

Resurrection and Resurrections. Some Insights into Matthew 27:51-54

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ABSTRACT. After Christ's death upon the cross, the gospel of Matthew is the only one that preserved a tradition about the opening of the graves and the resurrection of the saints (Mt 27:51-54). According to context, this resurrection of the Old Testament saints diverges from the concept of Christ as the beginner of the general resurrection. The article scrutinises the history of interpretation in patristic literature, modern commentaries, and the ideas of resurrection in early Judaism and Christianity. The author argues that here the gospel may preserve an ancient tradition about the victory of the Messiah which was further corrected to converge with the post-easter tradition about Jesus who was resurrected after three days.

Keywords: Resurrection, interpretation, Old Testament, Judaism, Pharisees, Sadducees

Introduction

After Jesus died on the cross, Matthew narrates some extraordinary events: "And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook; and the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep (*πολλὰ σώματα τῶν κεκοιμημένων ἁγίων*) were raised (*ἠγέρθησαν*); and coming out of the tombs (*ἐξελθόντες ἐκ τῶν μνημείων*) after His resurrection (*μετὰ τὴν ἔγερσιν αὐτοῦ*) they entered the holy city and appeared to many (*ἐνεφανίσθησαν πολλοῖς*)" (Mt 27:51-53 – NASB).

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This series of resurrections that happened before Jesus' resurrection raises some questions: How was the nature of this resurrection in connection with Christ's resurrection? Was it in line with other resurrections that already occurred during the period of the Old Testament, for example as the resurrected son of the widow from Sarepta (3 Kgs // 1 Kgs 17) or the resurrected son of the Shunammite woman (4 Kgs // 2 Kgs 4) or the resurrected dead man upon which the relics of prophet Elisha were thrown (4 Kgs // 2 Kgs 13)? If so, was it the same as the resurrections performed by Jesus himself: Jairus' daughter (Mk 5:21-43; Lk 8:41-56), the son of the widow from Nain (Lk 7:11-17) and his friend Lazarus of Bethany (Jn 11)? All these resurrections are relative because it seems that the resurrected people only gained life for a while, without acceding to the status of bodily immortality. After all, they were supposed to die in the end. Their resurrection means only bringing them again to ordinary mundane life.

Or was the resurrection of the saints from Matthew 27:51-53 the first instalment for "the resurrection on the last day (ἐν τῇ ἀναστάσει ἐν τῇ ἐσχάτῃ ἡμέρᾳ)", as Martha knew to finally happen to all the people (cf. Jn 11:24)? But how then could Jesus be "the first fruits (ἀπαρχή) of those who are asleep" (1 Cor 15:20), if before him some other saints have already been resurrected? The text from Matthew 27:51-53 doesn't seem to fit the general Christian teaching about the importance of Jesus' resurrection as the first of its kind and the beginning of the resurrection of all humankind at the end of times.

History of interpretation

Ulrich Luz¹ discerns five categories of interpretation: (1) one related to the history of salvation; (2) a Christological interpretation; (3) Christ's descent to hell; (4) allegorical interpretation; (5) eschatological interpretation.

Here the allegorical interpretation seems the most distant one to the text, because it goes beyond the literal meaning. Origen interprets allegorically the rocks that shattered as the prophets and the apostles who spread the gospel, the empty tombs as the bodies of sinful souls that were dead to God, but now have been raised, are made bodies of saints and are seen to go out of themselves in the holy city, whose citizenship is in heaven (*Commentary on Matthew* 139)². For Jerome, the text alludes to a type of believers, "those who were formerly like tombs of the dead, when their former errors and vices are abandoned and

¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary on Matthew 21-28*, in *Hermeneia*, trans. by James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 562.

² Ronald E. Heine (trans.), *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 755-757.

their hardness is softened, afterwards they recognize the Creator" (*Commentary on Matthew* 4.27.51)³. Hilary of Poitiers sees in the splitting of the rocks the Word who penetrates everything that is hard (*Commentary on Matthew* 33.7)⁴.

The allegorical interpretation eludes the literal meaning of the text and focuses on the spiritual analogy with the aspects of the Christian life. The historical sense might be acknowledged, as Origen who limits the extent of the resurrection of the saints to Jerusalem and Judaea: "For 'rocks were' not 'shattered' outside Judaea, nor 'were' other 'tombs opened' except those alone that were in Jerusalem or perhaps in the land of Judaea, not did 'the earth shake' at that time except in the region of Jerusalem" (*Commentary on Matthew* 134)⁵.

The third interpretation brings the episode of Matthew 27.51-54 in connection to Christ's descent to hell as the sequel of that event: first Christ went down to Hades to preach the gospel to the dead of the Old Testament, then he raised them along with his resurrection. Ulrich Luz considers 1 Peter 4:6 ("For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God") as the only New Testament text that supports this doctrine. But in the same epistle, the classical text about this doctrine is 1 Peter 3:18-20 – Christ "having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient...".

Echoes of this doctrine are found in St Ignatius' *Epistle to the Magnesians* 9.2: "If these things be so, how then shall we be able to live without him of whom even the prophets were disciples in the Spirit and to whom they looked forward as their teacher? And for this reason, he whom they waited for in righteousness, when he came raised them from the dead"⁶. Allusion to Christ's descent to hell to preach there the gospel is found in the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* 10: "When those soldiers saw this, they awakened the centurion and the elders, for they also were there to mount guard. And while they were narrating what they had seen, they saw three men come out from the sepulchre, two of them supporting the other and a cross following them and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was being led reached beyond the heavens. And they heard a voice out of the heavens crying, 'Have you preached to those who

³ Thomas P. Scheck (trans.), *St. Jerome: Commentary on Matthew*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 117 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 321.

⁴ Jean Doignon, *Hilaire de Poitiers. Sur Matthieu*, vol. 2, in *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 258 (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1979), 256-257.

⁵ Heine, *The Commentary of Origen*, 747.

⁶ Kirsopp Lake (trans.), *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, in *Loeb Classical Library*, vol. 24 (Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press / William Heinemann, 1965), 204-207.

sleep?', and from the cross was heard the answer, 'Yes'.⁷ St Justin the Martyr records also a fragment from an apocryphal text of prophet Jeremiah (*Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew* 72.4): "And again, from the sayings of the same Jeremiah these have been cut out: 'The Lord God remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in the graves; and He descended to preach to them His own salvation'⁸.

The most extended version of Christ's descent to hell is presented in the apocryphal literature of the Old Testament. In the *Odes of Solomon* 42.11-20 the sojourn in Hades (Sheol) is glorified: "¹¹Sheol saw me and was shattered, / and Death ejected me and many with me. / ¹²I have been vinegar and bitterness to it, / and I went down with it as far as its depth. / ¹³Then the feet and the head it released, / because it was not able to endure my face. / ¹⁴And I made a congregation of living among his dead; / and I spoke with them by living lips; / in order that my word may not fail. / ¹⁵And those who had died ran toward me; / and they cried out and said, 'Son of God, have pity on us. / ¹⁶And deal with us according to your kindness, / and bring us out from the chains of darkness. / ¹⁷And open for us the door / by which we may go forth to you, / for we perceive that our death does not approach you. / ¹⁸May we also be saved with you, / because you are our Savior'. / ¹⁹Then I heard their voice, / and placed their faith in my heart. / ²⁰And I place my name upon their head, / because they are free and they are mine"⁹. The same image appears in the *Ascension of Isaiah the Prophet* 9.12-18: "¹²And he said to me, 'They do not receive the crowns and thrones of glory – nevertheless, they do see and know whose (will be) the thrones and whose the crowns – until the Beloved descends in the form in which you will see him descend. ¹³The Lord will indeed descend into the world in the last days, (he) who is to be called Christ after he has descended and become like you in form, and they will think that he is flesh and a man. ¹⁴And the god of that world will stretch out [his hand against the Son], and they will lay their hands upon him and hang him upon a tree, not knowing who he is. ¹⁵And thus his descent, as you will see, will be concealed even from the heavens so that it will not be known who he is. ¹⁶And when he has plundered the angel of death, he will rise on the third day and will remain in that world for five hundred and forty-five days. ¹⁷And then many of the righteous will ascend with him, whose spirits do not receive (their) robes until the Lord Christ ascends and they ascend with him. ¹⁸Then indeed they will receive their robes and their

⁷ J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 156-157.

⁸ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 235.

⁹ James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, in *Anchor Yale Bible* (Doubleday, New York: Reference Library, 1985), 771.

thrones and their crowns, when he has ascended into the seventh heaven"¹⁰. Finally, the *Sibylline Oracles* 8.310-314: "310He will come to Hades announcing hope for all / 311the holy ones, the end of ages and last day, / 312and he will complete the fate of death when he has slept the third day. / 313And then, returning from the dead, he will come to light, / 314first of the resurrection, showing a beginning to the elect".¹¹

The connection of Matthew 27:51-53(54) with Christ's descent into hell became later well attested, as in St Hilary of Poitiers, *On Matthew* 23.7: "Graves were opened, for the gates of death had been unlocked. And a number of the bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep arose. Dispelling the shadows of death and illuminating the darkness of hell, Christ destroyed the spoils of death itself at the resurrection of the saints, who saw him immediately"¹². This became a standard explanation for the text of Matthew 27.51-53.

Some patristic exegetes wrote that the resurrected in Matthew 27.51-53 resembled Lazarus and other resurrected persons from the Old and New Testaments because they were supposed to die in the end. Apollinaris of Laodicea explained: "The raising up of the saints' bodies was announcing that the death of Christ was actually the cause of life. They certainly were not made visible prior to the Lord's resurrection, since it was necessary that the resurrection of the Savior first be made known. Then those raised through him were seen. It is plain that they have died again, having risen from the dead in order to be a sign. For it was not possible for only some of the firstborn from the dead to be raised to the life of the age to come, but the remainder [must be raised] in the same manner (fragment 144)".¹³ St Jerome wrote: "Just as the dead Lazarus was resurrected, so also many bodies of the saints were resurrected. Thus they showed the Lord rising again" (*Commentary on Matthew* 4.27.52-53)¹⁴. Later on, St John Chrysostom seems to refer to the same thing in *Homilies on Matthew* 88.2: "For if for Lazarus to rise on the fourth day was a great thing, how much more for all those who had long ago fallen asleep, at once to appear alive, which was a sign of the future resurrection. For, 'many bodies of the saints which slept, arose', it is said, 'and went into the holy city, and appeared to many'."¹⁵ In the

¹⁰ Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 170.

¹¹ J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, in *Anchor Yale Bible* (Doubleday, New York: Reference Library, 1983), 425.

¹² M. Simonetti (ed.), *Matthew 14-28*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament 1b* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 297.

¹³ Simonetti, *Matthew*, 297.

¹⁴ Scheck, *St. Jerome: Commentary on Matthew*, p. 321.

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, trans. by G. Prevost & M. B. Riddle, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 10 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 521.

post-patristic period, St Theophylact of Ochrid (Bulgaria) interprets that those saints were resurrected to become a sign of future resurrection and afterwards died again. He noted also the opposite interpretation that they have never died but added: "I do not know if it is worth accepting this teaching".¹⁶

Regarding the persons of the resurrected saints from Matthew 27.51-53, they tend to be identified with Adam, Abel, Enoch and other righteous according to the *Ascension of Isaiah the Prophet* 9.7-9: „⁷And there I saw all the righteous from the time of Adam onwards. ⁸And there I saw the holy Abel and all the righteous. ⁹And there I saw Enoch and all who (were) with him, stripped of (their) robes of the flesh; and I saw them in their robes of above, and they were like the angels who stand there in great glory”¹⁷.

The resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27.51-53(54) was also connected by some commentators to the first resurrection of Revelation 20:4-5: “⁴And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection”. St Jerome interprets the text in relation with a “special resurrection”, distinct from the general one: “But when it is said: ‘They appeared to many’, it is shown that this was not a general resurrection that appeared to all, but a special one to many. Thus those who deserved to behold it saw it” (*Commentary on Matthew* 4.27.52-53)¹⁸.

Nevertheless more supporters found in the discussed text the teaching of the general resurrection, as Ulrich Luz who concludes: „Of course, most interpreters assume that their resurrection was final and that they will ascend to heaven with Christ. This seemed to be more in keeping with the fundamental saving significance of Jesus’ resurrection that had preceded theirs (v. 53a) and also with the fact that, according to the general view, the persons who had already been raised were Israel’s patriarchs, Adam, Abel, Enoch, etc.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Sf. Teofilact al Bulgariei, *Tâlcuirea Sfintei Evanghelii de la Matei*, in *Tâlcuiri la Sfânta Scriptură*, vol. 1 (București: Sophia, 2007), 416.

¹⁷ Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, 170. J.H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament pseudepigrapha and the New Testament*, vol. 2: *Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Legends, Wisdom, and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works. Includes indexes* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 1985), 170.

¹⁸ Scheck, *St. Jerome: Commentary on Matthew*, 321.

¹⁹ Luz, *Matthew*, 564.

Resurrection in the Old Testament and Judaism

Surprisingly, there are only a few texts, all of them late, in the Hebrew Bible about the resurrection. Besides the resurrection as a bringing to life for a while in Elijah and Elisha's narratives, general resurrection is reflected in the book of Daniel, at the very end. The text runs as following: "1Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise (Hebr. *ya'amod*, Gr. LXX *παρελύσεται* "will arrive", Theodotion *ἀναστήσεται*). And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. 2And many of those who sleep (Hebr. *rabbim miyyešene...*, Gr. LXX and Theodotion *πολλοὶ τῶν καθευδόντων*) in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life (Hebr. *leḥayye 'olam*, Gr. LXX and Theodotion *εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον*), but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt. 3And those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars (Hebr. *kakkokhabim*, Gr. LXX *ὡσεὶ τὰ ἄστρα*, Theodotion *ὡς οἱ ἀστέρες*) forever and ever".

Nickelsburg supposes that beside angel Michael there was an angelic opponent as in Zechariah 3. The expression "will arise" seems to suggest a juridic context²⁰. For some scholars, the book of Daniel refers to the general resurrection, as "many" mean here "all".²¹ Other commentators saw in the expression "many" only a special category of loyal Jews who will receive the gift of eternal life.²² Nevertheless, the Jewish expectations about the resurrection must be considered.²³

In the period contemporary with Jesus, Jewish beliefs were diverse, and John Dominic Crossan is right that "Jesus not only lived and died as a Jew, he also rose as a Jew"²⁴. Josephus Flavius, the historian who served also as a priest at the

²⁰ George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity*, expanded edition, in *Harvard Theological Studies*, vol. 56 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²¹ Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, in *New American Commentary*, vol. 18 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 318-319.

²² Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. di Lella, *The Book of Daniel: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, in *Anchor Bible*, vol. 23 (Doubleday, New York: Reference Library, 1978), 309-310. John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 30 (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1989), 306-307. John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, in *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 391-392.

²³ Outi Lehtipuu, *Debates over the Resurrection of the Dead: Constructing Early Christian Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁴ John Dominic Crossan, "The Resurrection of Jesus in Its Jewish Context," *Neotestamentica* 37.1 (2003): 29-57 (here p. 29).

temple for Jerusalem shortly before its destruction in 70 BC, testified that Judaism was divided into three main religious groups: the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes. Regarding the Pharisees, Josephus wrote that for them “souls have power to survive death (ἀθάνατόν τε ἰσχὺν ταῖς ψυχαῖς)”; they believe that “there are rewards and punishments under the earth (ὑπὸ χθονός) for those who have led lives of virtue or vice; eternal imprisonment (εἰργμὸν αἰδίου) is the lot of evil souls, while the good souls receive an easy passage to a new life (τοῦ ἀναβιοῦν)” (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.14)²⁵. In another place, he describes the doctrine of the Pharisees as following: “every soul... is imperishable (ψυχὴν τε πᾶσαν μὲν ἀφθαρτον), but the soul of the good alone passes into another body (μεταβαίνειν δὲ εἰς ἕτερον σῶμα), while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment (αἰδίῳ τιμωρίᾳ)” (*Jewish War* 2.163)²⁶. In his own speech delivered to the fellow combatants during the war with the Romans, Josephus warns against suicide, saying that the righteous “are allotted the most holy place in heaven (χῶρον οὐράνιον... τὸν ἀγιώτατον), whence, in the revolution of the ages (ἐκ περιτροπῆς αἰώνων), they return to find in chaste bodies a new habitation (ἀγνοῖς πάλιν ἀντενοικίζονται σώμασιν)” (*Jewish War* 3.374)²⁷.

Regarding the Sadducees, Josephus wrote that they affirm that “the soul perishes along with the body (τὰς ψυχὰς... συναφανίζει τοῖς σώμασι)” (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.16).²⁸ But Josephus mentioned that only a few of them adhere to this teaching, while most of the Jews are adepts of the Phariseism. The Sadducees were aristocrats, wealthy persons, who once acceded to official positions used to please the crowd promoting the doctrine of the Pharisees. The same description is repeated elsewhere: “as for the persistence of the soul after death (ψυχῆς τε τὴν διαμονήν), penalties in the underworld, and rewards, they will have none of them” (*Jewish War* 2.165)²⁹. There is a confirmation of this overview in the New Testament: Luke 20:27 (“the Sadducees... say that there is no resurrection”) and Acts 23:8 (“the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them both”). In the second text, it is strange that although there are three elements (resurrection, angel and spirit), the Pharisees are said to agree with both. Some

²⁵ Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books XVIII-XX, trans. by Louis H. Feldman, in *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press / William Heinemann, 1965), 12-13. In Romanian: Josephus Flavius, *Antichitățile iudaice*, vol. 1: Cărțile I-X, trans. by Ion Acsan (Bucharest: Hasefer, 1999); vol. 2: Cărțile XI-XX, trans. by Ion Acsan (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2001).

²⁶ Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War*, Books I-III, trans. by H.St.J. Tackeray, in *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press / William Heinemann, 1956), 384-387. In Romanian: Josephus Flavius, *Războiul iudeilor împotriva romanilor*, trans. by Gheneli Wolf, Ion Acsan (Bucharest: Hasefer, 1997).

²⁷ Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War*, Books I-III, 680-681.

²⁸ Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books XVIII-XX, 12-13.

²⁹ Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War*, Books I-III, 386-387.

scholars³⁰ commented that it cannot be a question of denying the existence of angels or spirits, present throughout the Old Testament (there are not enough arguments to postulate that the Sadducees had a narrower biblical canon than the Pharisees, i.e. only the Pentateuch³¹). Rather “angel and spirit” regard the teaching of resurrection: they do not believe in resurrection, “neither as angel nor as spirit” (a relational explanatory accusative). That is, they do not have the idea that the soul, after subsisting like angels or like spirits, could finally be resurrected. This would be the best solution for understanding the text and would also agree with other texts regarding the vision of “spirit (πνεῦμα)” (Lk 24.37) and the vision of “angel” (Acts 12.15).

Finally, the Essenes held the third conception about the afterlife: “they regard the soul as immortal (ἀθανατίζουσιν δὲ τὰς ψυχὰς)” (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.18)³²; “the body is corruptible and its constituent matter impermanent, but [...] the soul is immortal and imperishable (τὰς δὲ ψυχὰς ἀθανάτους αἰεὶ διαμένειν)”. For them, souls are kept in bodies as in prison (ὡσπερ εἰρκταῖς), but “once they are released from the bonds of the flesh, [...] they rejoice and are borne aloft” to “an abode beyond the ocean, a place which is not oppressed by rain or snow or heat, but is refreshed by the ever gentle breath of the west wind coming in from ocean”, while the wicked souls are thrown into “a murky and tempestuous dungeon (ζοφώδη καὶ χειμέριον... μυχόν), big with never-ending punishments” (*Jewish War* 2.154-155)³³.

Resurrection in the New Testament

There were two directions to understanding the resurrection. Oscar Cullmann³⁴ considers that the idea of resurrection is not compatible with the

³⁰ Floyd Parker, “The Terms «Angel» and «Spirit» in Acts 23,8,” *Biblica* 84.3 (2003): 344-365; David Daube, “On Acts 23: Sadducees and Angels,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109.3 (1990): 493-497; Benedict T. Viviano, Justin Taylor, “Sadducees, Angels, and Resurrection (Acts 23:8-9),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111.3 (1992): 496-498.

³¹ Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets*, in *Forschungen zum Alten Testament*, vol. 27 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 266-268; Timothy H. Lim, *The Formation of the Jewish Canon*, in *The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2013), 27-29. Lim criticizes the classical position of the restricted canon to the Pentateuch adopted by the Sadducees, represented for example by Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1985), 87-90.

³² Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books XVIII-XX, 14-15.

³³ Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War*, Books I-III, 380-383.

³⁴ Oscar Cullmann, “Unterblichkeit der Seele und Auferstehung der Toten. Das Zeugnis des Neuen Testaments,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 12.2 (1956). In English: *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, 1958).

idea of the immortality of the soul. That is why, on the one hand, the resurrection in the original Semitic milieu was understood as a revitalization of the body, but on the other hand, the resurrection was accommodated to the Greek mindset and consisted in assuming a pneumatic form. The gospels preserved the Semitic idea: Jesus rose with the body and went outside the tomb. Even in the Gospel according to John, the warning *μὴ μου ἅπτου* (Jn 20:17) has not to be understood as “do not touch me”, as if the body is impossible to touch, but “do not hold on to me” (NRSV), “do not cling to me” (ESV), “stop holding on to me” (NAB), “stop clinging to Me” (NASB). In Paul the tradition of the empty tomb doesn’t occur because Paul insists upon the pneumatic or celestial body which is imperishable.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul envisioned a heavenly body for the resurrected: ³⁵But someone will say, ‘How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?’ ³⁶You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; ³⁷and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. ³⁸But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own. ³⁹All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one flesh of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish. ⁴⁰There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. ⁴¹There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. ⁴²So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; ⁴³it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵So also it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul’. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. ⁴⁷The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. ⁴⁹And just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. ⁵⁰Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor 15:35-53). This idea is further articulated in 2 Corinthians 5.1-4: ¹For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ²For indeed in this house we groan,

longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; ³inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked. ⁴For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life". While in 1 Corinthians 15 the heavenly body is received at the Parousia, in 2 Corinthians 5 Paul underlines that already at the death the Christian will be clothed in the celestial form³⁵.

Towards a Proposal

Considering these observations, there is the possibility of interpreting the passage from Matthew 27.51-53 also in the sense of the initial message of the gospel. Jesus preaches the nearness of the Kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven in the Gospel according to Matthew. The kingdom will be established on earth, but by divine intervention, which meant Messiah's victory over all enemies of Israel. In the Kingdom of God, the Messiah will become the awaited king. The ascension of Messiah was to bring about national rebirth, seen as a resurrection (Ez 37) and eschatologically developed as a judgment with general resurrection.

But the Christian message must readjust this scheme to historical reality. Jesus the Messiah died on the cross, and his victory for the kingdom of God is still expected. It will come, with the Resurrection and the Parousia, but it is not yet realized. The Christian Messiah ascends therefore in two stages: first defeated on the cross, then resurrected in glory and revealed at the Parousia.

This two-stage coming also creates the adaptation of the general resurrection issue. Because the first ascension of Messiah is on the cross, the righteous from the Old Testament are resurrected at the crucifixion. But then they follow Christ in the resurrection, coming out of the graves after his resurrection. This resurrection would represent the inauguration of the general resurrection that will be at the Parousia, while for the Gospel of Matthew, as for the first Christians, the Parousia was expected in a very short time.

³⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 40 (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1986), 98. Cf. Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: Translated with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, in *Anchor Bible 32A* (Doubleday, New York: Reference Library, 1984), 265.

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