

“PAUL’S ACCOUNT OF THE EASTER EVENT AND ITS APOLOGETIC RELEVANCE FOR THE CHURCH IN AFRICA”

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Abstract

The historical authenticity of the resurrection story of Jesus has elicited controversy down the centuries. Down the centuries New Testament scholars have raised questions concerning the account of the resurrection of Jesus as given to us by the Apostle Paul and wondered if this can be relied upon by Christians in the modern world, particularly African Christians? The paper examined the central text of I Corinthians 15:3-8 where Paul gives his own account of the resurrection of Jesus. After carrying out an exegetical and hermeneutical analysis of this text, the author then went ahead to point out the apologetic relevance of this event for the Church of Christ. For Christians in Africa the writer makes it clear that there is no reason to be shy in proclaiming the resurrection of Christ on the basis of the witness of the New Testament writers.

Key Words: Apologetics, Resurrection, Hermeneutics

I. Introduction

If the whole gamut of salvation history were to be symbolised as a tripod consisting of the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection, there is no doubt that the resurrection of Jesus has received serious attention in theological circles more than the other two because of its centrality to the Christian faith. The church in Africa, in seeking to give objective relevance to her gospel, and confronted with the pleroma of mythologies inherent in the African Traditional Religion, is put in an apologetic position as to the authenticity of the resurrection of Jesus. Thus the need for a constant study of the issues involved in the story of the resurrection, particularly as regards the weight of evidence in its support. It is from this standpoint that this work shall examine Paul’s account of the resurrection found in I Corinthians 15:3—8.

It should be stated here that the central focus of 1 Corinthians 15 is not only the resurrection of the dead, but on the more important question of the resurrection of the body. In another work (Ejenobo, 1982), the author has examined these two issues. In this paper, focus will be on the relevance of Paul's account as it relates to the Church in Africa today.

II. The Source of Paul's Account

1 Corinthians 15 reads: "For I delivered to you as of first important what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures." This is the Gospel which, according to v.1 they had received, in which they stand, and through which they had been delivered and placed into a position of security, soundness and joy. When he preached this Gospel to them in the first instance, as an object of first importance (ἐκ τοῦ πρώτου ἐπισημίου) they received it and believed in it as the truth. Since then they had continued to live in that truth, because they not only found that the message of the Gospel had delivered them from their former sinful state, but that it is the source of their salvation from the forces of darkness

However, the addition of the phrase ἐκ τοῦ πρώτου ἐπισημίου (ektos ei em eike episteusate) seems to suggest some misgivings on the part of Paul that his converts were deviating from this Gospel. It is likely, therefore, that word had reached Paul that somehow the "theology" of his converts on the question of the resurrection from the dead was no longer "straight". Thus, he reminds them at the onset, of the centrality of the message of the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel which he preached when he first came to them (Green, 2000). Paul does not claim to have received this Gospel by revelation as it was the case with the Gospel which he defended in his Epistle to the Galatians. There he made it plain that the Gospel which he preached was not of man, he did not receive it from man nor was taught by man, "but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11-12). The essence of the Gospel in the Galatian case which he received by divine revelation (ἐκ τοῦ ἁποκαλύψεως apokalupsis) had to do with the circumcision and admission of Gentiles into the Church. But the essence of the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 has to do with the resurrection of Jesus and he said that this Gospel was delivered (ἐκ τοῦ παρεδόκα) to them just as he had received it (ἐκ τοῦ παρελάβον).

The word ἐκ τοῦ παρεδόκα (paredoka) comes from ἐκ τοῦ παρεδότης (paredosis) or ἐκ τοῦ παρεδούνη (paredounai). The word ἐκ τοῦ παρεδούνη (paredounai) means deliverance of God's judgement as in Romans 1:24f (Beck, 1982). In its technical usage, it refers to the transmission of a set of tradition (ἐκ τοῦ παραδιδόμι paradidomi, Beck, 1982). It is so used when the object is a teaching such as the Halachic tradition of the Jews (Acts 6:14) or to a teaching that goes beyond the law (Mark 7:13). It gradually came to be

used to refer to Christian teachings with no precise definition of content (Romans 6:17; I Cor. 11:12, 23; 15:3).

The way it is used in the New Testament suggests that $\pi\alpha\rho\alpha\delta\omicron\varsigma$ (*paradosis*) refers only to what is transmitted rather than the act of transmission (Beck, 1982). In this sense, the word is not used in the LXX, but traces of it are found in Philo and Josephus and in some Greek writers (Buchsel, 1978). It is in this sense that Paul uses the word in I Cor. 15:3. He had delivered a tradition which was older than himself.

But when did the story of the resurrection of Jesus become a tradition which Paul received and delivered? W. J. Sparrow—Simpson (1968) has suggested that the tradition presented here is the earliest extant written record of the resurrection narratives. He therefore dates its compilation in oral form about A. D. 34, four years after the events of the resurrection. This is based on the assumption that at the initial stage of the compilation of the materials which made up the tradition it was proclaimed as part of the *kerygma* of the Church. This was because the resurrection of Jesus implied for the first Christians the fulfilment of the apocalyptic hope of the coming of the messiah, a supernatural event which had occurred at a point where history gave way to eschatology (Perry, 1975). By the time of Paul, therefore, this tradition formed the starting point as well as the centre of the *Kerygma* of the Church.

Now to the question of where Paul got his tradition. Johannes Weiss (Hering, 1962) has suggested that Paul's list of appearances does not include the appearances to several other disciples which had occurred, according to Acts 1:3 forty days after the resurrection of Jesus. The list of witnesses which Paul gives, therefore, appears to be older than the tradition of Acts 1:3. If this is correct, then it means that the account of Paul is older. A critical examination of the list of witnesses reveals that the reference to Cephas and James recalls Paul's visit to Jerusalem three years after his conversion (which likely occurred A.D. 37) to visit Cephas during which time he also saw James (Gal. 1:18). Fourteen years later he was back in Jerusalem together with Titus to confer with Peter and James, both of whom he refers to as pillars of the church (Gal. 2: 1ff). It has therefore been strongly suggested and widely accepted, that it was during these and similar visits to Jerusalem that Paul received the tradition of the Easter Event (Willmington, 1984).

In the list, Paul refers to the Twelve. Weiss (as quoted by Shepherd Jr., 1945), regards the word "Twelve" as an interpolation, while Lenski (1970), along with most scholars see the term as the official title of the Apostolate. It is therefore likely that some of the other Apostles who were witnesses of the resurrection informed Paul, at a very early stage, of the resurrection appearances of Jesus. The same applies to the +500 brethren to whom the Lord appeared, some of whom were still alive to testify to the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. Some of such brethren could have informed Paul about what happened after the resurrection. All these go to suggest that

the Christians in Jerusalem, or more broadly, those in Palestine, were the main source of Paul's $\square \square \square \square \square \square \square$ (paradosis) concerning the resurrection of Jesus.

However, Michael (Evans, 1970) believes that the traditional formula actually had nothing to do with the list of witnesses. According to him, the traditional formula ended with "he appeared" and that Paul added the list of witnesses in order to give credence to the tradition which he had preached to the Corinthians. On the contrary it appears very unlikely that the phrase "he appeared" would be mentioned by the early Christians without mentioning those to whom such appearances were made. If the early Church claimed that Jesus appeared after His resurrection, then the appearances would have been to some people who could be mentioned by name (Evans, 1970). Moreover, if the list of witnesses were the mere additions of Paul, it will then render the resurrection account meaningless, and place greater obscurity on the source of the tradition. Since Paul claimed that he received this tradition from others, and knowing his reluctance to admit his dependence upon the Apostles, it is more likely that he actually got his information from those who had experienced the resurrection appearances.

Still on the question of the veracity of witnesses, some scholars have called attention to the possibility of two separate lists of witnesses in Paul's list: the first to Cephas and the Twelve, the other to James and the other Apostles. On the strength of this argument, some have suggested that there might have existed a struggle for leadership between Peter and James for the church at Jerusalem from early times. Neville Clark (1962) has therefore suggested that up to and including the reference to Peter and the Twelve, one is dealing with a Palestinian formulation which must have had its origin in the very earliest life of the church; but beyond that, it is an expansion by Paul with his own comments.'

It is likely that this position is suggested because there is no record in the canonical books of the New Testament of a resurrection appearance to James. However, there is a reference to an appearance to James in an extra-canonical Gospel, "The Gospel According to the Hebrews," (fragments of which are found in the works of Jerome. Hennecke, 1963) In his work, *Of Illustrious Men* Jerome quotes these words from the said Gospel:

And when the Lord has given the linen cloth to the servant of the priest, he went to James and appeared to him. For James had sworn that he would not eat bread from that hour in which he had drunk the Cup of the Lord until he should see him risen from among them that sleep. And shortly thereafter the Lord said: bring a table and bread. And immediately it is added: he took the bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to James the Just and said to him: My

brother, eat thy bread, for the Son of man is risen from among them that sleep.

This reference to a resurrection appearance of the Lord to James, though extra-canonical, would tend to lend credence to Paul's list. However, it must be observed that even if one neglects this extra -canonical reference, the very fact that the brother of the Lord very early in the life of the Church became the leader of the church at Jerusalem (cf. Gal: 1: 19;2:9; Acts 12:2; 15) would almost make it necessary to assume a resurrection appearance to him, even if one did not possess the record of Paul (Craig, 1953). It should be recalled that the Lord's brethren had refused to believe on Him during His earthly ministry (John 7:5), but are found among believers after the ascension (Acts 1:14). What converted them? The appearance may have done so, and it is most likely, that such an appearance may have been granted by the risen Lord for this very purpose (Robertson and Plummer, 1978). In addition, one of the qualities a disciple should possess before he could become part of the Apostolate was that he should be one of those who must have witnessed the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:22) A lesser qualification would not have been demanded from the Lord's brother.

Taken together therefore, the source of Paul's account of the Easter event dates back to the very earliest period in the life of the Church, and that he most likely got his information from the brethren in Jerusalem. The suggestion that Paul got his information from Damascus is plausible, internal evidences support the Jerusalem or Palestinian source. In calling attention to the list of witnesses, Paul was reminding the Corinthians of the authenticity of the account of the Easter event which he handed over to them. Those whose names he had given were beyond questioning. And he adds, somewhat in parenthesis, that even among the +500, there were some living from whom the Corinthians could get verification if they wanted.

III The Merit of Paul's Account

But why was it necessary for Paul to present all these historical evidences in support of his claim that Jesus rose from the dead? Could it be possible that the conversion of the Corinthians was seen as shallow and superficial and unreal by Paul, and so he tried to remind them of that which they had received in the past, the Gospel in which they are now standing, and through which they will be saved in the future? It is clear from I Corinthians 15:2 that there are some misgivings on the part of Paul concerning the faith of the Corinthians, and perhaps more so the question of the resurrection (Robertson and Plummer, 1978).

It is therefore highly probable that Paul gave his list of witnesses to authenticate the Gospel which he preached to them. In doing this, he calls attention to the fact that the decisive event in his life was the revelation which

he received from the Risen Lord during which he was given a divine calling and commission to the ministry (Bronson, 1964). He used the strong word $\epsilon\kappa\tau\rho\sigma\iota\varsigma$ (ektrosis) to remind the Corinthians that God had to intervene to call him to the ministry. An $\epsilon\kappa\tau\rho\mu\alpha$ (ektroma) is usually an abortion, a dead foetus, and not simply a child born to parents in late life when a birth is no longer expected, nor a child born before the full period of gestation although it is able to survive (Lenski, 1970)

The word $\epsilon\kappa\tau\rho\mu\alpha$ (ektroma) actually occurs only here in the New Testament (Kittel, 1976). In the LXX it is used to translate the Hebrew *nephel* (Psalm 5 8:80.) It occurs also in Job 3:16 and Eccl. 6:3 and is found in the works of Hippocrates and Philo, being more prominent, in its verb form in the works of Greek physicians (Schneider, 1976). Thus, the translation of the Authorized Version the Revised Version (as to one untimely born) appears misleading introducing the notion of time of birth into what Paul was saying. This fails to call attention to the abortive character of the birth and seems to refer only to the fact that it is merely premature, but living and not dead (Vincent, 1980). On the contrary, what Paul is saying is that when Christ appeared to him and called him he was no better than an unperfected foetus among living men (Vincent, 1980). In referring to himself as an $\epsilon\kappa\tau\rho\mu\alpha$ (ektroma) among the Apostles Paul was referring to the suddenness and violence of his transition from a persecutor of the Gospel to a proclaimer of the same (Robertson and Plummer, 1978).

All the other Apostles had been called when they were already believers; they were like ripe fruits which fell, so to speak, of themselves from the tree of Judaism to which he was yet clinging with all the fibres of his heart and will (Godet, 1979). With his use of the word $\epsilon\kappa\tau\rho\mu\alpha$ (ektroma) Paul tried to authenticate the resurrection appearances both to other disciples and himself. In other words, the resurrection appearances were so unique and powerful that it changed the course of his life. Paul's list of witnesses was thus to authenticate the Apostolic preaching of the Easter event. Adolf von Hanack in his Essay "What is Christianity?" commenting on Paul's account has this to say; "There is no historic fact more certain than that the Apostle Paul was not the first to emphasize so prominently the significance of Christ's death and resurrection, but that in recognizing their meaning he stood exactly on the same ground as the primitive community" (Robertson and Plummer, 1978). This fact lent credence to Paul's claim that Jesus rose from the dead, and he wanted his Corinthian opponents to take careful note of this fact in their discussion of the resurrection of the dead (Lenski, 1970).

IV. The Apologetic Relevance of Paul's Account

The Church in Africa today stands in need of defending her belief in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In fact, every Easter session is a time for a reaffirmation of faith in the resurrection of the dead. In the face of those

who doubt the Christian faith and hope, Paul's account has three lessons to teach.

1. The tradition which Paul received and passed on has the ring of apostolic authority behind it such that he was prepared to identify himself with it. Judging from the fact that this tradition must have been compiled as early as A. D. 34, the historicity of the resurrection event should not be a subject of doubt. Paul's account gives a solid base on which to affirm the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. Paul's account is not a fabricated story. It is based on historical evidence.
2. The string of witnesses which Paul put together to defend the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus also help to attest to the fact that the appearances were not mere hallucinations. Professor Lampe (1967) and others have questioned the nature of the appearances of Jesus thus: 'Was Jesus actually seen with the bodily eyes in some kind of physical form (as to be capable in theory of being photographed)?' To counter this argument Robinson (1962) remarks that if the appearances of Jesus had been merely psychic phenomena, as some presume, one would have expected the sense that Jesus was alive to have grown progressively less vivid once the disciples ceased to see Him after the resurrection, and those who had not seen the evidence to be as sceptical as third parties usually are to such supposed communications from the dead – let alone to reports of miraculously empty graves. Be that as it may, it should be noted here that the objective reality of the appearances contained in Paul's use of the word *opetalma* (οπεταλμα) lies in the fact that the disciples recognized Jesus as the same person who died on the cross, who was buried, and was later laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Paul's own experience was not substantially different from that of the other Apostles. Thus sceptics of the Easter Event should be reminded of this objective note in Paul's account.
3. Paul's account led him to conclude: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (I Cor.15:19). Those who deny the authenticity of the resurrection of Jesus inadvertently deny hope of a future resurrection. Paul's account gives the Church today solid ground to preach the Gospel of a future resurrection for all Christians. The resurrection of Jesus was not a point to be compromised by Paul and the early Christians. The same is true for the Church today. The tradition from Paul concerning the resurrection event is both historically

solid and objectively valid that they can and should continue to be transmitted as authentic.

4. For the purposes of contextualizing the Christian faith in the African continent, it is pertinent to observe that the fact of the resurrection is one of the best historically attested facts of ancient history. If this is so, then African Christians must share their conviction of the resurrection story with all the vigour at their disposal. They should be proud of the fact of the resurrection of Jesus just as Paul did in his time.

V. Conclusion

The event of the resurrection of Jesus was the peak point of salvation history. When Jesus went to the cross to die for the world, nobody, even the disciples, expected that He would rise from the dead. Even though He had alluded to it to the disciples, they did not believe him. But then it happened. A dead man actually resurrected! And that made all the difference in world religion. Never had it been heard that the founder of a religion died and was raised to life!

That fact marked the turning point in the story of Christianity. With His resurrection, Jesus made it clear that the dead will rise again. And that is the hope of all Christians. In Africa today, there is the need for more and more Christians who believe in the validity of the resurrection and stand on the fact. There should be no doubt that Jesus rose from the dead. That is the basis of the confidence in the future life. Christians must continue to tell the unbelieving world that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, is the licence to eternal life with God. This was the plan of God when He created man from the beginning: an eternal fellowship with man. Christians believe that upon the final resurrection, there is hope of eternal fellowship with God. That is the solid rock on which rests the Christian faith.

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