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Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15

By Jim Myers

The **central doctrine** of Christianity and Judaism is resurrection. It is also one of the most compelling promises of both. Obviously, the fact that death is not an option for mankind makes any possible alternative attractive. However, that alone does not account for the doctrine's central role in the theology of Christianity.

Dictionary.com defines "resurrection" as – "*The act of rising from the dead or returning to life.*" What do you think that CNN would give for a verifiable video account of a resurrection? Every television station in the world would probably interrupt their scheduled programming with a "Breaking News" alert. I am sure that oral accounts had about the same affect on those hearing them many centuries ago.

The earliest references to the resurrection in the New Testament is found in the works of Paul, which were written in the mid 50's CE, about twenty years after the crucifixion of Jesus.

12 Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no **resurrection** of the dead? 13 But if there is no **resurrection** of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 Moreover we are even found *to be* false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the

dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. 20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. 21 For since by a man *came* death, by a man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, (1 Corinthians 15)

Paul's argument laid the foundation upon which the entire theological structure of the future Christian religions would be constructed.

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, **then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.**

Let's begin this study by asking the question of **who was Paul addressing?** The answer to this question is found in 1 Corinthians 1:2 –

“ **to the church of God** which is **at Corinth**, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their *Lord* and ours.”

The city of Corinth was strategically located on the isthmus of land that connects the lower peninsula of Greece with the mainland. Descriptions of Corinth found in ancient writings state that there were many temples in Corinth, some devoted to Egyptian deities. There was also a very important temple to Venus. Paul came to Corinth for the first time on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-17).

Since the “church of God” is located in Corinth, I think we must assume that there were many Greek members and, therefore, before being introduced to Paul’s religion, they were aware of many popular beliefs about death and the afterlife in Corinth.

In contrast to the optimism of the Egyptians, the majority of civilizations that developed in and around the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East in the centuries before Christ took a dim and pessimistic view. The ancient Babylonians, Hebrews, and Homeric Greeks, saw the after-life state - the Underworld, Sheol, Hades - as a dark, miserable, quasi-existence; the dead being but a pathetic shadow of their former living selves.

A graphic literary illustration of this is given in Homer's account of the meeting of Odysseus with the shade of Achilles, the greatest and most renowned of all the Greek heroes. Odysseus, descending to Hades in order to consult the dead seer Teiresias concerning the circumstances that prevented him from returning home, encounters Achilles, and congratulates him regarding the honors and fame he had won through his part in the siege of Troy. Achilles rejects Odysseus' words with a devastating reply:

"Nay, seek not to speak soothingly to me of death....I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, of some portionless man whose livelihood was

but small, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished." 1

If the hope of resurrection exerts such a strong emotional impact on people who already believed, how much of an impact would it be for those who held no such hope?

Paul must have understood this and therefore structured his argument to overcome the skepticism and disbelief that he might encounter? He presents his evidence in 1 Corinthians 15:

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ **died** for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was **buried**, and that He was **raised** on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He **appeared to Cephas**, then **to the twelve**. 6 After that He **appeared to more than five hundred brethren** at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; 7 then He **appeared to James**, then **to all the apostles**; 8 and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He **appeared to me** also.

To be continued in the next issue. BHR

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in complete SHALOM forever!*

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