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CHRIST'S RESURRECTION AN ENORMOUS SELF-DECEPTION? A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CHALLENGE OF GERD LÜDEMANN

1. Introduction

Gerd Lüdemann is professor of Early Christian History and Literature at the University of Göttingen. Until 1999 he held a professorship in New Testament at the Protestant theological faculty there. After he had progressively broken with Christianity, this professorship was taken from him through an initiative of the Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Lower Saxony, and a new chair was established for him.

He has become famous because of his many controversial contributions in the media which critically engage with traditional Christian belief¹. One of his main research areas is the life of the historical Jesus. Lately he called the newly published Jesus book of Pope Benedict 16th an „embarrassing blunder”, accusing it of wrongly using the sources². As a result of his studies, he has published several books on the resurrection of Christ, intending to show that it did not happen historically in the way traditional Christian doctrine explains it³. This article will briefly present

¹ It is interesting to note that Lüdemann is a member of the „Jesus Seminar“ (see his homepage <http://www.user.gwdg.de/~gluedem/ger/index.htm>, 25.05.2007), a branch of the Westar Institute in the U.S. which promotes the critical study of the origins of Christianity. Its mission statement includes the communication of *the results of the scholarship of religion to a broad, non-specialist public*, see <http://www.westarinstitute.org/Mission/mission.html>, 25.05.2007.

² See G. Lüdemann, *Eine peinliche Entgleisung*, in *Spiegel Online* April 26th, 2007, <http://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/mensch/0,1518,479636,00.html>, 25.05.2007.

³ G. Lüdemann, *Die Auferstehung Jesu. Historie, Erfahrung, Theologie*, Göttingen 1994; *ibid.*, *Was mit Jesus wirklich geschah. Die Auferstehung historisch betrachtet* (together with Alf Özen), Stuttgart 1995; *ibid.*, *Der große Betrug. Und was Jesus wirklich sagte und tat*, Lüneburg 1998; *ibid.*, *Die Auferweckung Jesu von den Toten, Ursprung und Geschichte einer Selbsttäuschung*, Lüneburg 2002.

Lüdemann's methodology and his results. After critically engaging with his approach, some consequences of Christ's resurrection for Systematic Theology are considered.

2. Lüdemann's Discussion of the Resurrection

2.1 Methodology

Lüdemann's methodological assumptions could be summarized as follows:⁴

a) Contrary to a number of 20th century theologians, Lüdemann sees a historical analysis of the resurrection as essential for the Christian faith, because the resurrection is, according to the early Christian witness, „an event in time and space“, a dealing of God with the dead Jesus on the level of history⁵. For his historical analysis Lüdemann fully embraces the criteria of historical criticism as they were classically formulated by Ernst Troeltsch: causality, the consideration of analogies and the recognition of the mutual influence historical phenomena have on each other. He also subscribes to a methodological atheism⁶.

b) In applying these criteria, Lüdemann is committed to a modern understanding of reality which has been formed by the natural sciences⁷. In this worldview the conception of the return of a deceased person to life as well as the expectation of a general future resurrection of the dead are not compatible.

c) The NT material generally – with the exception of the presumed authentic Pauline letters – has the character of a secondary source and is of very little historical value.

d) Reported appearances of Christ after his death need to be interpreted as visions, which means: as products of psychological processes, not as external sensual experiences. People in NT times could not yet distinguish between visions as internal experiences and external reality⁸.

e) The kind of reality of the believed resurrection event needs to be determined according to our present-day possibilities of understanding the disciples' visionary experiences. On the basis of what historically happened then, we need to show what valid religious meaning this event might have today⁹.

⁴ For this summary see also B. Oberdorfer, *Was sucht ihr den Lebendigen bei den Toten?*, in *Die Wirklichkeit der Auferstehung*, ed. Hans Joachim Eckstein and Michael Welker, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2002, p. 167ff. Oberdorfer refers to Lüdemann's first book on the resurrection from 1994. The latest book, to which I predominantly refer, only slightly modifies the approach displayed there.

⁵ See G. Lüdemann, *Die Auferweckung...*, p. 12. At this point he is in agreement with Wolfhart Pannenberg, at the same time opposing the approaches of Rudolf Bultmann, Willi Marxsen, Jürgen Moltmann, Karl Barth and Paul Hoffmann to the resurrection, see *ibid.*, p. 13ff.

⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 220.

⁷ See e.g. *ibid.*, p. 162. In another place Lüdemann laments the arrival of postmodernism with its weakening of the truth question in the academic disciplines; see *ibid.*, p. 207.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 38f.

⁹ See B. Oberdorfer, *Was sucht ihr den Lebendigen...*, p. 168.

2.2 Results

Based on the outlined methodology, Lüdemann's interpretation of the biblical documents delivers the following results:¹⁰

a) The Gospel stories about the empty grave are late, are not given by eyewitnesses, and are therefore irrelevant for a historical understanding of the origin of Christianity. Hence we need to focus on the appearance testimonies in order to arrive at a historical understanding of the events in question¹¹. The appearance account of Paul in 1Cor 15:4-8 is historically valid. Therefore other sources such as the Gospels need to be interpreted in the light of this text. How basic this assumption is in his approach is shown in a statement in his first book on the resurrection: *Whoever does not share the presumptions made here will not gain anything from the following*¹². A second personal witness to the events in question is Peter, whose denial of Jesus before the crucifixion and whose appearance experiences are in all likelihood historical¹³.

b) The worldview of Jesus' disciples caused them to interpret their visions as objective encounters with their master. Because of this objectifying approach, they had to explain the whereabouts of Jesus' body and did so by presuming a bodily resurrection in the sense of a resuscitation. The later narrations about the empty grave are the result of this presumption together with an apologetic bias for a truly physical resurrection, therefore they have hardly any historical value¹⁴.

c) We know of individual visions of Peter and Paul, who both had experiences analogous to each other. Because of their internal character, these visions need to be explained by means of depth psychology. Lüdemann refers mainly to the approach of C.G. Jung. He suggests a repressed „Christ complex” with Paul who – in spite of being a persecutor – was subconsciously fascinated with Christ. With Peter he proposes an incomplete mourning process which due to the sudden death of Christ and Peter's feeling of guilt towards him he could not bring to a proper conclusion. The Christ visions are then the result and the resolution of these psychological processes¹⁵. *The consequences which resulted out of this have dominated the whole Western civilization for two millennia*¹⁶.

d) This basic vision experience is infectuous, it spreads to others who experience it similarly. Also the other disciples carry a certain guilt complex, because they all betrayed Christ. The apparition of Christ before more than 500 people from 1Cor 15:6 is interpreted as the mass hysteria which happened at Pentecost. Paul identifies here Christ, as he often does, with the Holy Spirit¹⁷.

¹⁰ See also Lüdemann's summary of the events from Jesus' crucifixion to the interpretation of the early Church, based on his results. See *Die Auferweckung...*, pp. 150ff.

¹¹ See idem, p. 28f, also 73 (resurrection report in Mk, according to Lüdemann probably the inventor of the report of the empty grave). For the comparison of both traditions see ibid., pp. 127ff.

¹² Idem, p. 47.

¹³ See idem, pp. 28f.

¹⁴ See idem, pp. 141-153, where he discusses the report in Mk 16,1-8, also idem, p. 73. As far as the appearance witness is concerned, only the remark in Luke 24:34 about Jesus' appearance before Peter is historical, also possibly the appearance before Cleopas, a kinsman of Jesus.

¹⁵ See idem, pp. 140-149.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁷ See ibid., pp. 60ff.

What is the religious sense of the experience reconstructed in this manner? How can we still be Christians, although we no longer believe in a historical resurrection as a foundation of our faith?

In 1994, for Lüdemann, the Easter experience was *nothing but the revitalized and definitely enacted remembrance of the man Jesus*. Both Peter and Paul experienced the replacement of their feeling of guilt by a consciousness of being forgiven. They relate the image of the guilt-forgiving Jesus to their own situation and experience this forgiveness as presently valid. This experience is then clothed in the mythical statement „Jesus lives“. Exactly in this metaphorical manner, Lüdemann claimed, it is still possible to say that Jesus has come to life. What is contained in this experience – the forgiveness of sins, the experience of life and of eternity, is contained in the word and the factual history of Jesus. Whenever a person is in dialogue with and touched by the history of Jesus, this experience is made and constitutes a belief in eternity.

This was formulated in his first book on resurrection in 1994. Since then Lüdemann has officially renounced Christianity. In the preface *Letter to Jesus*, published in his book *Der große Betrug* (The Great Fraud), he writes: *My attempts to designate the reality of your resurrection through interpretation as an experience of forgiveness, of eternity and of life, had to fail, because these experiences can be made also apart from your person and your resurrection, and are not dependent on what you called God. Therefore I prefer to develop from now on a purely human perspective of religion, without having to legitimize myself through a higher authority which theologians call God*¹⁸. Lüdemann's latest work on the resurrection closes its main part with the confession: *If we take historical knowledge and ourselves seriously, it follows that we can no longer be Christians, even if we wanted to, because Jesus Christ has not risen from the dead. We are not Christians anymore. Whoever nevertheless claims to be one is deceiving himself*¹⁹.

3. Aspects of a critical engagement

3.1. Critique directed towards Lüdemann's approach

In terms of biblical scholarship Lüdemann's approach offers little which has not already been said. To a large extent, his work reflects older positions in German liberal theology, borrowing from David Friedrich Strauss, Rudolf Bultmann and Emanuel Hirsch²⁰. The main criticisms of his approach are the following:

a) The uncompromising commitment to the classical historical critical method and to a „methodological atheism“ which Lüdemann displays have long been questioned by biblical scholars²¹.

¹⁸ G. Lüdemann, *Der große Betrug...*, pp. 16f.

¹⁹ G. Lüdemann, *Auferweckung...*, p. 166.

²⁰ See e.g. B. Oberdorfer, *Was sucht ihr den Lebendigen...*, pp. 172f.

²¹ See e.g. the dispute of Adolf Schlatter and Paul Jäger in the year 1905 on the question of atheistic methods in theology, in A. Schlatter, *Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie. Mit einem Beitrag von Paul Jäger*, ed. H. Hempelmann, Wuppertal 1985. Schlatter argues that Jäger's atheistic methodology a priori

b) Lüdemann overestimates the quality of Paul's witness over against that of other NT witnesses. Even as secondary sources their value can not easily be nullified. However, the early tradition that the gospels of Matthew and John are eyewitness reports or based on them has found able defenders even since the age of enlightenment, the most recent contribution being the book of R. Bauckham *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*²². Any acknowledgement of a NT gospel as the work of an eyewitness would change the methodological presumptions considerably. In addition, it has been argued that the intention of Luke in writing his gospel is to present history in accordance with the historiographical criteria of his day. These criteria employed a truth criterium not different from that of present day historiography²³. However, even on the basis of Lüdemann's methodological priority of Paul's witness, his denial of the „empty grave“ as being a part of the earliest witness is doubtful, as a later analysis will show.

c) Subjective visions may be later recognized as such and not be taken as representing reality²⁴. The explanation of the appearances as subjective visions caused by psychological reasons therefore raises the question of whether the disciples later consciously deceived their addressees, claiming against better knowledge that their visions were real. It would then be necessary to assume a conscious fraud, for which the disciples were willing to endure difficulties such as persecution and sometimes martyrdom.

d) The disciples did not simply objectify visions. The narratives contain a strong element of discontinuity of the appearances with the previously known Jesus – he is not recognized, he is surprisingly present and absent, there is a strange tension between everyday-life-scenes and the extraordinary²⁵. This also shows that the first Christians did not understand the resurrection of Christ as a mere resuscitation. Lüdemann acknowledges this in his latest work on the issue, presenting a short NT account of various concepts of resurrection²⁶.

e) Had Jesus not appeared in the bodily manner which was expected in Pharisaic Judaism's eschatological expectation of the resurrection, the connection of Christ's resurrection and the eschatological one in 1Cor 15:22ff – which presents Jesus, the first of the resurrected, as the anticipation of the eschatological resurrection – would in all likelihood not have been made. Then, however, the NT kerygma would have been decisively diminished.

f) According to the overall NT witness, it is not the apostles who generate the appearances of Jesus, but the risen Jesus himself, who makes himself present unexpectedly. When Lüdemann does not allow this aspect of the NT witness, he

excludes certain results and constitutes a dogmatical prejudice of its own, see *ibid.*, pp.11,14. Another example would be Peter Stuhlmacher, professor for New Testament in Tübingen, who has relativized Troeltsch's criteria by adding another one, namely that proper understanding of the biblical text takes place in the faith community, see P. Stuhlmacher, *Zur hermeneutischen Bedeutung von 1Kor 2,6-16*, in „Theologische Beiträge“ 18, 1987, p. 156.

²² R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Grand Rapids 2006.

²³ See A.D. Baum, *Lukas als Historiker der letzten Jesusreise*, Wuppertal; Zürich 1993, pp. 150ff.

²⁴ Lüdemann himself gives an example for this: the report of a lady who has apparitions of her deceased husband while being aware that this is only imagination, see Lüdemann, *Auferweckung*, p.141. Lüdemann quotes reports from Yorick Spiegel, *Der Prozess des Trauerns: Analyse und Beratung*, 1989, p.173.

²⁵ See B. Oberdorfer, *Was sucht ihr den Lebendigen...*, p. 173.

²⁶ See G. Lüdemann, *Die Auferweckung*, pp. 54ff.

seems to display an indebtedness towards a secularized understanding of reality which precludes any divine intervention in history²⁷.

3.2 The main arguments for a bodily type of Christ's resurrection

Which main arguments speak in favour of a bodily model of the resurrection (see the comparison of four main approaches to Christ's resurrection under 4.1.)?

a) The level of reliability of the Gospel records about the empty tomb

The gospel narratives about the empty tomb show the intention of giving historical reports. Their authors are not likely to *invent* history in order to argue a theological conviction. The resurrection stories in particular display features which make the assumption highly improbable that the disciples freely created these stories:²⁸

- the lack of scriptural proof-texting and allusions – which would be expected in a fictional story;

- the absence of any mention of the believers' sharing in the hope of eschatological resurrection – which would fit in well for *kerygma* purposes;

- the absence of descriptions of the risen Christ in glory, which some of the apocryphal reports actually give;

- the prominent role played by women in the narrative, which would not strengthen, but rather diminish the credibility of an invented report in the eyes of the contemporary readers. As H. Hempelmann put it: *You do not invent witnesses with a bad credit if you want to convince others*²⁹.

We may therefore take much more seriously than Lüdemann the empty tomb and the narration of appearances which strongly support the bodily aspect of the resurrection.

b) The importance of the body in Paul's resurrection concept

It could be argued very broadly that Paul, being a Pharisaic Jew, could have envisioned the resurrection not otherwise than bodily. Yet, in a classical text which goes back to the very earliest tradition about the Easter event, we already find reflections of this belief³⁰.

In 1Cor 15:3-6 Paul cites an early creed, which states the most important convictions of early Christianity in condensed form. This creed knows about the burial of Jesus (v. 4a: καὶ ὅτι ἐτάφη), this same Jesus who was buried has been raised on the third

²⁷ See B. Oberdorfer, *Was sucht ihr den Lebendigen...*, p. 174.

²⁸ See the summarily account in W.L. Craig, *Wright and Crossan on the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, in *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue*, ed. R.B. Stuart, Minneapolis 2006, p. 145. Craig refers to the extensive monography by N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, London 2003, ch.13, section 3.

²⁹ H. Hempelmann, *Hat Ostern wirklich stattgefunden?* in *Das Grab Jesu: Leer oder voll?* idea-Dokumentation 20/97, Wetzlar 1997, p. 15.

³⁰ The following is a summary of the argumentation of M. Hengel, *Das Begräbnis Jesu bei Paulus und die leibliche Auferstehung aus dem Grabe*, in *Auferstehung – Resurrection*, ed. Friedrich Avemarie und Hermann Lichtenberger, The Fourth Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium: Resurrection, Transfiguration and Exaltation in Old Testament, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity (Tübingen, September 1999), Tübingen 2001, pp.122-138.

day (v. 4b). The function of the phrase καὶ ὅτι ἐτάφη is not simply the confirmation of Jesus' death, which was at this time not questioned yet. It is rather a necessary and consciously implemented part of the early creed. A similar sequence of *he died – he was buried – he was resurrected* appears in Rom 6:4 and Col 2:12, confirming the importance of the sequence for Pauline thought. This speaks in favour of the assumption that Paul envisioned a bodily resurrection of the buried body of Christ which of course effected the empty tomb – there is no need to emphasize this aspect particularly.

Lüdemann admits in his latest work that Paul imagined the resurrection of Jesus as bodily and therefore the grave of Jesus as empty, because he envisioned Christ as sinless and therefore not submitted to decay. Still, for Lüdemann, in 1Cor 15,3-6 Paul was reading this conviction into a tradition which does not explicitly confirm it.³¹ Once the former is admitted, however, it may be asked if the NT accounts should not legitimately be read in a much more unified manner than Lüdemann assumes – without an insuperable tension between Paul and the Gospel reports about an empty tomb. The empty tomb then belongs to the earliest convictions of the followers of Christ after the resurrection – the Gospels simply give a more detailed explanation which seems to be almost required by the shortness of the summarizing creedal statements to which Paul refers in 1Cor 15.

Both the disciple's discovery of the empty tomb and their experience of the bodily appearances after Christ's death constitute a *sufficient* explanation of the early Christians' belief in a bodily resurrection. Both elements also constitute *necessary* explanations of this belief. For appearances alone would have been insufficient to establish the conviction that in Christ the eschatological resurrection had been anticipated – they might have been explained as visions or hallucinations. And the empty tomb alone could have found a number of other explanations (the most famous being the theft theory). The belief of the early Christians is therefore founded on experiences which are arguably best explained by a historical, bodily resurrection of Christ.

4. Systematic consequences of the bodily resurrection

4.1 The kind of reality of the resurrection

G. R. Habermas has identified 4 general models for understanding the origins of Christianity³². There is a broad agreement that Christ's disciples experienced appearances of their master, which were the main motivation for the first proclamation of the Gospel. How is the nature of these appearances explained?

Habermas finds two natural and two supernatural hypotheses:

a) natural hypotheses: Jesus did not rise from the dead.

1. natural internal – the disciples had internal, subjective visions.

2. natural external – Jesus' body disappeared in a natural way (swoon theory, theft theory).

³¹ See G. Lüdemann, *Auferweckung...*, pp. 56f.

³² See G.R. Habermas, *Mapping the Recent Trend Towards the Bodily Resurrection Appearances of Jesus in Light of Other Prominent Critical Positions*, in *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006, pp.78-92.

b) supernatural hypotheses: something happened to the deceased Jesus.

3. supernatural internal – Jesus appeared to the disciples in a heavenly, luminous manifestation, but not in a physical body (his mortal body decaying).

4. supernatural external – Jesus appeared to the disciples in an external, bodily form (his mortal body gone – empty grave).

In between these forms we find an agnostic view which does not answer the question, while being convinced that Christianity can leave it undecided. Both evangelicals and Lüdemann would strongly disagree with this. Both see the historical questions connected with the resurrection as decisive for the Christian faith. Lüdemann, however, decides for the first view, which makes him abandon Christianity.

Evangelicals would decide for the fourth. As we have seen, the resurrection of Christ can legitimately be viewed as a reality which embraces the material and physical, namely: the body. A purely spiritual resurrection would be essentially docetic.

The resurrection of Christ is a reality which is not just a resuscitation of the mortal human body, but a recreation which includes continuity and discontinuity with the previous body. It improves on the mortal body, providing an incorruptible one.

This physical reality can be seen as a paradigm for the recreation of the entire cosmos. It is, according to the NT testimony, also the eschatological hope for the believer. This hope embraces the whole person and includes the body, which is in accordance with an integrative picture of man as displayed both in the OT and in the NT. It is opposed to a gnostic and neo-platonic devaluation of the body, against which the apostolic creed formulated: πιστεύω σαρκός ἀνάστασιν – I believe the resurrection of the flesh.

4.2. The question of the worldview

Has Lüdemann drawn the appropriate consequences of his denial of a bodily resurrection of Jesus, following his predecessor D.F. Strauss?³³ In the opinion of the author, the answer is yes. A paradigm shift towards a naturalistically biased worldview will lead – if consistently applied – to these consequences. The question should be considered, however, what such a paradigm shift is motivated by. It has become widely accepted today that paradigm shifts are not motivated by rational considerations only. Do they not often have their source in life situations, in traumatic experiences, on the emotional and the pastoral level of human existence? Anyone who experiences haughtiness, injustice, incompetence and intolerance from representatives of Christian orthodoxy tends to become wide open for worldview commitments which question the presumptions of conservative theological scholarship. Evangelicalism surely needs to heed the warning here included.

The NT testimony about the bodily resurrection of Christ, however, can be seen as an invitation – away from an enlightenment naturalism or post-enlightenment pluralism towards a theist and also Christian worldview, which provides meaning for human life in the face of death.

³³ Strauss posed the question in 1872 *Are we still Christians?* He concluded: *My conviction is: If we are not trying to find excuses, if we let a yes be a yes and a no a no, to put it short, if we want to speak as true and upright people, then we must confess: we are not Christians anymore.* D.F. Strauss, *Der alte und der neue Glaube: Ein Bekenntniß*, Bonn: Strauß 1881, p. 13.

Zmartwychwstanie Chrystusa wielkim 'samo-zwiedzeniem'? **Krytyczny dialog z wyzwaniem Gerda Lüdemanna**

Streszczenie

Gerd Lüdemann podważył wiarę w historyczne zmartwychwstanie Chrystusa w formie przyjętej przez pierwszych chrześcijan. Jego metodologiczne założenia klasycznego historycznego krytycyzmu związane z poddaniem w wątpliwość merytoryczności przekazu Ewangelii doprowadziły go do przekonania, że koncepcja cielesnego zmartwychwstania może być wyjaśniona jedynie w kategoriach 'samo-zwiedzenia' Piotra i Pawła, którzy zinterpretowali swoje wewnętrzne wizje Chrystusa jako zewnętrzne, obiektywne doświadczenia. Poglądy Lüdemanna są szeroko dyskutowane w środowiskach naukowych nie podzielających naturalistycznego światopoglądu i wyrażających przekonanie o wiarygodności ewangelicznych przekazów o pustym grobie. Fizyczne objawienia Chrystusa uczniom oraz innym osobom w połączeniu z wiarygodnymi relacjami o pustym grobie tworzą wystarczające wyjaśnienie wiary w zmartwychwstanie uznawane przez wczesnych chrześcijan.