision. Ludemann does not address this either. In terms of explanatory power, psycho-dynamic theory can no better explain the causality of concrete occurrence of events than Paul's own statement that he was "untimely born" (RSV, 1 Cor 15:8), implying divine providence (see also context). Moreover,

this line of interpretation is not new and is regarded as having been largely demolished by the works of Kummel and Stendahl. One more aspect needs to be mentioned. Methodologically all attempts at psychohistory of ancient personalities suffer the same problem: the non-availability of psychoanalytic data. We have practically no biographical data of Paul prior to his conversion, making any psychological profiling of his conversion "flagrant speculation" at best.¹

Using the same grid that Ludemann employs, it is surprising that he could even speak about God as if he can have any direct influence on the affairs of man. This is particularly clear in his conclusion where he speaks of communion with God (*Resurrection*, 183). It is not exactly clear what Ludemann means by God. Obviously God cannot be an objective reality in the sense that the modern historian understands it. Yet while Ludemann rejects the idea of an objective physical resurrection, he does not reject the idea of an objective God that can be experienced. To be consistent, a deistic God would have been a lot more comfortable within the Ludemannian framework.

Even as a historian, Ludemann is not consistent by his own standards. As pointed out by J. C. O'Neill, Ludemann knows that Jewish ideas about general resurrection at the time mean resurrection of the body. Yet he denies Paul as being interested in the empty tomb, for to Ludemann the statement "he was buried" (1 Cor 15:4a) is connected with death only and not resurrection (*Resurrection*, 35, 46). Yet the following statement that "he was raised" (1 Cor 15:4b) would have been unnecessary if it is not connected to "he was buried" directly, for then the tradition could have simply said that "he was buried and appeared to...". Obviously, Ludemann is precluded from coming to conclusion on the side of physical resurrection because of his prior commitment to interpreting "spiritual body" in 1 Cor 15 as "spirit body." Ludemann's historian objectivity is not as firm as he would like us to believe.

Finally, Ludemann answers affirmatively to the question posed by Strauss: "Can we still be Christians?" One is simply at a loss to understand the logic of the affirmative answer, aside from perhaps the description "Christian" being understood in a psychoanalytic sense, as being the label of a process in which one goes through. The solution posed by Ludemann in his final chapter contains no new insights. As he himself admits, he has been inspired by his nineteenth century liberal predecessors as found in Emanuel Hirsch and Wilhelm Herrman, and the naturalistic historiography of Van A. Harvey. He solves the "Easter enigma" by erasing it from the record. But unlike Strauss, who believed that the early Christian belief of resurrection is critical to the integrity of the Gospel tradition, however misguided and deluded the disciples may be, Ludemann denies that the resurrection of Jesus adds anything to

¹ A.F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 294.

the Christian faith. Historically this is difficult to sustain, dogmatically it disqualifies one who holds to such a belief from being called a Christian, and existentially it is not clear such "faith" could survive its own attack for long. There was little surprise when Ludemann came out calling himself no longer a Christian.

Neither the thesis nor the substance of Ludemann's book is new. They have been rehearsed a number of times during the last two centuries in a variety of post-Enlightenment settings. It does, however, further "decloaks" liberal Christianity for what it is and backs it further to the corner. Jesus either was raised or his body had long since rotted away. Ludemann opted for the latter conclusion. The one whom the early Christians called Christ turned out for the post-Christian Ludemann to be no more than a Jewish sage by the analogy of modern consciousness.

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