CHAPTER SIX

THE RELIGIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS AND RESURRECTION FAITH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. Resurrection and History of Religion:
Early Beginnings and Current Aims

At the turn of the century, religio-historical study of the New Testament was stimulated by a series of studies by members of the so-called Religionsgeschichtliche Schule of Göttingen (see Lüdemann & Schröder 1987). In his seminal publication Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Verständnis des Neuen Testaments Herman Gunkel (1910:77) argues that the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, which belong together, are the opposite of the descent into hell, and that both conceptions are mythological. Jesus Christ, he maintains, was not the first and only being of divine character who was believed to have risen from the dead. On the contrary, faith in the dying and rising of gods was common in the Near East. This phenomenon was known in Egypt in the first instance, where it was a common belief, as well as in Babylonia, Syria, and Phoenicia. In Crete the grave of Zeus of Crete can be visited to this day; obviously the grave is empty (Gunkel 1910:77).

Gunkel (1910:77ff.) maintains that the disciples’ belief in the resurrection of Jesus was influenced by conceptions, from religions other than mainstream official Judaism, about the rising of gods after death. It is of importance for the purpose of our study to give a short summary of Gunkel’s argument, both from the perspective of methodology and with regard to the relevance of religio-historical material for the understanding of resurrection and resurrection faith.

The hypothesis that the ‘religion of the New Testament’ was influenced in its origin and development by foreign religions and that these influences were transmitted into early Christian religion through Judaism is of paramount importance for the understanding of Gunkel’s views (1910:1). With regard to resurrection, he asserts (1910:78) that the Jewish ideas about resurrection (see 4 Ezr. 7:29) with which the disciples were acquainted should be understood against
the background of dying and rising gods in non-Jewish religions and their influence upon Judaism. With this in mind he investigates the background of resurrection motifs in the New Testament.

First there is the date of the discovery and announcement of the resurrection of Jesus. According to our sources, it happened on Easter Sunday at the rising of the sun (see Mk. 16:8parr). The fact that this date coincides with the important Sunday on which the sun rises after winter, which was most probably regarded as the day of the rising of the gods, is probably an indication that early Christians borrowed the date of the ‘day of the resurrection’ from ancient Near Eastern beliefs (Gunkel 1910:79).

Even more important is the motif of ‘after three days’ or its variant ‘on the third day’. The value attached to this motif is seen in its repetition in early Christian sources and its inclusion in the Apostolic Creed. Gunkel (1910:79ff.) regards it as one of the first dogmas which the early Christians derived from other religions. He traces it back through the story of Jonah in the fish, the motif of three and a half periods in Daniel, to similar and parallel motifs and ideas in the history of other religions (see also Leipoldt 1988:289ff.). This material gives an explanation for the importance given to the three day motif in the resurrection of Jesus by early Christians. They borrowed the idea from other religions through their Jewish heritage. Gunkel (1910:82) concludes that the material not only explains the importance of the motif with regard to the resurrection of Jesus, but also that there was a belief in the death and resurrection of the messiah in Jewish syncretistic circles before Jesus. After the death of Jesus, his disciples made use of extant conceptions about death and resurrection to interpret his death.

Paul’s teaching on baptism (Rm. 6) is also clearly based on the idea of dying and rising: from death to resurrection. Baptism is a symbol of the Christian’s dying and rising with Christ. Gunkel (1910:84) compares this to the myth of the Egyptian god Osiris who was killed and rose from death and he considers that this gave rise to resurrection hope. By being united with his/her god, the believer can be assured that it is possible to obtain eternal life through death. Gunkel (1910:82ff.) maintains:

Die historische frage is demnach nicht, wie der Glaue und die Auferstehung überhaupt entstanden ist, . . . sondern das eigentliche Problem ist das engere: wie es möglich gewesen ist, den Glauben an die Auferstehung auf die Person Jesus, des schimpflich am Kreuz hingerichteten Jesus zu übertragen.