

ABSTRACT

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The Resurrection of Jesus: Fifteen years later

The first part of the lecture describes the content of my 1994 book on the resurrection of Jesus, the second part its effect and the reactions to it in academic circles, the third part traces the development of my own thinking about the resurrection of Jesus.

(1) My book *The Resurrection of Jesus* (London: SCM Press/Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994) grew out of the dissatisfaction that New Testament scholars and Christian theologians have tended to be evasive about what actually happened at the resurrection of Jesus. How was Jesus seen? Was the tomb really empty and if so, what happened to the body? I posited, therefore, a thorough examination of all the New Testament passages relating to the resurrection, beginning with 1 Corinthians 15 and ending at John 21. The book first looks at precisely what the text says, then at the traditions which underlie the texts, and finally investigates what historical facts are contained in the traditions. The historical results are largely negative; the confession that Jesus was raised did not mean that a resurrection took place but rather that his disciples have seen him in a vision. The theological advice that the book gave was not to abandon the Christian faith but to base the Christian faith entirely on the historical Jesus, for his authentic sayings and actions already contain within themselves all the characteristics of the earliest resurrection faith.

(2) The reaction to the book's exegetical segment was generally positive, especially concerning the position that the Gospel accounts of the appearances of Jesus are secondary narrative expressions of the resurrection faith found in the little creeds of Paul's letters. Yet, many found the analysis of the story of the empty tomb questionable and postulated that women had indeed found the tomb empty on the third day. A number of scholars vehemently rejected the visionary and thus subjective nature of the resurrection experience; they claimed that a decision whether Jesus was made alive again does not depend on historical analysis but on our preconceived construction of reality. Still others related the issue of whether Jesus was raised from the dead to the question of God: "To believe in the resurrection is no more difficult than to believe in God's reality." With respect to the effect of the book in academic circles I have to conclude that the resurrection stories have gained more credence and, in particular, the story of the empty tomb has received a historical boost.

(3) Looking back at my 1994 work I am still in full agreement with its individual exegetical results and its straightforward historical perspective. Indeed, I would defend it

against any objection from postmodernism (“there are no facts, only interpretations”). Yet, I am convinced that disproving the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus ultimately annuls the Christian heritage as error. Consequently, I must reject my 1994 attempt to base Christianity on the historical Jesus.