

UNIT 1: INTRODUCING THE SUBJECT

The word 'resurrection' is in fact a Latin word meaning 'rising again'. It translates the Greek *anastasis* which means 'standing up again'. It was originally used to refer to the belief that there would come a time when God would return the dead to life in a physical, bodily form. Over the course of time, this belief in a future physical resurrection of the body has prevailed, but other means of understanding the word have also emerged, including the hope for continued, personal life after death but not necessarily in terms of the raising and revivifying of dead corpses.

In much of the Hebrew Bible, there is little sense of a meaningful, post-mortem existence. Sheol – the world of the dead – is inhabited by the *rephaim* (the shades) who lack personality or strength. Initially no differentiation was made between the righteous and the unrighteous as all made their home in Sheol after death. Sheol was considered a place of darkness and stillness which was separated from life and from God. There is some evidence to suggest that the dead can be contacted, as in the case of Saul seeking the assistance of the Witch of Endor to conjure up the dead Samuel (1 Samuel 28:3-25), though consulting the dead is prohibited in the Deuteronomic code (Deuteronomy 18:10).

Belief that the dead were raised was a late development in Hebrew thinking. Two verses in particular might have significance. The first is Isaiah 26:19: 'Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy. For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead'. This appears to support the view of corporeal resuscitation. Another verse which appears to support the view is Daniel 12:2: 'Many of these who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt'. Unlike the verse in Isaiah, this verse appears to suggest that the general resuscitation of all humankind will result in a distinction being made between some who would enjoy a kind of eternal paradise and some who appear to enjoy a kind of eternal punishment. The historical context of the verses is significant. The intense persecution of faithful Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes (215BC-164BC) caused two beliefs to emerge. The first is that the untimely death of the faithful at the hands of the enemy led to the development of belief in a post-mortem existence in order to support the view of a just and righteous God who loves those

who trust in him. The second is that those who apparently do evil in this life and get away with it, will face judgement in the hereafter. Thus the belief in the resurrection became widespread in Judaism in the centuries immediately prior to the birth of Jesus, though it was not universally held. Famously, of course, the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection.

The interpretation of Jesus' resurrection, as recounted in the four Gospels, is disputed among biblical scholars (and you are asked to look closely at the accounts in Unit 2). Nevertheless, it seems to have been universally believed, by the end of the first century, that Jesus had conquered death by having been physically raised from the tomb on the first Easter Sunday. This was not interpreted solely as him overcoming his own death, but that the death of all people was somehow defeated so that his own physical resurrection became a foretaste of the resurrection of all people at the end of time. Thus, for St Paul, for example, the resurrection of Jesus mattered because it was the key to the hope that we might all be raised. This belief in bodily resurrection was declared *de fide* for Roman Catholics by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215, though widely believed before that time); by John of Damascus (676-749) for the Eastern Orthodox churches, as well as by Luther and Calvin within Protestantism.

In modern times, changed cosmology has impacted on the belief in the resurrection of the flesh (in the sense of the resuscitation of the corpse). It was considered that the threefold image of creation, with the heavens above, the earth in the middle and the world of the dead (or even hell) below had given rise to the belief that the body would be raised either to spend eternity in the heavens above or to be eternally punished in hell below. While from earliest times, the 'resurrection of the body' was part of the Christian creed, with the Latin text of the Apostles' Creed using the word 'flesh' which seems to favour the idea that the dead corpse somehow is raised to new life. From the sixteenth century, English versions of the Creed use the word 'body', and this has been increasingly interpreted as meaning the inheritance of a renewed, spiritual body at the resurrection, somehow personal and in continuity with the life lived on earth, but not necessarily the physical reconstitution and revivifying of the particles composing each person's flesh. The Archbishop of Canterbury's commission on Doctrine in the Church of England (1938) expressed this view:

We ought to reject quite frankly the literalistic belief in a future resuscitation of the actual physical frame which is laid in the tomb ... none the less in the life of the world to come the soul or spirit will have its appropriate organ of expression and activity ... what is important when we are speaking of the identity of any person's 'body', is not its physic-chemical constitution, but its relation to that person.

Some (such as Paul Badham and John Hick) have suggested that this reinterpretation of resurrection in terms of a spiritual body implies a dualism between the body and mind (or soul), seeing the continuity between earthly life and the resurrected life in terms of continuity of mind (or soul) rather than a person's physical constituency. Hick argues for 'an exact psycho-physical replica' created of the earthly life 'in another space'.¹ Yet it does seem to be the case that Hick's idea requires a continuity of mind (or soul). Badham concludes: 'the overall consensus seems to be that, for this psycho-physical replica to be truly "me", some continuity of mental life between the present and the future bodies remains necessary, and hence a dualism of mind and body continues to be inescapable in any understanding of resurrection other than belief in the literal reconstitution of the corpse'.²

However, belief in the 'immortality of the soul' has become unpopular among Christian theologians. One reason for this is that modern knowledge seems to suggest a close relationship between physical state and mental life. It becomes more difficult, then, to imagine a state in which the disembodied soul could exist. It might well be that the constant interaction between the mind and the body in itself is sufficient to argue against the existence of a disembodied soul. It could also be that the soul is never totally disembodied. Instead, as Paul tells the Corinthians, the 'inner nature' will be 'clothed' by a 'spiritual body' (see 2 Cor. 6:16-5:9). Nevertheless, this remains a disputed point (and, if you are able, you should look up a commentary on 2 Corinthians to see what scholars have said about the meaning of this passage).

¹ John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976), chapter 15.

² Paul Badham, 'Resurrection', in Paul A. B. Clarke and Andrew Linzey (eds), *The Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 724.

This is not unproblematic, and Paul Badham points to what he considers a 'profound inconsistency' in the thought of those who believe in an 'objective' resurrection:

For themselves, almost all contemporary Christians understand resurrection as a way of expressing their hope for some kind of continuance after the total extinction of their present bodies, which they do not expect to get back. However, they ground this hope on belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ which they continue to understand as entailing the literal uprising of Jesus' corpse and the emptiness of his tomb.³

A couple of other alternative interpretations of the resurrection have emerged, but they remain problematic. The first is to consider that people 'live on' in the eternal mind of God. This is far removed from a belief in physical resurrection, and is difficult to justify from the New Testament's accounts of Jesus' resurrection and its significance. Others, following Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) and others interpret 'resurrection' in existential terms. Thus faith in the resurrection has consequences for the living of a 'new' earthly life. It is, however, difficult to know what characterizes this 'new life', while there is no clear association of this existential view with the historical belief in the physical resurrection.

From this brief discussion, the primary question which should occupy us is how do these different views inform and affect our grasp of the Christian 'hope'? For some, the Christian hope concerns the continued existence – whether through the continuance of an immortal essence or through subsequent resurrection either of the dead body or to a new body – of the individual in a personal and recognizable way. This is clearly one aspect of belief in the resurrection, but is it enough to see Christian hope in this way? Does it only reflect the concern for continued, individual existence?

In future units, we will return to this question. For the moment, consider the question: if the Christian hope is constituted by belief in continued personal existence, how, if at all, do the interpretations listed above inform that hope? Which one sounds most hopeful?

³ Badham, 'Resurrection', p. 724.