

# The Resurrection, History and Christianity

Robert W. Lyon\*

One is not necessarily being profound when he draws attention to the crucial role played in the New Testament scholarship of the last century by historical research into the life of Jesus. Indeed, such phrases as the “old quest” and the “new quest” have come to be almost trite as scholars have sought to go beyond mere events to try to determine the contemporary significance of the ancient story and its appended creeds. Distinctions between “Historie” and “Geschichte,” between “Jesus” and “Christ” as well as a new vocabulary that includes “kerygma,” “Holy (or Salvation) History” and a host of other *termini technici* have made theological students well aware of what is described in generic terms as ‘the historical problem.’<sup>1</sup> Though it may sometimes appear that the scholars are playing games with words, yet the issues are very real, especially because the generally accepted world view of our day is held to be (and is) so different from that which is seen in the pages of Scripture.

Perhaps nowhere does this difference come through so clearly as when one considers the resurrection of Jesus in modern thought.<sup>2</sup> The resurrection of Jesus seems to cut directly across all modern

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\* Associate Professor of New Testament Language and Literature, Asbury Theological Seminary.

1. A brief statement of the problem and a bibliography is to be found in a small booklet by J. Jeremias, *The Problem of the Historical Jesus*, translated by N. Perrin. Facet Books: Biblical Series, edited by John Reumann. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964). A larger treatment is given by Carl E. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics*, which is Vol. II of the series “New Directions in Theology Today.” (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966).
2. The prominence of the resurrection in modern discussions can be readily seen in a bibliography the present writer, with the help of a number of students, is preparing. This bibliography on the resurrection will cover only the twenty year period 1950-1969, but will have several hundred entries.

conceptions of historical reality. But does its uniqueness, by the very fact that it is unique, automatically lead to a rejection by historians and a re-interpretation by theologians? It shall be the purpose of this article to give consideration to one representative view, then to ask some questions which the present writer believes are raised, and then, finally to make certain observations which relate to a satisfactory assessment of the resurrection.

## I

Shortly after the turn of the century Kirsopp Lake presented a careful critique of the literary evidence for the resurrection in a book<sup>3</sup> which in many ways was typical of the classic liberalism of his time. Most of his book is given to explaining away on the basis of a reigning naturalism the traditional understanding of the resurrection. Recently there has been published in English a very penetrating essay by Willi Marxsen which has the same commitment to the modern mind but which is especially important in that it grew out of the work of the Theological Commission of the Evangelical Union Church.<sup>4</sup> It thus takes on the proportion of a programmatic essay for discussion within the Church.

Marxsen is as much committed to a twentieth century world view as was Lake, but their writings are very different. Whereas Lake felt it necessary to explain away the literary evidence and then suggest a new center for the faith, Marxsen simply says that we know the resurrection did not happen *the way it is traditionally understood*. If one asks why this is so, Marxsen simply states that we live on the right side of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. At the same time Marxsen and his contemporaries stand over against the earlier liberalism in that they are better biblical theologians who rightly note that the resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of the New Testament faith and must be retained as the fundamental feature of the Church's proclamation. He affirms with the Apostle Paul that without the resurrection there is no gospel. In fact he goes even further and says that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead and insists on the event-ness of this resurrection. At the same time he denies

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3. Kirsopp Lake, *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (New York: Putnam, 1907), 291 pp.
  4. Willi Marxsen, "The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical and Theological Problem," in *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ*, edited by C.F.D. Moule; *Studies in Biblical Theology*, Second Series, No. 8 (London: SCM Press, 1968), pp. 15-50.

that we can believe the accounts the way the early Church did and declares that the resurrection cannot be turned into history. He knows he cannot abandon the resurrection, for to do so would be to have no message. But he also knows he cannot forsake the twentieth century. Any treatment of an event must be “in accordance with our own historical judgment.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, one sees in a very real way the predicament of modern man.

How, then, did the early Church come to a belief that is not even an option in our modern world? In developing his material, Marxsen emphasizes certain basic facts and makes a number of subtle distinctions. He acknowledges that the early Church believed the tomb was empty and that it was empty for the reason given by most Christians of all ages. He further admits that it was a belief the Church came to hold within months after the crucifixion. How did this belief originate? The answer is rather clear: it was a deduction, that is, a conclusion based on other matters they had come to believe. At this point he emphasizes one feature that is clear to all who have ever looked at the texts, namely, that no one saw Jesus rise from death, or in his phrase, “experienced the resurrection.” No one actually saw the event take place. The resurrection is, therefore, an affirmation which grew out of certain experiences. By this he means that certain remarkable events took place, but these occurred to the disciples, not to Jesus. Marxsen writes, “. . . witnesses. . . claimed that something had happened to them which they described as seeing Jesus, and reflection on this experience led them to the *interpretation* (italics his) that Jesus had been raised from the dead.”<sup>6</sup> In so expressing himself he secures the event-ness of the Easter message as well as its centrality for the proclamation. At the same time he readily admits this is not what the New Testament says. When asked how one may hold to the theological content while re-assessing the historical validity of the narratives, the author argues that we have already done this very thing with the accounts of creation. At this point, however, some may take exception, for it is not immediately evident that the writer of Genesis was convinced he was using ‘scientific’ language in his account. There is a more important question: if the “event” that lies behind the Easter messages is a series of experiences with Jesus after His death, which led to a certain deduction or interpretation, why was that interpretation expressed in terms of ‘resurrection’? Marxsen says the answer is rather clear: the witnesses used the terms and tradition that

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5. Marxsen, p. 16.

6. Marxsen, p. 31.

were at their disposal. The concept of resurrection was widespread in Judaism at that time. Jesus probably embraced it, and it seems to have been in harmony with Semitic anthropology which did not conceive of a living person without a body. So when the witnesses described what had happened, they did so within their natural frame of reference. The One, therefore, who appeared to them came to be the Risen One—by a process of deduction within the patterns of their culture. But, as we noted above, Marxsen reminds us that is not our culture, nor our world-view, and so asks if we are bound to it. Obviously we are not, for we must express reality in our terms as they did in theirs.

What then is the significance of these appearances to the disciples? Marxsen finds his clue for the answer to that question in the persons to whom He appeared. Each individual or group had a function in the early Church. Paul, for example, argues for his own ministry on the basis of the appearance of the Lord to Him. The appearances bring into being a function, namely, to continue the proclamation of the public ministry of Jesus. To justify this functional view of the appearances, Marxsen points to the fact that on several occasions reference is made to them apart from any use of resurrection terminology (cf. Gal: 1:15f; I Cor. 9:1; Matt: 28: 16ff). In so doing he seeks to demonstrate that the appearances had a forward thrust for mission: the old purpose was set in motion afresh. This, according to Marxsen, is permanently valid and enables the Church to re-affirm the centrality of the “resurrection.”

## II

Now it needs to be said at the outset that this is a serious presentation which deserves a serious response. That it represents the thought and mood of large numbers of people is very clear and it is equally clear that to speak to our age we must recognize its *zeitgeist*. But the present writer would like to raise a number of technical questions and then three much larger questions which relate to the nature of Christianity.

1. The first question is one that has been raised often in defense of the orthodox view of the resurrection: can one dismiss the empty tomb so easily? It is often said that an empty tomb would prove nothing, that there could be numerous explanations, one of which is actually mentioned in the narrative of the first gospel.<sup>7</sup> But conversely, why would the early Church refer to it if its evidential value was nil? Is it not possible that the oppo-

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7. Matthew 28:11-15.

nents in those early days were handcuffed at this point, that is, they had no effective way to nullify the reference to an empty tomb? The attempt to explain it by theft was apparently short-lived. At this point the arbitrary nature of Marxsen's treatment is self-evident. For, he says, if the tomb was empty, that would be historical fact and would require some historical explanation. But the resurrection as traditionally understood cannot be historical; so it cannot be the explanation for the empty tomb. Some natural explanation would have to be found. It should be mentioned that this manner of treating the material was not valid prior to the arrival of rationalism. One must reckon with more than just the empty tomb to justify this treatment of the material. Why, for example, is there reference to the burial<sup>8</sup> with all the details? Perhaps the empty tomb does indeed *prove* nothing. But reference to it does suggest that the authorities were *powerless to disprove* the assertions of the disciples that Jesus had indeed been raised.

2. In his discussion of appearances Marxsen divides the traditions into two groups: (a) occasions where only the *fact* of the appearances as such is mentioned; (b) the second group consists of the *elaborate* tales of appearances (italics his). Though it is readily acknowledged that the first group (e.g. I Cor. 15.3ff) is older and earlier than the latter group, is it justifiable to speak, as he does, of a literary development from the first to the second? Is it being realistic to believe that there was ever a time in early Christian preaching when there was merely the reverence to appearances without the actual stories of how they took place? Are we not more apt to have precisely the opposite circumstance, namely, that the stories were told so frequently that finally reference to the event was sufficient to recall the entire story? Would matter-of-fact references have any impact whatsoever on a non-believing world?<sup>9</sup> At this point it might also be suggested that some of the fine distinctions made by the author are not able to carry the significance he seeks to attach to them. Does the terminology by which Paul refers to his Damascus road experience really reveal

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8. I Corinthians 15:4; Mark 15:42ff and parallels.

9. C.F.D. Moule in a recent address at the Fourth International Congress on New Testament Studies (soon to be published in *Texte und Untersuchungen*) scored those critics who, in their studies of the *kerygma*, suggest that early proclamation of the gospel was even remotely possible apart from the stories about Jesus which came to be incorporated into the written gospels. Similarly Paul can speak referentially of the cross precisely because they do know the story.

the nature of his experience? Is unvarying use of specific resurrection vocabulary mandatory? Had it been so, then it probably would have been a sure sign of continuous apologetic motif through the whole tradition.

3. Mention must now be made of a more serious matter upon which most of Marxsen's reconstruction relies, namely the suggestion that the event came to be described in terms of resurrection because this was the means which their religious tradition placed at their disposal.<sup>10</sup> One cannot seriously question the presence of an idea or ideas of resurrection in Jesus' culture and in theory it would be possible to explain the development of a resurrection tradition in terms of this phenomenon *if* the experiences of the disciples satisfied the expectations associated with the resurrection. But this is precisely what the appearances of Jesus to his disciples did not do. In contemporary Jewish thought the resurrection was associated with the end time, the day of the Lord, that is, the eschaton. So, for example, when Jesus says to Martha that her brother Lazarus shall rise, she responds in typical fashion by saying, "I know that he shall rise in the resurrection in the last day."<sup>11</sup> It can be clearly seen, then, that although thought of the resurrection was prominent in their tradition, not any event would have fit these expectations. In fact it is difficult to believe that any event short of the "Day of the Lord" could have called for the use of resurrection terms unless the disciples had been provoked into using the language. What is suggested here is that the common conceptions of the resurrection would not have led the disciples to express themselves through the traditions placed at their disposal. Unusual as these appearances were, they are not apt to have led through a deductive process to a belief in the resurrection. The visions would have led them to affirm that He was alive, but, even given the Semitic anthropology, not to the belief that He had been raised. In the opinion of this writer, such a "sufficient cause" could most likely be found in one of two places, either Jesus spoke in these terms or the appearances were of such an undoubtedly corporeal personality as to leave them with no alternative but to speak in terms of resurrection. Given the Jewish doctrine, Marxsen's understanding of the "event" does not offer a sufficient basis to explain the adoption of the vocabulary.

4. Another question is raised regarding the function of the appearances. Marxsen comments, "They [i.e., the appearances] substantiate their

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10. Marxsen, p. 32.

11. John 11:24

[the disciples'] right to further [Jesus'] purpose by claiming that they had seen Jesus after His crucifixion."<sup>12</sup> This raises in the mind of the present writer a serious question: Why could not their authority to continue his ministry be based on the fact that they had seen Him and been with Him throughout His ministry? This was indeed part of the qualification for the one chosen to succeed Judas.<sup>13</sup> We are surely tempted to believe that their prolonged exposure to his pattern of ministry, his use of Scripture, his mighty works and his private instruction constituted a more substantive basis for their future ministry than the highly subjective appearances, no matter how impressive they were. It is indeed possible that a vision can strongly motivate to unusual ministry, but are we able to say this is the *reason* for the appearances? If so, then why the appearances to the women? Furthermore, how could it be said today that he has destroyed the power of the evil one if he has not in some very real sense been raised from the dead? If he only appeared, then he did not triumph over death, but only in the continuation of his ministry and proclamation?

5. One final question must be raised before comments of a more general nature are made. Marxsen says we are forbidden to understand the resurrection the way the early Church understood it because of the historical method and our modern world view. But if such an understanding as that held by Paul and those who formulated the *kerygma* is no longer possible because of our scientific historical methodology which excludes the unique, then are we not forbidden to ascribe any uniqueness to Jesus? Inasmuch as the disciples are historical entities, is it not true that anything that happened to them must be explained in terms that satisfy the twentieth century? Are the appearances (or visions, a word Marxsen also uses) any more acceptable than a bodily resurrection? If the twentieth century is our plumbline, can we speak at all of eschatology or of any definitive event? In this type of cultural context the work of Christ cannot in any way be regarded as determinative in human history since that implies finality—a concept equally out of place since the Enlightenment. Finally, one may ask without being facetious, what is there in the Christian proclamation, however interpreted, that can satisfy a century regarded as the legitimate offspring of the Enlightenment?

These questions are enough to pinpoint the issues that have been raised by Marxsen's penetrating mind. Before concluding, however, it is

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12. Marxsen, p. 37.

13. Acts 1:22

necessary to raise a number of questions as to the nature of Christianity as seen through the prospective of Marxsen's article.

1. Is it possible to speak of a sovereign God? When one is committed to a given concept of truth or reality which is given to him by his age, does he not thereby circumscribe the activity of God? If a given understanding of Scripture is regarded as not possible because of the contemporary *Weltanschauung*, are we not dangerously close to making the Scriptures subservient to the modern mind? How, then is Scripture, or the sovereign God it reveals, to be redemptive? How is the Word of God to be a corrective when the modern mind is given veto power? At this point it should be noted that it is not the nature of the narratives, their ambiguity, or lack of coherence that leads Professor Marxsen to move away from the pattern which has been regarded as the obvious understanding of the resurrection. To be sure these narratives have many literary, historical and theological problems. It is doubtful if all the narratives can be put together into one chronological account. There is reasonably clear evidence of telescoping and abbreviation of material. There is obviously more than one strand of tradition. But given all this, it still is not the host of problems or the form of Scripture which has led to the present reconstruction. It is rather that the scriptural accounts are out of step with the modern scientific view of history. Marxsen is very straightforward at this point in that he acknowledges that the common understanding of the resurrection is simply not acceptable. He does not waste time pointing out the discrepancies or the problem areas. On the contrary, he acknowledges that Paul and the early Christians did believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. There is no ambiguity at that point. The problem lies rather in the fact that *two irreconcilable world-views are confronting each other*. Are we able to affirm that God is Lord of history when he is made subject to a post-Enlightenment world-view? Are we not being called to a wholly new view of God who is void of transcendence? To this writer it seems that more than just a view of the resurrection is at stake.

2. Another question presses itself at this point. It is commonly said that Christianity is a historical religion, and by this one usually means that what one knows about God and His will have come to us through historical events *which He has brought about*. Herein lies the question: given Marxsen's commitments to modernity, is it possible to speak of events which God has brought about, or over which He has exercised any superintendence? In other words can Christianity be a historical religion? Can we speak of "acts of God" when the very concept is not acceptable to scientific historical methodology? The modern mind can, for example, say that the Hebrew tribes came to believe that God had delivered them out of



Egypt, but can the modern mind believe that God in fact did deliver them out of Egypt? The physical resurrection of Jesus differs only in degree, not in kind, from the other activities of God whereby He has directed the flow of history. We do not intend to suggest that one should retain a given view of the resurrection in order to be able to remain secure in what in other days would be called a normative view of Christianity. Truth is truth and must be followed wherever it leads us. It is our intention in raising these questions to suggest that Christianity itself as a historical religion, and not just the bodily resurrection, is incompatible with our times. Otherwise, how could we speak of our age as being under the judgment of God?

3. We are now led to raise one final question: is it possible in the light of Marxsen's commitment to speak at all of revelation except in personal terms? Can we speak of the "work of Christ" in any final sense? Can we speak of the work of Christ in any universal sense? Can we speak in terms of the knowledge of God or in terms of the will of God? It is doubtful if any of these or similar questions can be answered affirmatively if we permit strictures on the nature of events that may take place. May not the idea of finality be adopted only in terms of personal experience? One may be able to find as he reflects on Jesus that in some way that reflection makes a definitive change in the orientation of his own individual life. But then if we are confined to these terms, can there be any normative Christianity? Can we speak any longer of a Christianity "apostolic and universal"?

The belief that any view of Christianity must be acceptable to the canons of the Enlightenment determines beforehand the nature of Christianity. It may be expressed in traditional categories, and thus Marxsen believes we can still proclaim the resurrection. But there the similarity will end. The trend in theology has seemed to be in this direction. The modern theologians speak as much about resurrection, redemption and eschatology as any generation of scholars has done. But is it the same clear word? Has the man in the pew sensed this uncertainty, and is he expressing his dissatisfaction by his absence?