

Luke 20:28-40

²⁷ Some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, came forward and put this question to him, ²⁸ saying, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us, ‘If someone’s brother dies leaving a wife but no child, his brother must take the wife and raise up descendants for his brother.’ ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman but died childless. ³⁰ Then the second ³¹ and the third married her, and likewise all the seven died childless. ³² Finally the woman also died. ³³ Now at the resurrection whose wife will that woman be? For all seven had been married to her.” ³⁴ Jesus said to them, “The children of this age marry and remarry; ³⁵ but those who are deemed worthy to attain to the coming age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶ They can no longer die, for they are like angels; and they are the children of God because they are the ones who will rise. ³⁷ That the dead will rise even Moses made known in the passage about the bush, when he called ‘Lord’ the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; ³⁸ and he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” ³⁹ Some of the scribes said in reply, “Teacher, you have answered well.” ⁴⁰ And they no longer dared to ask him anything.

Context

Last week’s gospel, the encounter with Zacchaeus, was the last personal encounter prior to Jesus’ arrival at Jerusalem. Since early in the summer Jesus has been traveling to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51) and now has finally arrived. Yet there is much that the Ordinary Time sequence passes over between the Sunday gospels

Luke 19:11-27 *The Parable of the Talents?*

At first blush upon reading one is tempted to conclude this is the “Parable of the Talents” paralleled in Matthew 25:14-30. Yet there are distinctive features which make the Lucan telling a different story. Where the Matthean version is about stewardship of what is entrusted to a disciple, the Lucan version contrasts the coming of the kingdom of God with the typical pattern of the establishment of a political kingdom. Alan Culpepper titles this parable as “The Greedy and Vengeful King.”

Luke’s parable follows upon Jesus’ declaration to Zacchaeus, “*Today salvation has come...*” (19:9). Yet this parable begins with (lit.) “a certain well-born man” went off to a “distant country.” In Luke a “certain man” and a “distant country” never amount to anything good. In the end those who disappoint this king are slain (19:27). Luke’s parable features, not a lesson on responsibility and stewardship, but one on greed and vengeance (Culpepper, *Luke*, 362). The noble born man seeks power and wealth. In our modern society we deal with an economic mindset of unlimited goods, but the 1st century economic mindset was one of limited goods. When one person is sufficiently ambitious, clever, fortunate, or driven, their acquisition is another’s loss. While the modern mind is quick to place Jesus in the scene, Herod (the Great or any one of his sons) is the better choice for the first century hearer: noble born and one who traveled abroad to have the title of king bestowed upon him by foreign rulers (cf. Josephus, *The Jewish War*). Jesus, hardly noble born, seeks no kingdom of this earth but rather the Reign of God upon earth. This parable reminds people that the Kingdom of God has not yet come – and invites our consideration of what kind of king Jesus is and what kind of kingdom it is that we seek.

Luke 19:28 – 21:38 *Jesus and Jerusalem*

At the completion of the parable, Jesus reaches Jerusalem. Our gospel reading is after the Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem and before the events of the Passion and Death. An outline of the events of this week (referred to in the tradition as Holy Week) is below. It is adapted from Culpepper’s outline.

- The "Palm" Sunday events (19:28-40)

- Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (19:41-44)
- Jesus cleansing the temple (19:45-46)
- The beginning of Jesus' teaching in the Temple (19:47-48)
 - The question of Jesus' authority (20:1-8)
 - The parable of the wicked tenants (20:9-19)
 - The question about paying taxes (20:20-26)
 - **The question about the resurrection (20:27-40) – our reading**
 - The question about David's son (20:41-44)
 - The denunciation of the scribes (20:45-47)
 - The widow's offering (21:1-4)
 - The Apocalyptic Discourse (21:5-36)
 - The coming wars and persecutions (21:5-19)
 - The destruction of Jerusalem foretold (21:20-24)
 - The coming of the Son of Man foretold (21:25-36)
- The Conclusion of Jesus' Teaching in the Temple (21:37-38)

As this outline indicates, summary statements about Jesus teaching in the temple form "bookends" (19:47-48; 21:37-38) to the major section of this outline. These "summaries" indicates:

1. Jesus taught in the temple
2. He taught every day.
3. There were two responses to Jesus' teachings:
 - a. “*The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people, meanwhile, were seeking to put him to death*” (19:47)
 - b. “*all the people were hanging on his words*” (19:48) and they got up early in the morning to listen to Jesus

In the narrow context, our text is part of a conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities. This conflict is partly indicated by four questionings as indicated in the outline above:

1. the chief priests, scribes, and elders question Jesus about his authority
2. they [scribes and chief priests from v. 19] question Jesus about paying taxes
3. Sadducees (v. 27) and scribes (v. 39) question Jesus about the resurrection
4. Jesus questions them about the Messiah being David's Lord

Commentary

In the opening verse Luke introduced the Sadducees and that they did not believe in the resurrection. Both of these ideas need some background

Sadducees and Resurrection

The *Sadducees* are mentioned here only in this Gospel. None of the Sadducee writings has survived so our information about them is fragmentary and we see the sect only through the eyes of its opponents. The name appears to be derived from Zadok (cf. 1 Kgs 1:8; 2:35), so that they were ‘Zadokites’. They were the conservative, aristocratic, high-priestly party, worldly-minded and very ready to cooperate with the Romans, which, of course, enabled them to maintain their privileged position. Patriotic nationalists and pious people alike opposed them. They are often said to have acknowledged as sacred Scripture only the Pentateuch, but no evidence is cited for this. The Septuagint (LXX) is evidence that

before New Testament times the canon of the Old Testament was practically fixed and there seems no reason why any major Jewish party should have rejected most of it. What is attested is that the Sadducees rejected the oral tradition that meant so much to the Pharisees; they accepted only written Scripture (Josephus, *Antiquities* xiii.297). They denied the whole doctrine of the afterlife and of rewards and punishments beyond the grave (Josephus, *Antiquities* xviii.16; *Jewish War*, ii.165; cf. Acts 23:8). Scholars have speculated that the Sadducees must have thought of the resurrection as a new idea brought in from Persia after the Old Testament period.

Indeed, there is little explicit mention of “resurrection” in the OT; this notion does not appear except in texts that are rare, obscure with regard to their precise meaning, and late. On the whole, resurrection—which could simply express Israel’s restoration—concerns the dead in only one or two passages, and only Dan 12:2–3, within the apocalyptic context of the 2d century B.C., clearly proclaims that the dead will be snatched from death to experience either “eternal life” or “eternal damnation.”

It is in this vacuum that some scholars declare that the notion of resurrection is a foreign body within the OT; it was the result of external influences that came into play in various ways over the course of the history of Israel. Robert Martin-Achard (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*) shows that upon examination, the extent of the contribution from outside Israel, without being denied, needs to be qualified, and one could say that, when some Jews declared that the dead (of their God) would revive, they did so by basing their arguments on biblical principles. It is in the tradition itself that are to be found the roots of faith in the resurrection: the OT proclaimed YHWH’s power, one which no force could hold in check; God masters death as God masters life (1 Sam 2:6; Deut 32:39; cf. Isa 25:8a). God has created and thus can re-create (2 Maccabees 7). God’s justice, affirmed everywhere in the OT, sooner or later had to become manifest, and the resurrection allowed this very thing to happen, as we have seen. Finally, the victory over death, that in the first instance concerned the faithful Israelites, gave Israel’s God an occasion to demonstrate his *hesed*, “faithfulness, loyalty, solidarity,” toward his own and, in this way, to answer the question already raised by the psalmists about the definitive future of those bonds which actually united God to his *ḥāsîd* (Psalms 6; 16; 22; etc.). Thus, belief in the resurrection of the dead is based on God’s power, on his justice, and on his love, as these have been revealed in the course of the history of Israel; in the 2d century B.C.E., at the high point of the Maccabean crisis, the *ḥāsîdîm* drew out the ultimate consequences from the experiences that Israel had lived through over centuries.

The Canaanite or Near Eastern world could have furnished themes and a language. Much later on, Persian teachings may have served as stimulants to the Jewish visions of the afterlife, but in the end, resurrection is seen as always been indicated in the OT Scripture, but only fully understood later in Israel’s history.

What is clear is that first century Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead, while the Sadducees were the exception to that belief.

The Question

“Teacher, Moses wrote for us, ‘If someone’s brother dies leaving a wife but no child, his brother must take the wife and raise up descendants for his brother.’²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman but died childless.³⁰ Then the second³¹ and the third married her, and likewise all the seven died childless.³² Finally the woman also died.³³ Now at the resurrection whose wife will that woman be? For all seven had been married to her.”

The Sadducees are attempting to destroy Jesus’ credibility by raising the question of who interprets Moses faithfully, as they seek to demonstrate the alleged unreasonableness of faith in the resurrection of the dead, which Jesus shares. The starting point of the question concerns levirate marriage.

Levirate Marriage

The word "levirite" comes from the Latin, *levir* = "brother-in-law." According to Culpepper (*Luke*, 388), such laws are found in Ugarit, Middle Assyrian, and Hittite codes as well as in Deut 25:5-10 (cf. Gen 38:8; Lv 18:16; Ruth 3:9, 12-13). Levirate marriage was a device to prevent a man's name and family dying out. "Eternal life" was seen, not in terms of an afterlife, but in the continuity of the family and lineage after the man dies. When a man died childless, his brother was to take the widow and raise up children to the deceased (Deut. 25:5 *ff.*). Not many examples of the practice are recorded and interestingly those few always seem to regard the child as the child of its natural father and not of the deceased (cf. Ruth 4:5, 21). By New Testament times this custom seems to have fallen into disuse, so that the question was an academic one. But the Sadducees could argue that provision was made for it in the Law and thus came from Moses and that the Law accordingly, at least by implication, rejects the doctrine of resurrection. It really isn't the law that is under question, but the reason for the law. Hence, they try to ridicule the idea of resurrection by referring to levirate marriage.

The Real Question

Joel Green (*Luke*, 718) writes that the focus on the resurrection from the dead in Jesus' controversy dialogue with the Sadducees raises the more basic question of the nature of Jesus' authority and the relationship of his authority with the authority of Scripture and its faithful interpretation. The Sadducees argue that if one takes the levirate marriage legislation seriously, it is obvious that the belief in a future resurrection of the dead is ridiculous because the reality of levirate marriage potentially leads to a complex web of familial relationships that would be impossible to sustain in the life to come. In other words, since rules such as levirate marriage exist for the present life, it is logically impossible that life goes on after death through resurrection.

Jesus' questioners had failed to realize that the life to come will be essentially different from this life. Where the doctrine of resurrection was held among the Jews it was usually envisaged as an indefinite prolongation of this life, though no doubt with modifications and improvements. All enemies would be overthrown and delights would be multiplied. But essentially it would be the same kind of life as the present one. Some were so sure of the continuation of earthly conditions that they seriously discussed whether the resurrected would need ceremonial purification on the grounds that they had been in contact with a corpse (*Niddah* 70b). Jesus rejects all this. Life in heaven will be significantly different from anything on earth. Human relationships are largely a matter of place and time: they are bound to be different when neither of these applies. Jewish thought at its best realized something of this and on occasion rejected the concept of heaven as a place of material delights in favor of the view that it is basically a 'feasting on the brightness of the divine presence' (*Berakhoth* 17a).

Jesus argues that the Sadducees' focus on (levirate) marriage was bound up with a focus on the social conditions of the present world (20:34), whereas entirely different conditions govern the life of those who are deemed worthy of the resurrection (20:35a), conditions that are no longer dependent upon marriage (20:35b) because the new mode of existence of the "children of God" no longer depends upon procreation, but rather corresponds to that of the angels (20:36). This argument does not mean that Jesus holds the view that the meaning of Scripture is not self-evident, but rather that it must be grasped in the context of an eschatological perspective. Jesus tells the Sadducees that people who quote Moses—in this case, the legislation concerning levirate marriage in Deut. 25—should also listen to Moses, about, for example, resurrection. Jesus' assertion in 20:37 demonstrates that this interpretation misses the point of Jesus' scriptural argument, which implies that the truth of belief in the resurrection of the dead can be ascertained in the plain meaning of the text of Moses' encounter with God at the "burning bush."

“That the dead will rise even Moses made known in the passage about the bush, when he called ‘Lord’ the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive” (Luke 20:37-38).

In this way Jesus has asserted his authority to interpret Scripture. Where the Sadducees have posed a case that they think will force Jesus either to renounce the resurrection or to allow polygamy, Jesus replies that the succession of husbands is a problem for the Sadducees only because they have not thoroughly comprehended the meaning of the resurrection: resurrection life and current existence are two completely different things. In heaven the marriage relationship will be transcended by a new kind of relationship that focuses on God

But along the way....

Jesus makes a statement that perhaps needs a second look:

“The children of this age marry and remarry; but those who are deemed worthy to attain to the coming age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.”

Does this mean that Christians shouldn't get married and have children? First of all, Jesus makes a contrast between "this age" and "that age". He has made similar distinctions earlier:

And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently. “For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” (16:8).

He said to them, “Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive (back) an overabundant return in this present age and eternal life in the age to come.” (18:29-30)

The contrasts of the ages that Luke presents are

- children of this age versus children of light
- possessions and relationships of this age versus eternal life in the age to come
- children of this age versus (children of) that age = resurrection from the dead

It appears that the question of marriage and procreation was raised in the early church (see 1 Cor 7:1-16). The belief that one lives forever through the resurrection negates the need for children (more properly, sons,) to have "eternal life". In an ironic way, this is almost the opposite of levirate marriage – i.e., since we will inherit eternal life, there is no need to have the “eternal life” of children and generations. That is not where their "eternal life" is to be found.So? Should Christians get married or not?

Green (*The Gospel of Luke*, 721) has a lengthy comment on marriage:

Although typically represented as passive verbs, the instances of the two verbs translated "are given in marriage" (NRSV) actually appear in the middle voice: "to allow oneself to be married." the focus shifts from a man "taking a wife" (vv 28, 29, 31) to include the woman's participation in the decision to marry. This is important because the basic concern here is with a reorientation of human relations through a reorientation of eschatological vision. One sort of person is aligned with the needs of the present age; such persons participate in the system envisioned and advocated by the Sadducees, itself rooted in the legislation governing levirate marriage, with women given and taken, even participating in their own objectification as necessary vehicles for the continuation of the

family name and heritage. The other draws its ethos from the age to come, where people will resemble angels insofar as they no longer face death. Absent the threat of death, the need for levirate marriage is erased. The undermining of the levirate marriage ordinance is itself a radical critique of marriage as this has been defined around the necessity of procreation. No longer must women find their value in producing children for patrimony. Jesus' message thus finds its interpretive antecedent in his instruction about family relations of all kinds: Hearing faithfully the good news relativizes all family relationships (cf., e.g., 8:1-3, 19-20).

Culpepper (*Luke*, 389-90) raises two concerns about the issue of marriage and resurrection:

For those who have lived through violent, abusive marriages, the pronouncement that in the resurrection we will neither marry nor be given in marriage may come as liberating good news. On the other hand, those who have enjoyed lifelong intimacy and companionship in marriage may well object that God has invested so much in establishing faithful, loving, and fulfilling relationships in this life that it is unthinkable that such relationships would be terminated in the resurrection. One approach to interpreting this saying is to recognize that it is set in a time when marriage was viewed primarily as an arrangement of a man's rights to a woman and a woman's right to male support. In heaven there will be no need for such arrangements. Leaving aside the physical side of love and marriage (which belong to the flesh), there will be no need to restrict love, intimacy, or companionship to a monogamous relationship.

It may be best as Culpepper (390) later suggests, to keep our life on the other side of the resurrection a mystery. It is unknown to us. Yet, he also offers this counsel:

Jesus' words can thus be approached from a positive side. The God who created human life, including the institution of marriage, has also provided for life after death for those who have cultivated the capacity to respond to God's love. The biblical teaching is that life comes from God. There is nothing in or of the human being that is naturally or inherently immortal. If there is life beyond death, it is God's gift to those who have accepted God's love and entered into relationship with God in this life.

And at that....

Some of the scribes said in reply, "Teacher, you have answered well." And they no longer dared to ask him anything. (20:39-40)

Notes

Luke 20:37 *the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*: The reference to Exod. 3:6, 15 makes at least the following points in the discussion about the resurrection of the dead. First, Jesus argues that when Yahweh was speaking to Moses at the burning bush, he was still the God of the patriarchs who had long been dead. Second, Jesus infers that the suggestion that God would assert a covenant relationship with people who had died long ago is absurd. Third, Jesus concludes that the patriarchs must therefore still be alive in some sense, and/or can be expected to be raised from the dead. Fourth, Jesus deduces that Moses, in relating the passage of the burning bush, attests to the belief in the resurrection of the dead.

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