

*The teaching of Jesus on resurrection and
eternal life*

1. Resurrection

Ever since St Paul wrote his letters in the fifties AD, the resurrection of Jesus and resurrection in general have stood at the centre of New Testament thought and Christian theology. Paul is adamant on the subject: without belief in resurrection, primarily in the resurrection of Christ, his preaching is baseless, the Christians are misled by him and their faith is futile (1 Cor 15:12-17). In these circumstances one would justifiably expect to find in the teaching of Jesus, as handed down in the Gospels, numerous references to the raising of the dead and to his own resurrection. Those who labour under such an illusion must brace themselves for a big surprise. General pronouncements by Jesus on resurrection are few and far between. Allusions to his rising can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and when scrutinized with critical eyes, they turn out to be inauthentic. Let us investigate these passages, leaving to chapters 9 and 10 the examination of the narrative accounts: the 'resurrection miracles' performed by Jesus and the Gospel stories of his own resurrection.

There are two passages in the Synoptic Gospels dealing with resurrection in which Jesus is neither the resuscitator nor the raised (see chapter 9), and four predictions are recorded concerning his own rising (see chapter 8). Out of the two general resurrection references, one is merely cursory and simply dates another event; the other is substantive, and is embedded in a controversy story. The former occurs in a parable dealing with the guests summoned to a banquet which is preserved only in Luke (Lk 14:7-14). In it, Jesus advises the host to show disinterested benevolence by inviting not friends, members of his family and *rich* neighbours, but 'the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind'; those who are unable to reciprocate his generosity. So, instead of hoping for immediate repayment in the form of similar invitations to festivities, he postpones his reward until the end, until 'the resurrection of the just' (Lk 14:14).

There is only one relatively extensive Synoptic treatment of the problem of the resurrection ascribed to Jesus. It appears in a debate with the Sadducees in a collection of controversies situated in Jerusalem. However, while the other polemics on divorce, the authority of Jesus, the legitimacy of the payment of taxes to Rome and the precise identity of the Son of David fit well into the context of Jesus' arrival in the Holy City during the week of the fateful Passover, the meeting with the Sadducees is haphazard. It is no doubt put in its present place because it is a doctrinal argument which must have taken place in the Holy City, and in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus only once visits the capital of Judaea.

And Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the wife, and raise up children for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no children; and the second took her, and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; and the seven left no children. Last of all the woman also died. In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife' (Mk, Mt, Lk). Jesus said to them, Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?

For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven (Mk, Mt).

[The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry, nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are **equal to angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection** (Lk).]

The anecdote, which carries the message on resurrection, recounts the curious adventure of a Jewish woman, told against the background of the biblical law regulating leviratic marriage (Deut 25:5–6). The Mosaic legislation obliged a childless widow to marry her deceased husband's brother if he was willing to take her as his wife. The purpose of the rule was to provide the former husband with an heir: the first male child born of the new union was indeed legally recognized as the deceased brother's son.

In the story quoted by the Sadducees, the woman went through successive marriages with her six brothers-in-law,

burying them all one after the other, without producing a child. Finally she also joined the seven dead husbands in Sheol. The tantalizing question put to Jesus concerned the eschatological future of the widow of seven spouses: 'In the resurrection whose wife will she be?'

Most critical commentators rightly assume that the conflict is inauthentic and probably reflects by anticipation arguments opposing the haughty Sadducees and the representatives of the apostolic Church in the latter part of the first century, but there is no reason to doubt that the ideas expressed here correspond to the eschatological thought of Jesus.

The tale itself smacks of fiction. From what we learn from other Gospel accounts about Jesus as polemist – for instance his proud refusal to declare to the envoys of the chief priests the source of his authority (see Mk 11:27–33; Mt 21:23–27; Lk 20:1–8) – it is hard to imagine him naively putting up with what seems to be a cynical leg pull by the Sadducees. The Gospel story has all the appearances of an upper-class Jews' joke, addressed not to Jesus whom the chief priests feared, but to the apostles who for them counted as uncouth boors from Galilee (see Acts 4:13).

The reply placed on Jesus' lips provides an insight into how some first-century AD Jews, and possibly Jesus himself, conceived of the state of a person raised from the dead. The 'sons of the resurrection' were thought to be *bodiless* and resembled the 'angels of God' or the 'sons of God'. The picture is paralleled in contemporaneous Jewish literature such as the First Book of Enoch (in the section of the Parables, datable to the last quarter of the first century AD), whose author, like Jesus of the Synoptics, compared the resurrected righteous to the 'angels in

heaven' (1 En 51:4). The Second Book of Baruch (equally from the late first century AD) also speaks of the glory of the risen just that is similar to, and even surpasses, the splendour of the angels (2 Bar 51:5, 10, 12). So for Jesus, or at least for his later disciples, the sons of the resurrection had an angelic, non-corporeal, quality. If so, the idea of marriage, with its bodily implications, was inapplicable to them.

Consequently, in the eyes of Jesus, resurrected persons, or more precisely the raised just, the people he seems to have most of the time envisaged as worthy of resurrection, were purely bodiless beings without the needs and functions of flesh and blood.¹ This would imply that in Jesus' mind the distinction between resurrection and mere spiritual survival was minimal. Study of his concept of 'life' or 'eternal life' will confirm this conclusion (see pp. 75-8). The only sustainable conclusion is that corporeal resurrection played no significant part in the thinking of Jesus although he was undoubtedly aware of the idea. If so, the concept must have gained popularity at a later stage.

i. Resurrection in the Gospel of John

By contrast, due to the peculiar perspective of the evangelist, a totally different picture emerges from the Gospel of John. John's Jesus pre-existed in heaven. He descended to earth for a short duration and he had long since reascended to heaven to be with the Father by the time the Gospel was written at the turn of the first century AD. Some of his followers were already dead and others were expected to die before the D-day of the final resurrection. In John's eyes, the principal task Jesus, the glorified Son of God, received from the Father was the raising of the dead, or

more specifically the raising of his deceased disciples on the last day, as is obvious from the words placed by the evangelist on Jesus' lips:

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me; and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day (Jn 6:38-40).

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day (Jn 6:44).

The means by which the faithful are to be revived for ever is the symbolical body and blood of Jesus that they must sacramentally consume.

He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day (Jn 6:54).

This cannibalistic allegory is hardly attributable to Jesus speaking to his Galilean listeners. Most first-century AD Palestinian Jews, hearing these words, would have been overcome by nausea. The eating of blood was a deeply ingrained biblical taboo, since the Mosaic law identified blood with life and life belongs to God alone (Lev 17:10-11). It follows, therefore, that John's words are those of a possibly Gentile Christian preacher addressed to a non-Jewish audience. Let it be recalled that even some twenty years after the death of Jesus, the council of the apostles in Jerusalem compelled non-Jews wishing to join the Church to abstain from blood (Acts 15:20), that is to say,

to eat only the meat of animals slaughtered according to Jewish ritual law.

John's Jesus metaphorically presents himself to the sister of his deceased friend Lazarus as the embodiment of resurrection as far as the dead are concerned, and as the source of life for the living: 'I am the **resurrection** and the **life**; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me, shall never die' (Jn 11:25).

Following the model adopted with a single exception by the Synoptics (see p. 155, n. 1, to chapter 7), in John, too, as a rule resurrection is promised to the just alone; the fate of the wicked is left out of consideration. Universal renaissance of the dead – both good and evil, preceding judgement – is first mooted in the Book of Daniel before becoming common doctrine professed by rabbinic Judaism, and is heard only on a single occasion in John.

*For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the **resurrection of life**, and those who have done evil, to the **resurrection of judgement** (Jn 5:26–29).*

Here ends our extremely meagre harvest of sayings on resurrection, using the actual words 'to rise' and 'resurrection', attributed to Jesus by the Gospels. However, it is possible to cast the net wider and hunt also for references to 'life' or 'eternal life', not necessarily including the concept of corporeal reawakening, in an attempt to establish whether it alters the picture.

2. Eternal life

Here again the first fact that strikes the observer is the paucity of attestation in the Synoptics; four units if parallel passages are not counted separately, as against three for resurrection.

i. The Synoptic Gospels

Although the concepts of eternal life and resurrection are interconnected, curiously they do not figure together in the Synoptic Gospels as they do in the later work of John. Nevertheless, there is one example in the Synoptics in which the idea (though not the actual term) of bodily resurrection is presumed.

*And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter **life** maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter **life** lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the **kingdom of God** [Mt: **life**] with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched (Mk 9:43–48; Mt 18:8–9).*

According to Jesus, it is worth sacrificing a limb or an eye if it opens the gate to life, that is to say to eternal blessedness. Elsewhere he hyperbolically recommends self-castration if it is required for access to the kingdom of heaven (Mt 19:12).

In the other Synoptic passages, eternal life is used as the equivalent of 'kingdom of God', the central topic of the preaching of Jesus in Mark, Matthew and Luke, that plays

practically no part in the Fourth Gospel. Neither formula is ever properly defined, but both indicate in general terms the transformation of the conditions of existence from those that prevail in the present era to the state of affairs in the world to come. By contrast, damnation is depicted with the help of the biblical imagery of worms and hell-fire.² Jesus seems less interested in the details of the future life than in the overall qualifications which authorize entry to the kingdom of God. The best illustration is yielded by the story recounting a conversation between Jesus and a pious wealthy man:

*And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' . . . You know the commandments . . . ' And he said to [Jesus]: 'Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth.' And Jesus . . . said to him, ' . . . [S]ell what you have, and give it to the poor . . . ' And Jesus . . . said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the **kingdom of God!** . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the **kingdom of God**' (Mk 10:17-25; Mt 19:16-24; Lk 18:18-25).*

'Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left their house [Lk: or wife] or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel [Mt: for my name's sake; Lk: for the sake of the kingdom of God], who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, . . . and in the age to come eternal life' (Mk 10:29-30; Mt 19:29; Lk 18:29-30).

In his answer to the question of how to be saved, Jesus declared that obedience to God's commandments,

especially as they are expressed in the Decalogue, is the way to 'eternal life', but renunciation of worldly goods, too, constitutes a simple and safe access. Indeed, approach to the kingdom of God or eternal life is hindered by wealth, and to attain it is just as impossible for a rich man as it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.³ In short, the accent is laid not on the ultimate target, but existentially, as is often the case with Jesus, on the means enabling one to reach the goal.

The typical exaggeration of abandoning parents, siblings, spouses and children for the sake of Jesus⁴ simply means that preference is due to what is the most important, namely the ultimate life which can be reached only in the footsteps of the Master. Once again, the emphasis is not on the target but on the action leading towards it.

A further rather particular mention of 'eternal life' may be found in the Gospel of Matthew; it figures at the end of the parable of the last judgement: 'And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life' (Mt 25:31-46). The scene recalls the Similitudes of Enoch, a book probably contemporaneous with and possibly influencing Matthew, where the Son of Man or the Elect condemns the sinners to destruction. Though not expressly stated, it presupposes the resurrection both of the righteous and of the wicked, followed by divine retribution to all.

It is to be borne in mind that with the possible exception of the last example, 'life' and 'eternal life' are never actually associated with resurrection or even necessarily imply the idea of it. So when, on rare occasions, Jesus spoke of eternal life, it is possible that he meant immortality. Also those Jews who thought they belonged to the final period (and Jesus was definitely one of them), believed that the

reign of God was on the point of bursting into this world. Consequently they imagined that they could pass into the 'age to come' without experiencing death and therefore needed no resurrection (Mk 9:1; Mt 16:28; Lk 9:27). Indeed we know that according to the teaching of Jesus, the kingdom of God was 'at hand' (Mk 1:15; Mt 4:17) and was already in the midst of his generation (Lk 17:20-21), as revealed by the charismatic exorcisms and healings performed by him and his envoys (Mt 11:4-5; Lk 7:22; Mt 10:7-8).

These few quotations from the first three Gospels obviously lead to the conclusion that the subject did not play a major role in Jesus' teaching as reflected in the Synoptics. It was only in the context of the eschatological end of time (which after the death of Jesus was developed by St Paul and the early Church to encourage belief in resurrection) that the topic acquired a climactic position in the thought of early Christianity. An examination of the part played by the concept of eternal life in the Fourth Gospel will help us to grasp its rising momentum.

ii. The Gospel of John

Compared to the four passages in the Synoptics, John's Gospel counts twenty-five occurrences of 'life' or 'eternal life' in the sayings ascribed to Jesus. The acts which in John are thus rewarded in most cases differ from those in the Synoptics. It is true there is one passage where 'life' is said to be earned by a hard-working harvester through his devotion to duty: 'He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for **eternal life**' (Jn 4:36). And on another occasion 'eternal life' is the prize granted to a man who, inspired by outstanding moral heroism, sacrifices all his

worldly values (Jn 11:25). However, most of the time, 'life', a kind of continued and renewed existence with God, is ultimately the reward of faith in Jesus, and/or in God the Father, who has sent Jesus: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have **eternal life**' (Jn 3:16). The same theme is repeated again and again in John: 'He who believes in the Son has **eternal life**; he who does not obey the Son shall not see **life**, but the wrath of God rests upon him' (Jn 3:36). Finally, presenting both Christ and God as the source of the gift, 'eternal life' is promised to those who hear the word of Jesus and believe in the Father who sent him (Jn 5:24).

In addition to the passages where belief in Jesus is the recipe for gaining eternal life, John includes a whole series of symbolical images where Jesus is depicted as the **fontain of life**. He is 'the spring of water welling up to eternal life' (Jn 4:14); 'the food which endures to eternal life' (Jn 6:27); 'the bread of life' (Jn 6:35, 48) his 'flesh' and 'blood' give 'eternal life' (Jn 6:53-54) and he is the 'light of life' (Jn 8:12). It will come in useful later on to remember that belief not only in Jesus, present among the faithful, but also in the name of Jesus, no longer in tangible contact with his disciples, was considered to give them life: 'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have **life in his name**' (Jn 20:31).

In John, as in the Synoptic Gospels, with the possible exception of Matthew's account of the last judgement (Mt 25:46), only the Jewish followers of Jesus are promised eternal life. We have to wait first until the charismatic conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius and ultimately until the acceptance of the apostolic mission of

Paul in the Graeco-Roman world before encountering for the first time the possibility of non-Jews being judged worthy of eternal life without being compelled to pass through Judaism.

Whereas in the Synoptics Jesus is painted as the guiding light to the kingdom of God and in it to eternal life, in John we witness a more advanced stage of doctrinal development. Eternal life can be inherited by those who believe, not just in the words of Jesus the teacher, but in his heavenly power deriving from his special relationship with God the Father.

In conclusion, it must be recalled that Jesus' eschatological imagery in Mark, Matthew and Luke is centred not on resurrection,⁵ but on the idea of the 'kingdom of God' or 'kingdom of heaven'. This is revealed by the frequency of the two formulae in the Synoptic Gospels where they appear more than eighty times as against two occurrences in a single passage of the Gospel of John (Jn 3:3, 5). Resurrection is an uncommon concept in the authentic message of Jesus revealed by the Synoptics, and the source of its central significance in Christian ideology must be sought elsewhere (see chapter 13). As for 'eternal life', while only sporadically used in the Synoptics, it gains increasing momentum and import in the Gospel of John.

Predictions of the resurrection of Jesus

All three Synoptic evangelists emphatically state that during the final period of his life Jesus repeatedly announced to his closest disciples his death and his resurrection. The Gospel of John contains nothing comparable. In it only an obscure forewarning is given, not to the apostles, but privately to Nicodemus, in the form of a symbolical reinterpretation of an Old Testament image, the brazen serpent which was set up by Moses in the wilderness as a talisman to protect against snake bites (Num 21:6-9). As it saved the Jews who looked at it with trust, so will the 'uplifted' (crucified, risen and glorified) Jesus give eternal life to the believers (Jn 3:14). We find another cryptic reference in Matthew's treatment of the sign of Jonah, alluding to the duration of Jesus' stay in the tomb before his resurrection: 'For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth' (Mt 12:40).

Elsewhere Mark, Matthew and Luke are less mysterious. With greater or smaller detail they make Jesus foretell the events of the end of his life. The first occasion is Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi of the Messiahship of Jesus acknowledged by all the apostles: