

RESURRECTION OF THE FLESH-BODY

IN THE LIGHT OF 1 CORINTHIANS 15:50a AND MATTHEW 22:30

By Prof. J. A. SCHEP

There are a few statements in Scripture which are often adduced as indisputable evidence that we cannot expect a resurrection of this body of flesh. Outstanding among these statements is in the first place Paul's remark in 1 Cor. 15 : 50a: "Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God."

Already in the early Church all who denied the resurrection of this body of flesh, fell back upon this passage, as Irenaeus writes: . "This . . . (passage) . . . is adduced by all heretics in support of their folly . . ."¹

As regards recent times, a great many of the works, quoted in this study as denying the resurrection of the flesh, adduce this verse as proof that Paul denied the same too. Some pay hardly any attention to the context in which Paul's statement occurs, or to the significant fact that the apostle does not speak of the "flesh" but of "flesh and blood," which as we hope to show has a quite different meaning. H.H.A. Kennedy, for example, simply declares: "Here is one of the Apostle's axioms. Flesh is, of course, the material substance of the earthly life . . ."² To prove that Paul did not believe in a resurrection of the flesh O. Cullmann quotes our statement without any further interpretation.³ C. T. Craig, though giving some further interpretation, claims that these words do not only show that Paul denied the resurrection of the flesh, but that he denied that the risen Christ had a body of flesh, as Luke speaks of it.⁴

The explanation, however, is not as simple as that.

The expression "flesh and blood" occurs in four other passages in the New Testament, viz. Matt. 16 : 17; Gal. 1 : 16; Eph. 6 : 12 and Hebr. 2:14. In the latter two passages it is used with inversion. The words form "a single conception . . . a semitic wordpair."⁵

In all the passages, just mentioned, it is obvious from the context that "flesh and blood" does not denote the substance of the human body. When Jesus says to Peter after his great confession "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee . . ." Jesus cannot possibly have thought even of the possibility that the substance of flesh and blood could give a man any revelation. Reading the expression "flesh and blood" within the context of the other passages, leads to similar conclusions: not the substance of the human body is meant.

E. Schweizer shows convincingly that the expression belongs to the Rabbinic vocabulary. The Rabbis never used it for the flesh-substance or for the human body. The latter they named with increasing frequency "GUPH," which can also mean "person." "Flesh and blood" always denoted the whole man with all his functions, with particular emphasis on

1) "Against Heresies", V. 9.

2) "St. Paul's conceptions of the Last Things", London, 1904, p. 238.

3) "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?", London, 1958, p. 46.

4) Interpreter's Bible, ad loc.

5) J. Jeremias, "New Testament Studies", Febr. 1956, p. 152.

man's earthly condition as a frail and perishable creature, in contrast to the eternal and almighty God.⁶

There is no ground for interpreting the expression "flesh and blood" as it occurs in 1 Cor. 15 : 50 in a different way. On the contrary, that here again the whole man is meant, particularly in his frailty and perishableness appears from the fact that the verb in Greek is in the singular, and that in the parallel clause 50b for "flesh and blood" the word "corruption" is used: "neither does corruption inherit incorruption."⁷

J. Jeremias and Robertson-Plummer view the parallelism in this verse as synthetic, so that "flesh and blood" and "corruption" are interpreted as referring to different groups of men. "Flesh and blood," according to them, denotes those that will be alive when the End comes, whereas "Corruption," refers to those that died before the Parousia and whose bodies have suffered corruption in the grave.

However, with E. Schweizer and most commentators we regard the parallelism as synonymous so that "flesh and blood" in vs. 50a is called "corruption" in vs. 50b, corruption denoting: that which is subject to corruption; that which is perishable and a certain prey of death and destruction. This interpretation is in perfect accordance with the meaning of the expression "flesh and blood" in Rabbinical literature and in the New Testament.

Here the question arises however, What does Paul mean when he says that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God?"

According to Grosheide and Lenski Paul declares in this statement that to obtain the blessings of God's Kingdom in Jesus Christ man must be born again, as Jesus taught Nicodemus, John 3 : 3, 6. This means that our passage does not speak of the resurrection of the dead.

However, it is difficult to see how this can be the correct interpretation as Paul immediately after vs. 50 continues to speak of the resurrection. It seems also incongruent with the fact that the scholars concerned declare that "flesh and blood" does not denote man in his sinfulness. It is because of his sinfulness that man needs a spiritual regeneration; not because he is a frail and perishable creature, a certain prey of death and corruption. Also the parallel clause "corruption does not inherit incorruption" points in a different direction, as does the word "inherit" which in the context of 1 Cor. 15 decidedly seems to speak of the eschatological entering into God's completed kingdom, which will be a kingdom of "incorruption," i.e. of immortality, imperishableness and glory.

With the majority of commentators we understand vs. 50a as declaring that "flesh and blood" cannot possibly have a place in the glorious realm of the new heaven and the new earth, which Christ will establish at his second coming.

Does this mean that the body the saints need to be able to enter that realm of glory cannot be a body of flesh, as many scholars claim?⁸

6) G. Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, VII, pp. 115-6. Similarly many commentators, F. W. Grosheide (*Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament*) and Robertson-Plummer (*The International Critical Commentary*) point also negatively out, that "flesh and blood" does not denote man in his sinfulness.

7) E. Schweizer, *Op. cit.* p. 128.

8) Thus, to mention only a very few by way of example, C. T. Craig (*Interpreter's Bible*), F. Godef, Jean Hering (*"The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians"*, ET, London, 1962), H. D. Wendland (*Das Neue Testament Deutsch*).

Here we would answer in the negative for the following reasons.

1. If this is the correct interpretation, Paul's statement in this verse contradicts what Scripture says about Christ's resurrection-body of "flesh and bones," a body which he has in heaven, in which he will come again, to enter with all the saints the eternal kingdom;

2. If Paul declares here that a body of flesh is incapable and unworthy of partaking of the future glory, he contradicts his general teachings on the subject, which, as we have seen, point in a quite different direction;

3. The interpretation under discussion misrepresents the expression "flesh and blood" as if it meant the physical body, and in particular the "substance" of that body, whereas in the New Testament in general and in Paul's writings in particular (Gal. 1:16; Eph. 6:12) "flesh and blood" undeniably denotes the **WHOLE MAN** in his weak, perishable, corruptible **HUMAN NATURE**, as we have seen;

4. The context excludes the possibility that Paul is speaking here of the necessary abandonment of the body of flesh. For in vs. 51ff Paul explains what kind of change is necessary for man to enter the new world. It is not a change consisting in the annihilation of this body and its replacement by a completely new body of a different substance. On the contrary, the apostle declares in vs. 53 that **THIS** corruptible and mortal (body) will be endowed with the glorious gifts of incorruption and immortality. This means the **CONDITION** of our present body will be changed, precisely as we found it earlier in vs. 42 ff.

For all these reasons the clause "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" must be interpreted along different lines. In the light of all we have found the only correct and natural interpretation seems to be that **MAN, AS HE IS NOW, A FRAIL, EARTH-BOUND, PERISHABLE CREATURE**, cannot have a place in God's glorious heavenly kingdom. His human nature must first be changed, shall he be able to live in a world which is completely different from this present world: a new world in which sin, weakness and death are unknown, where procreation of the human race is no longer needed, where there is no marriage, where the continuation of life does not depend any more on eating and drinking and digestion, where heaven and earth are united as never before and God dwells among and in his people, with all the fullness of his Spirit. (Is. 33:24; Matt. 22:30; 1 Cor. 15:28; Rev. 7:16; 21:1-4).

To be able to live in such a world man need not be deprived of his flesh-body in which God created him in His image, no more than Christ in whom this new world already has come in principle, has abandoned his flesh-body. What man needs is a change in the **CONDITIONS** of his flesh-body and of his **WHOLE HUMANITY**; a change from corruptibility, perishableness, dishonour, and all that belongs to this earth-bound life, to indestructibility, immortality, glory and all that is characteristic of a world which, indeed, may be called: heaven on earth, and where the Spirit of God fills man's body and soul to the brim, as He does the new Adam, the life-giving Spirit.⁹

9) Thus, in the main, J. Calvin, R. C. H. Lenski, et al.

It is obvious that a body of flesh of such a condition is beyond description and adequate human understanding, just as is the case with the glorious body of our Lord. On earth nothing of the kind is available to experiment with in scientific research, in order to learn what this future body precisely is. The change of which Paul speaks is a divine miracle. When Paul in Phil. 3 : 21 speaks of this change, he adds emphatically that it will take place "according to the working whereby he is able to subject all things unto himself." Divine, miraculous power is necessary to bring this change about. For this reason no scientific verification and understanding is possible. God's miracles require FAITH. To deny the possibility of a body of flesh which has all the characteristics described above, just because our scientific mind cannot conceive of such a body, amounts to thinking lightly of the power of that God, for whom there is nothing impossible, Luke 1 : 37.

To say it with the words of H. Bavinck: "Almighty God who during this life, despite the constant flux of all the particles of our body, is able to preserve its identity from childhood to old age, possesses without doubt the power to do something similar through death."¹⁰

Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 15 : 50, understood as thus suggested, constitutes a most suitable conclusion to what precedes. The NEB rendering: "What I mean, my brothers, is this . . ." is well-chosen, for what follows is a further explanation and conclusion of the sowing-parallel, vss. 35-44 and the Adam-Christ-parallel, vss. 45-49.

In the first parallel Paul has spoken of God's power to raise dead bodies to new and richer life.

In the Adam-Christ parallel the apostle has shown that in Christ's glorious resurrection as the last Adam God's plan with the first Adam and his offspring has been realized in principle. In the future resurrection of the believers the latter will be renewed after the image of the risen Christ.

Now here, in verse 50, Paul states in conclusion that all this implies the necessity of a tremendous change. This change has been already implicitly announced in vss. 35-49. In vs. 50, however, it is explicitly stated as absolutely necessary. If the erring Corinthians think that Paul teaches a resurrection which means a mere repetition and continuation, they are now undeceived: "flesh and blood," man in his present condition, is not able to enter the new world.

On the other hand, understood this way, vs. 50 provides the most natural transition to what follows. For in vss. 51 ff. the apostle declares that (because "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God") not only those that are dead at the Parousia will be raised in a changed body, but that such a change is also necessary for those that are alive when Jesus returns from heaven: "we shall ALL be changed," vs. 51. This change is an absolute necessity for every believer: "For this corruptible MUST (Gr. emphatic DEI) put on incorruption and this mortal immortality," vs. 53.

We may conclude from our study of the relevant passages of 1 Corinthians 15 that, in conformity with his general teachings, the apostle Paul speaks here in an unambiguous way of the resurrection of this body of flesh in a glorified condition.

10) Gereformeerde Dogmatiek, IV, p. 776.

Another statement, often adduced as evidence that we cannot expect a resurrection of this body of flesh, is Jesus' answer to the question of the Sadducees, which of the seven men, married in succession to the same woman, should have her as wife in the resurrection. Our Lord replied: ". . . . in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as angels in heaven," Matt. 22 : 30, Mk. 12 : 25. In Luke we read: "for neither can they die any more, for they are equal unto the angels," 20 : 36.

Some conclude from these passages that "in the life hereafter" we shall have no body and consequently be "freed from the limitations which necessarily belong to bodily existence."¹¹ Others suggest that Jesus ascribes to those that enter the resurrection-life "angelic bodies, made from the light and glory of God."¹² There are also some, who interpret Jesus' words as implying that the sexual difference between male and female will cease to exist.¹³ Schleiermacher went even so far as to declare that Jesus teaches here the future cancellation of the difference between male and female SOULS.¹⁴

However, Jesus' words do not allow for any such interpretations.

In the first place it should be noticed, that Jesus spoke the words concerned to the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection, VIEWED AS THE RAISING UP OF DEAD BODIES FROM THE GRAVES. Their question concerning the marriage in the future life of the woman, who in this life had been married seven times, would have had no sense if they were not thinking of a resurrection in a physical body fit for marriage and reproduction, and actually employed in both.

Against this background Jesus' answer is remarkable, because he does not deny the raising of dead bodies from the graves, but rather confirms the same. Over against the "Impossible" of the Sadducees, Jesus states that they are erring, "not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God." That means: What you, Sadducees, erringly deny, namely the raising of dead bodies from the graves, is promised in the Scriptures and will be accomplished by the power of God.

That this is implied is confirmed by the fact that our Lord then states: "For when they shall rise from the dead . . .," Mark 12 : 25, and: "But as touching the dead, that they are raised . . .," vs. 26. With a view to the issue under discussion between the Sadducees and Jesus, these words can only mean that according to Jesus dead men will indeed rise up in their own physical bodies. "What else could rise up thus?" we may ask with Lenski.

This excludes any explanation suggesting that we shall be raised as spirits, or that we shall receive an "angelic body," consisting of some heavenly "glory-matter," without any physical connection with our present bodies.

11) E.g. W. Strawson, "Jesus and the future life", pp. 207, 227; Dorothy L. Sayers renders Jesus' word as follows: "Blessed spirits neither marry nor are given in marriage". ("The Man born to be King", London, 1957, p. 224).

12) J. Baillie, "And the Life Everlasting", p. 136; S. Barton Babbage in "Reformed Theological Review", IX, 4, p. 23.

13) So, for example, K. Dijk, "Over the laatste dingen", III, p. 106; P. Eudokimoff, "The mystery of Marriage", in "The Student World", XLV, 1952, pp. 151 ff., quoted by A. Hijmans, in "Bezinning", Kampen, 1958, pp. 218 ff.; P. Althaus, "Die letzten Dinge", p. 126.

14) Quoted by P. Althaus (Op. cit. p. 126, nota 1), who disagrees with Schleiermacher on the ground that if the latter were right the personal identity would suffer a loss.

Secondly, though our Lord defends the Scriptural doctrine of the resurrection of the believers¹⁵ in their physical bodies, he makes it clear that he disagrees with the popular Jewish conceptions of his day and with the teachings of the Pharisees, who pictured the future life as a mere continuation of this life. According to the Rabbis "the world to come would not essentially differ from the present, but only be more beautiful and glorious, with greater fertility, etc."¹⁶

Jesus, in contrast to all such theories, declares that those that are raised from the dead "neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as angels in heaven."

It is noticeable that the text does not read that they BECOME angels, but that they are "angel-like."¹⁷

This being "angel-like" must not be taken as implying more than the context clearly indicates. In the context, for instance, not a word is said about a future cancellation of the difference in sex, either in body or soul. Any reference therefore in that direction drawn from Jesus' words, is invalid.

One thing is emphatically stated by Jesus: in the world to come there will be no marriage, just as there is no marriage among the angels. IN THAT RESPECT, the risen saints will be "angel-like."¹⁸

That Jesus' words by no means imply that the resurrection-body will have no sexual qualification, appears from the fact that Luke, whose account is more elaborate than that of the other Synoptics, immediately after the statement that there will be no marriage, mentions the reason for this fact. This reason is: "For they cannot die again" BV; (not: "they will be sexless as the angels"). Only then it reads: "For they are angel-like," which in the light of what follows means: "they are immortal like the angels."

All this implies that marriage, which in this present Age is necessary, INTER-ALIA with a view to the preservation of the human race, whose numbers are constantly reduced by death, can be abolished in the world to come, because there no one can ever die again and no vacant places need to be filled any more. In that respect redeemed mankind will resemble the realm of the angels, who do not know death and whose number therefore never changes.

15) Plummer and many other commentators point out that Christ is speaking of the resurrection of the believers, using the words EK NEKRON (out of the dead). This expression differs from TON NEKRON (of the dead) which as a rule is used to denote the resurrection of ALL the dead (John 5:28, 29; Acts 17:32, etc.). Greydanus adds that although all the dead will receive their bodies back and in so far may be said to rise again, yet only the believers will rise in the proper and full sense of the word, namely to eternal life. The others will be in the power of "the second death", under punishment of God (Rev. 20:6, 13-15).

16) K. H. Rengstorf (Das Neue Testament Deutsch), ad loc. Rengstorf adds that Mohammed had the best pattern for his sensualistic pictures of the future life in the Jewish conceptions.

17) Luke has the unusual word ISAGGELOS, which is better rendered "like angels" (NEB) or "angel-like" (Kittel, Op. cit. I, p. 87) than "equal to the angels" (ERV).

18) W. Manson (Moffatt's Commentary) on Luke, ad loc. interprets: "Their mode of life is like that of angels".

In the light of all the passages discussed it is obvious that the resemblance between the risen saints and the angels has only two sides, which are inter-related: the absence of both married life with all its implications, and death.¹⁹

Any further interesting questions as regards the fellowship among the risen saints, especially in connection with family relations they had in this world, can be left alone. Scripture does not satisfy our curiosity on this point, no more than in several other respects.

There can be no doubt that Matt. 22 : 30 and parallel passages do not deny that the believers will rise in their bodies of flesh, though in a glorified and changed condition. On the contrary, they confirm this Scriptural truth.

19) G. Kittel, *Op. cit.* I, p. 87.