



The Latimer Trust

PO Box 26685
London N14 4XQ

Chairman: The Rev'd Dr Mark Burkill
administrator@latimertrust.org
www.latimertrust.org

Biblical Truth for Today's Church

The Latimer Trust. Registered Charity No. 1084337

This document contains the opinions of the author(s) at the time of original publication. Permission to quote or publish in any other form must be sought from the author.

LATIMER COMMENT 05

THE TRUTH AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

The oldest of the documents recording the resurrection of Jesus is generally held to be 1 Corinthians 15, written about 54 A.D. As the present-day radicals and their predecessors emphasise, it does not mention the empty tomb, which all the four gospels do (even Mark, usually reckoned the earliest). Nor does it mention an appearance of Jesus to the women, as Matthew, Luke and John do, though Mark, if its ending is a later addition, does not. Further appearances are mentioned by the other three gospels, differing greatly from gospel to gospel.

From this it is inferred that Paul knew nothing of the empty tomb, which was invented at some point before the time of Mark, while the physical resurrection appearances recounted in the other three gospels, without any agreement between them, were invented later still. So, when Paul says that Jesus was 'raised on the third day' (1 Cor. 15:4), he is probably speaking of a spiritual not a bodily resurrection, which explains why he is ready to include his own subjective vision of Christ among the resurrection appearances (verse 8). A 'spiritual body', and therefore a spiritual resurrection, was all that he knew of (verses 44-46). Everything the gospels add is later legend. ~ ■-

The more closely one examines this sceptical reconstruction, however, the more unsatisfactory it is found to be. The following points are significant:

1. The Nature of the Documents. 1 Corinthians is a letter, not a narrative like the gospels. In chapter 15, Paul begins by simply reminding his readers, in summary form, of the message which he has previously transmitted to them, and goes on to draw out its relevance to the errors which have since arisen in their midst. If Paul had been writing a gospel and not an epistle, or if he had been proclaiming the Christian message to the Corinthians for the first time, and not simply reminding them of it, he might well have said explicitly things at which he here only hints, and included things which he here passes over in silence.

2. The Antiquity of the Gospels. The gospels were all probably written within the first century, and at least some of them well within it. Compared with other narratives of events in the ancient world, they are all early accounts rather than late ones, and if they recounted ordinary happenings in the lives of ordinary people, their reliability would not normally be challenged. 1 Maccabees, for example, which was written about 100 B.C. and relates events beginning about seventy years earlier, is reckoned a very reliable account. Why should the reliability of the gospels be challenged, simply because Jesus was not an ordinary person, and the events of his life were not ordinary ones?

3. The Resurrection Appearances. It is of course true that Mark's gospel, without its ending (Mk.16: 9-20), concludes very abruptly, without any of the resurrection appearances, even to the women. At this stage in the narrative there have not been resurrection appearances in any of the other gospels either. Yet it is very arbitrary to suppose that Mark finished here because there was no more that he could have said. Indeed, we are far from sure that Mark did finish here. W.R.Farmer has recently argued strongly that the traditional ending is original, and, even if it is not, it is quite possible that the original ending has been lost, and that (like the traditional ending) it recounted resurrection appearances. This is all the more probable in view of the fact that 1 Cor. 15, which is reckoned older than Mark, lists many resurrection appearances. Since it does this, and since some of them seem to correspond to resurrection appearances recounted in the other three gospels, it is perverse to argue that the resurrection appearances in Matthew, Luke and John

must have been invented, simply because they are not in Mark. The wonderful verisimilitude of the resurrection appearances, as related in Matthew, Luke and John, needs also to be borne in mind. And the apparent conflicts between the accounts are not irreconcilable, as John Wenham has demonstrated in a forthcoming book.

4. The Appearances to the Women. The silence of 1 Cor. 15 as to the appearances to the women is easily accounted for. Paul is summarising the Jerusalem gospel, which he had 'received' and passed on; and the Jerusalem gospel, as proclaimed originally to Jews, would have concentrated on appearances to men, since Jewish hearers would have been reluctant to accept testimony derived from women. One of the oldest Jewish commentaries on the Law of Moses states that evidence is not normally accepted from women (Siphre on Deuteronomy 190). In face of this prejudice, we find Jesus, in Luke-Acts and John, appointing twelve men as his 'witnesses', even though both writers record appearances to women as well.

5. The Appearance to Paul. It is true that the appearance to Paul on the Damascus Road, after the Ascension, was different from the other appearances. He says himself, when adding this to the list, that he was 'born out of due time' (1 Cor. 15:8). And yet it was not wholly different. It was not just a psychological experience, but resulted in physical blindness; and it was not just a subjective experience of Paul alone, for though he alone heard what Jesus said, there were others with him who also saw a great light and heard a strange sound (Acts 9:7-9, 17f; 22: 9, 11—13). It is not to be compared, therefore, to the vision of Jesus seen by John on Patmos, which indeed caused John to fall on his face (Rev. 1:17), but had no lasting physical effect, and involved no-one except himself.

6. Paul's Jewish Antecedents. There is in Jewish literature one probable reference to a future resurrection which is not bodily. This is in an Essene work (Jubilees 23:30f.) where the writer is trying to maintain the Old Testament terminology of resurrection, while really teaching no more than the immortality of the soul. However, to suppose that Paul is using 'raised on the third day' (1 Cor. 15:4) in this artificial way would be rash. There is no reason to think that the usage was a common one, for it does not seem to occur elsewhere in Essene literature, and the prevailing school of thought among the Jews (as the repeated statements of Josephus and other evidence show) was not the Essene school but the Pharisaic. Moreover, Paul's own background was Pharisaic (Acts 23:6; 26:5; Phil.3:5). Since the Sadducees rejected the idea of resurrection, the framers of the usual Jewish concept of resurrection were probably the Pharisees. And the usual Jewish concept of resurrection, taking its hint from Ezk. 37, was extremely physical, as the inter-testamental literature shows (Judith 16:17; Sibylline Oracles 4:179-182; 2 Baruch 49:2 - 50:4). Hence Josephus, who was a first-century Pharisee, when writing for Gentile readers, expresses the unfamiliar idea of resurrection to them in terms of the transmigration of souls (War 2:8:14; 3:8:5). This was a popular Greco-Roman idea, as was the immortality of the soul, but the former was more akin to resurrection, because one began with a body and ended up with a body, whereas on the latter conception one began with a body and ended up without one.

7. Paul's Teaching. In the Corinthian church, Paul was dealing with a predominantly Greek congregation, who found no difficulty with the immortality of the soul, but were in some cases prepared to deny the resurrection of the body (1 Cor. 15:12). Paul's reaction to this is very significant. He does not say, 'Well, I agree with you really - resurrection is only a figurative way of speaking*'. On the contrary, he says that they are, in effect, denying the gospel, undermining their salvation and displaying ignorance of God (verses 13-19, 33f.). Paul may, it is true, have been prepared to distance himself somewhat from the very materialistic conception of resurrection in which he had been trained. In the light of what he knew of Christ's resurrection, it is less surprising to hear him speaking of the resurrection body as a 'spiritual body' (verses 44-46). Yet it is still a body. And this is shown not only by his rejection of the adequacy of the immortality of the soul as a substitute for resurrection, but by two other features of this same chapter. First, there is his stress on Christ's burial (verse 4). The fact that, immediately before asserting that Christ was 'raised on the third day', Paul asserts not only that Christ 'died for our sins' but that he 'was buried', implies that he was raised from burial. So, although Paul does not explicitly mention the empty tomb, he implies it. Secondly, Paul asserts the closest relationship between Christ's resurrection and our own future resurrection (verses 12f., 16, 20-23, 42-49). But we know from his other letter to the Corinthians that Paul did not think of our own resurrection in non-bodily terms (2 Cor. 5:1-4), which means that he did not think of Christ's resurrection in non-bodily terms either.

8. The Significance of the Resurrection. The New Testament sees the resurrection of Jesus as an event of unique importance. It is because of this importance that its truth or falsity matters. Its significance is fourfold:

(a) The resurrection is the great miracle attesting Christ's divine mission, the sign that his teaching and his authority come from God (Mt. 12:38-40; 16:4; Jn. 2:18-22). Since the rise of eighteenth-century rationalism, miracles have often been regarded as difficulties rather than evidences, but if Jesus's claims are true, an absence of miracles would be an even greater difficulty.

(b) The resurrection is evidence of his divinity (Jn. 20:28; Rom. 1:3f.). Unlike those few temporary raisings performed by Elijah, Elisha. Christ himself and his apostles, Jesus was raised to an eternal life (Rom. 6:9;. The lot of common humanity is 'Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return' (Gen. 3:19), but the lot of Jesus Christ is life.

(c) The resurrection is evidence of our forgiveness (Rom. 4:25; 1 Cor. 15:17) Death is the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23), and the resurrection shows that these wages have been paid, on behalf of those for whom Christ died.

(d) The resurrection is the pledge of our own future resurrection, of which Christ is the firstfruits (1 Cor. 15:20-23, 49).

The resurrection, consequently, is not a doubtful or dispensable part of Christianity, which can legitimately be spiritualised away. It is a well-attested fact, and one that is central to the gospel.

Roger Beckwith

An address given to the School Chaplains of the Oxford Diocese, January 1981