

“Our Lord’s Doctrine of the Resurrection”
The Bible Student 3:189-197. [1901]

Eschatological subjects do not appeal strongly to the religious consciousness of our time. The general attitude taken towards them is reflected in the observation of a German writer that the doctrine of “the last things” counts among the last things in point of importance. Various causes have contributed towards this state of neglect into which eschatology has fallen. As such we may mention the extensive application of the principle of evolution to the history of God’s kingdom, the preeminently practical bent of modern Christianity, the spread of a one-sided moralizing conception of the Christian religion, and, perhaps more than anything else, the general anti-supernaturalism by which present-day theological thinking is colored. It is easy to see how each and all of these tendencies must lead to the quenching of the eschatological spirit both in the sphere of theology and in that of practical piety. Evolution means constant transformation, in the present case constant spiritual growth, but without any crisis or catastrophe. Eschatology, on the other hand, means a break in the process of development, suspension of the continuity, a sovereign termination of the historical process by the intervention of God. The practical spirit of the age demands concentration of the religious energy upon the needs and issues of the present moment and of the tangible world, whilst eschatology invites an expenditure of spiritual power on transcendental realities both unseen and remote. The philosophical positivism to which the school of Ritschl and other allied movements owe their origin, seeks on principle to restrict all that is religiously knowable and valuable to the surface processes of conscious experience, and thus the deeper-going, creative acts of divine power, which affect the subconscious reality of things, in part even the physical world, and which occupy so large a place in the eschatological drama, are easily dismissed as unessential and indifferent from a moral and religious point of view. Finally, it is in the bold realism of the biblical doctrine of the last things that the fundamental supernaturalism of the Bible most emphatically asserts itself. Whatever else of the content of revealed religion may possibly be translatable into the terms of naturalism, the eschatological conceptions defy every such attempt. Being the very embodiment of the miraculous, they must meet with disfavor in all circles where the latter is scorned or suspected.

The influence of these tendencies also affects in no small degree the biblico-theological treatment of the eschatological part of our Lord’s teaching. At one time it was not uncommon to reject all utterances of this import found in the Gospels as unauthentic, and to credit the early church with their production. The fact was that the modernizing idealistic construction of the figure of Jesus then in vogue was instinctively felt to leave no room for the, from that point of view, fantastic expectations which the Synoptists ascribe to Him. It was soon perceived, however, that in order to get rid of the obnoxious material a much deeper cut had to be made into the body of the gospel tradition. The eschatology of Jesus is nothing more nor less than the necessary correlate of the messianic role, which, according to the same record, He claims for Himself. To any mind except one utterly void of historic sense, it must be plain that Jesus could not have entered upon this role without appropriating the substantial eschatological functions that had become inseparable from it, not merely in the Jewish view of the times, but also in the old prophetic conception. A Messiah who means to be no more than a teacher of ethics and religion is a mere philosophic abstraction, not a historically conceivable reality. Now, although a few writers, like Scholten, Lagarde and Volkmar, were willing to go to the length of declaring the whole messianic setting of the life of Jesus unhistorical, and to assert that He never, not even in the last days, aspired to the place of Messiah, the majority naturally

shrink from such an extreme, skeptical position, and are thus forced back to the acknowledgment of the eschatological expectations as an integral element of the official consciousness of Jesus. This, however, by no means implies that at the present day the whole eschatological material found in the gospel is accepted as authentic by the great body of critical writers. By various critical expedients substantial reductions are still being made in most quarters from the sum total of our Lord's eschatological teaching, which a careful comparison of the four Gospels yields. Nor does it imply that these writers, after having historically ascertained what the teaching of Jesus on this point is, are personally ready to accept its contents as regulative of their own belief. The present remedy, where the modern un-eschatological and the intensely eschatological consciousness of Jesus come in conflict, is to distinguish between two elements in the Savior's teaching. The one element consists of His specifically religious and ethical conceptions; this represents His original contribution to the sphere of truth, that in imparting which, He may in some sense be called the Revealer of God and in respect to which His views are authoritative for us. The other element is made up of what He naively borrowed from the belief of contemporary Judaism, and to this belongs much, if not all, of His eschatological teaching. In borrowing this material He stood under the restraining influence of His religious and ethical principles, so that only such features were adopted as were free from all injurious fanaticism; even where the outcome has proven Him mistaken, as in the expectation of His speedy return from heaven, the mistake was harmless and need not interfere with our acknowledgment of His infallible authority in the other sphere to which alone it properly applies, and in which alone it can have value for us.

It may well be asked, however, why, if Jesus borrowed discriminatingly, and, if His eschatology is characterized by great soberness in comparison with the overloaded programs of the Jewish apocalypses, as it undoubtedly is, why He should have admitted into His teaching morally or religiously indifferent conceptions at all. A motive for the retention of these, while so much else was discarded, must have existed, and this motive must either have been connected with eudaemonistic considerations, or it must have been of a specifically religious nature. The former would hardly leave Jesus' ethical perfection intact, for it would mean the exploitation of religious conceptions for a religiously indifferent purpose. In the other case, however, we have no right to say that what bore a profoundly religious aspect to Him can be discarded by us, without imperiling the confidence we place in Him as a religious teacher. On closer examination it will be found that the difference between the modern apathy in eschatological matters and the interest this subject possessed to the mind of Jesus is due not to an external change of age and environment, but to a difference in the very tone and spirit of religion itself.

Our Lord's teaching on the resurrection is partly contained in the predictions of His own return to life in the body soon after death, partly in statements referring to the general resurrection, and indirectly also light is thrown upon it by the resurrection miracles He wrought during His ministry, and most of all by His own appearances as the Risen One. Jewish opinion on the subject at this time and in the immediately preceding period appears to have been very diverse and uncertain. The most varying views were entertained regarding the persons who were to share in the resurrection. According to some, all men were to be raised, or at least certain classes from among mankind; according to others, only Israelites, and of these only the righteous or the specially wicked. Further, there was disagreement as to the time when the resurrection was to take place. It was generally held that the righteous Israelites were to be raised at the advent of the Messiah, to share with him in the

temporal messianic kingdom, whilst the remainder of those to be raised were to follow, after the close of this kingdom at the great judgment, which was to introduce the kingdom of eternity. But where no preliminary messianic kingdom was expected, the raising of the dead was concentrated on the judgment day. Some held also that there were to be successive resurrections of the several saints distributed over the days of the preliminary kingdom. And we meet even with the idea of a postponement of the entire resurrection until the end of the messianic kingdom. The form also in which the risen were to appear was variously conceived of. One belief was that they would come in the identical bodies that had rested in the graves, which were, however, at least according to some, to be changed immediately after the judgment. Others expected that from the outset the risen would have a transformed body. Still others assumed a resurrection of disembodied spirits only. And alongside of all these varying beliefs went the Sadducaic denial of the resurrection *in toto*, involving that the shades of men remain forever in Sheol.

It will be evident from this brief review that the motives which shaped Jewish speculation on the subject were of a considerably mixed and impure character. Coming from all this confusion and wavering we cannot but be strongly impressed with the simplicity and assurance of our Lord's teaching. It is shaped by the one great principle, that the kingdom of God and the salvation it brings cannot stop short of the complete reclaiming of men, *body as well as soul*, from death, nor of their complete equipment for the consummate fellowship with God in heaven. In Jesus' argument with the Sadducees certain points are brought out which go to show that such is really the underlying principle of the entire doctrine. The covenant fellowship of God with the patriarchs, in virtue of which He calls Himself their God, renders absurd not merely the thought that their existence should cease with death (this not even the Sadducees asserted), but renders equally absurd the contention that God could expose them forever to a shadowy existence in the nether world. It would be unworthy of God to take into the fellowship of His own perfect life a being which He did not intend to raise to the full fruition of communion with Himself of which its nature is capable. He is not a God of the dead but of the living, and life in this pregnant sense postulates the resurrection of the body. How strongly our Lord's doctrine of the resurrection life was regulated by His doctrine of God may be perceived from this also, that He finds the root of the Sadducaic skepticism in their inadequate understanding of the power of God. The truth about God and the reality of the resurrection for Him stand and fall together (Matt. 22:32). And from the point of view of man's redemption, the resurrection appears to Jesus equally essential. Those that attain to it are in virtue of this privilege "sons of God" in a specific sense (Luke 20:35). The raising of the body marks, as it were, the final admission of the completely restored man into the enjoyment of the fatherly love of God.¹

The time of the resurrection is placed by our Lord at the end of the present world. On the whole the gospel eschatology is kingdom eschatology. It deals with the large collective events which shall usher in the final perfect state of the kingdom. While by no means leaving us in uncertainty as to the condition of man in the intervening period (cf. Luke 16:23; 23:43), yet our Lord touches but rarely upon the questions of individual eschatology pertaining to the intermediate state. In accordance with His unique character and His unique place in the scheme of revelation, His teaching on this as on other points has a majestic sweep and is concerned with final doctrines as well as with fundamental principles. It involves a disregard of this fact when attempts are occasionally made to represent Jesus as teaching a resurrection following immediately upon death in the case of each individual. Thus a recent writer takes the manner in which our Lord argues against the Sadducees to imply that the

patriarchs were in his view immediately after death translated into a heavenly state and (perhaps) endowed with a new body, and that this translation and heavenly incarnation are by Him called the resurrection.² This theory lacks all real support in the Gospels. As has been shown above, the nerve of our Lord's argument with the Sadducees does not require that the patriarchs were at the time of Moses in possession of *the resurrection body*, but only that they were in possession of *the covenant life*, which would inevitably issue in due time into the raising of their bodies; John 11:25, where the resurrection and the spiritual life are identified, is another passage appealed to in this connection. We know, however, that Paul also found the principle of the resurrection in the possession of the Spirit and spoke of purely spiritual processes in terms of rising from the dead, and yet alongside of this he held to the doctrine of a literal resurrection of the body in the future. Nothing forbids our understanding Jesus' words in the same sense. The very argument with the Sadducees which is quoted in support of this theory makes the resurrection coincide with the beginning of the coming aeon (Luke 20:35). If our Lord had conceived of His own resurrection after the fashion thus attributed to Him, the outcome would have proved Him mistaken, for the empty grave leaves no doubt about the substantial identity between His body that was buried and His resurrection body. The resurrection miracles also create difficulty, for, although in one sense they are peculiar and cannot be put on a line with the resurrection proper, yet the place which our Lord assigns to them among the evidences of His messianic calling (Matt. 11:5, "the dead are raised up"), shows that they were symbolic and typical of the final resurrection. In addition to all this, we have the explicit statement of John 5:28, 29, according to which *those that are in the tombs* shall hear the voice of the Son of Man and come forth unto the resurrection; and in 6:39, 44, 54, the resurrection is explicitly placed at the last day.

Another disputed question is whether our Lord extends the resurrection to all mankind or confines it to the members of His kingdom. The argument with the Sadducees is so formulated as to prove only the resurrection of the children of God. Inasmuch, however, as the Sadducees denied every kind of resurrection, it was sufficient for our Lord to demonstrate that some would be raised, viz., those in regard to whom it was most easy to prove, without intending thereby to deny the universality of the resurrection. Appeal is frequently made to the universality of the judgment connected with the Parousia as presupposing a universal resurrection, but this consideration is not decisive, since a judgment of disembodied spirits is not *a priori* inconceivable and actually is assumed in some Jewish writings.³ Nor is the phrase "resurrection of the just" in Luke 14:14 sufficiently unequivocal to settle the dispute, seeing it may mean equally well "the resurrection which belongs to the just alone" as "that resurrection state which will fall to the share of the just." Again, that the righteous are said to *attain* to the resurrection from the dead (Luke 20:35) does not imply that the resurrection *as such* is an attainment of which others fall short, for the whole passage deals with the blessed resurrection of the people of God and not with the resurrection in the abstract. While the arguments adduced in favor of a partial resurrection are entirely inadequate, we have explicit and emphatic declarations on the other side which place the matter beyond doubt. The final fate of the wicked is described as overtaking them in the body (cf. Mark 9:43-48), and that this is not a mere accommodation of speech may be seen from Matthew 10:20, where God is said to be able to destroy *both soul and body* in Gehenna. In John 5:29, Jesus draws a formal distinction between "the resurrection of life" and "the resurrection of judgment." At this point we once more verify that our Lord's doctrine of the resurrection rests on a broader basis than that of individual soteriology. The raising of the dead forms part of a process of cosmical proportions which draws within its range the entire physical universe and therefore extends to the wicked as well as the righteous. Even in the case of the wicked

the resurrection of the body and the recompense in the body are necessary to the completeness of the theodicy which forms the essence of the final coming of the kingdom.

In regard to the nature of the resurrection body, little is taught by our Lord directly. The argument with the Sadducees implies that the risen will be "equal unto the angels." The word "equal" here as elsewhere in the New Testament does not express sameness of nature, but parity of status. It relates in the present case to the exemption from death and the consequent ceasing of the process of propagation and of marriage. The general conception of an angelic glory is not directly expressed by these words. We have no right simply to carry back into our Lord's teaching the specifically Pauline conception of the spiritual body. On the other hand it should be remembered that undoubtedly this Pauline conception was derived from the appearance of Christ in His celestial glory which Paul beheld on the way to Damascus. And on general grounds as well as on the basis of the account of the transfiguration we must believe that our Lord was fully cognizant of the glory that was awaiting Him. Consequently, even though He should not have explicitly taught this truth, the form in which it was present to His own mind cannot have differed from that in which Paul possessed it. Besides this, our Lord's doctrine of the final kingdom is so dominated by the principle of the celestial character of the life in this kingdom, that He cannot have conceived of the body otherwise than as fully adjusted to the conditions of such a life and to the entire supernatural environment in which it will have to move. John 5:28, 29 and Luke 14:14; 20:35, 36 make it probable that the body of glory will be the immediate product of the resurrection, and not the result of a subsequent transformation of the body first risen from the grave in its previous natural condition.

(Footnotes)

¹ With this may be compared the peculiar statement of Paul in Romans 8:23, where the redemption of the body at the last day is called "the adoption," and the eschatological use of the word "redemption" in such passages as Ephesians 1:14 and 4:30.

² S.A. Fries, in an article entitled "Jesu Vorstellungen von der Auferstehung der Toten", in *Zeitschrift für die N.T. Wissenschaft*, 1900, pp. 291ff.

³ So in the book of Jubilees and in part in the book of Enoch.