

Lazarus is Dead – The greatest story about second chances ever told by Richard Beard.  
Harvill Secker 2011.

The raising of Lazarus from the dead has long been considered one of the greatest of the miracles enacted by Jesus, but comparatively little is known about the man and his life and the references to him in the Gospels are few and far from informative. In such circumstances, as with the Midrash to the Torah, it is often the case that those with a good imagination and a strong sense of context will fill in the gaps and flesh out the story.

Richard Beard's Lazarus supplies lambs to the Temple in Jerusalem and lives comfortably with his sisters Mary and Martha in Bethany; he is a calculating man with his eye on the main chance and hopeful of marrying in to an important priestly family; then he gets ill and dies and after four days is resurrected by Jesus. But that is not the end of the story, for Jesus' execution is to follow and Lazarus' second life.

Beard's approach to this story is to tell it in parts, interspersed with the theories of others, both scholars and novelists, about Lazarus' life and death and second life. While this technique could be disruptive and irritating Beard handles it in a way where one part compliments the other. The descriptive power evinced by the author, not least when he details Lazarus' physical decline and death, is chilling and laudable.

This is an excellent story, though the more alert reader may cavil at the blooper confusing King Saul and the prophet Samuel, which should have been picked up by an educated copy editor, and the discrepancy about the texts within *tefillin*. But these are small details in the broader context of a fine novel.

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