

CHAPTER THREE

Christ Appeals to the Resurrection



1. The Resurrection of the Body as a Reality of the “Future World”

A. THE SYNOPTICS: “HE IS NOT GOD OF THE DEAD BUT OF THE LIVING”

The Third Part of the Triptych

64 *General Audience of November 11, 1981*
(*Insegnamenti*, 4, no. 2 [1981]: 600–603)

1. TODAY WE TAKE UP AGAIN, after a rather long pause, the meditations we have been presenting for quite a while, which we have defined as reflections on the theology of the body.

As we continue, we should go back to the words of the Gospel in which Christ appeals to the resurrection, words that have a fundamental importance for understanding marriage in the Christian sense and also “the renunciation” of conjugal life “for the kingdom of heaven.”

The complex casuistry of the Old Testament in the field of marriage moved not only the Pharisees to go to Jesus, to set before him the problem of the indissolubility of marriage (see Mt 19:3–9; Mk 10:2–12), but on another occasion the Sadducees, to ask him about

the law of so-called levirate marriage.⁶⁶ This dialogue is reported in similar ways by the Synoptics (see Mt 22:24–30; Mk 12:18–27; Lk 20:27–40). Although the three redactions are nearly identical, one nevertheless notices some differences between them that are slight but at the same time significant. A deeper analysis is required since the dialogue is reported in three versions, those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and inasmuch as its contents have an essential meaning for the theology of the body.

Next to the two other important dialogues, namely, the one in which Christ appeals to the “beginning” (see Mt 19:3–9; Mk 10:2–12) and the other in which he appeals to man’s innermost [being] (to the “heart”) while indicating the [reductive] desire and concupiscence of the flesh as a source of sin (see Mt 5:27–32), the dialogue that we propose to analyze now is, I would say, *the third component of the triptych* of Christ’s own statements, the triptych of words that are essential and constitutive for the theology of the body. In this dialogue, Jesus appeals to the resurrection, thereby revealing a completely new dimension of the mystery of man.

2. The revelation of this dimension of the body, stupendous in its content—and yet connected with the Gospel reread as a whole and in depth—emerges in the dialogue with the Sadducees, “who say there is no resurrection” (Mt 22:23);⁶⁷ they came to Jesus to present to him an argument that—in their judgment—showed the reasonableness of

66. This law, contained in Deuteronomy 25:7–10, concerned brothers who lived under the same roof. If one of them died without leaving children, the brother of the deceased had to take the widow of his dead brother as his wife. The child born from this marriage was recognized as the son of the deceased, so that his bloodline would not become extinct and that his heredity would be preserved in the family (see Gen 38:8).

67. In the time of Christ, the Sadducees formed a distinct group within Judaism tied to the circle of the priestly aristocracy. In opposition to the oral tradition and the theology elaborated by the Pharisees, they held to the literal interpretation of the Pentateuch, which they considered the main source of Yahwist religion. Since there is no mention of life after death in the oldest biblical books, the Sadducees rejected the eschatology proclaimed by the Pharisees and affirmed that “souls die together with the body” (see Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates Iudaicae*, 17.4.16).

The views of the Sadducees, however, are not directly known to us since all of their writings were lost after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, when the group disappeared. The information about the Sadducees is meager: we gather it from the writings of their ideological adversaries.

their position. This argument was supposed to contradict “the hypothesis of the resurrection.” The reasoning of the Sadducees is the following: “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother” (Mk 12:19). Here the Sadducees appeal to the so-called levirate law (see Deut 25:5–10), and by attaching themselves to the prescription of this ancient law *they present the following case*: “There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. In the resurrection, when they will rise, whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her” (Mk 12:20–23).⁶⁸

3. Christ’s answer is one of the key answers of the Gospel, in which—taking purely human arguments as a point of departure and in contrast to them—he reveals another dimension of the question, one that corresponds to the wisdom and power of God himself. In a similar way, the Gospel presents the case of the tax coin with Caesar’s image and the correct relation between what is divine and what is human in the realm of power (“belonging to Caesar”) (see Mt 22:15–22). This time *Jesus answers as follows*: “Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they take neither wife nor husband, but are like angels in heaven” (Mk 12:24–25). This is the fundamental reply to the “case,” that is, to the problem contained in it. Since he knew the ideas of the Sadducees and saw their real intentions, Christ immediately afterward takes up again *the problem of the possibility of the resurrection* denied by the Sadducees. “And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’ He is not God of the dead, but of the living” (Mk 12:26–27). As one can see, Christ quotes the same Moses to whom the Sadducees appealed, and he ends by saying, “You are quite wrong” (Mk 12:27).

68. By turning to Jesus with a purely theoretical “case,” the Sadducees simultaneously attack the primitive view of the Pharisees about life after the resurrection of the body; they insinuate, indeed, that faith in the resurrection of the body leads to allowing polyandry, contrary to the law of God.

4. Christ makes this concluding statement a second time. In fact, the first time he makes it at the beginning of his explanation. He says at that point, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." This is the version in Matthew (22:29). In Mark we read, "Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?" (Mk 12:24). In Luke 20:27, 36, by contrast, Christ's corresponding answer lacks the polemical tone of "You are quite wrong." On the other hand, he proclaims the same thing inasmuch as he introduces into the answer some elements found neither in Matthew nor in Mark: "Jesus said to them, 'The sons of this age take wife and take husband; but those who are considered worthy of the other world and the resurrection from the dead take neither wife nor husband. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to the angels and, being sons of the resurrection, they are sons of God'" (Lk 20:34–36). With respect to the very possibility of the resurrection, Luke—like the other two Synoptics—*appeals to Moses, that is, to the passage in Exodus 3:2–6*, which tells the story that the great legislator of the Old Covenant had heard the following words from the bush that "burned with fire, but was not consumed": "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob" (Ex 3:6). In the same place, when Moses asked the name of God, he heard the reply, "I am who am" (Ex 3:14).

In this way, when he speaks about the future resurrection of the body, Christ appeals to the very power of the living God. In our next meetings we will have to consider this point in more detail.

65 *General Audience of November 18, 1981* (*Insegnamenti*, 4, no. 2 [1981]: 656–61)

1. "YOU ARE WRONG, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Mt 22:9), Christ said to the Sadducees, who—rejecting faith in the future resurrection of the body—had presented the following case to him: "There were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother" (according to the Mosaic Law of the "levirate"). "The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, of the seven whose wife will she be?" (Mt 22:25–28).

Christ answers the Sadducees by stating at the beginning and at the end of his answer that they are quite wrong, because they know

neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (see Mk 12:24; Mt 22:29). Since the dialogue with the Sadducees is reported in all three Synoptic Gospels, we should briefly compare the parallel texts.

Witness to the Power of the Living God

2. Although it does not refer to the bush, Matthew's version (Mt 22:24–30) agrees almost entirely with Mark's (Mk 12:18–25). Both versions contain two essential elements: (1) the statement about the future resurrection of the body; (2) the statement about the state of the bodies of risen human beings.⁶⁹ These two elements are also found in Luke 20:27–36.⁷⁰ The first element, concerning the future resurrection of the body, is joined, especially in Matthew and Mark, with the words addressed to the Sadducees that they “know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.” This statement deserves special attention, because in it Christ points to the very basis of faith in the resurrection, to which he had appealed in answering the question posed by the Sadducees with the concrete example of the Mosaic Law of the levirate.

3. Without any doubt, the Sadducees treat the question of the resurrection as a type of theory or hypothesis that can be refuted.⁷¹

69. Although the New Testament does not know the expression “resurrection of the body” (which appears for the first time in St. Clement, 2 Clem 9:1, and in Justin, *Dial.* 80:5), but uses the expression “resurrection of the dead,” intending by it man in his integrity, it is nevertheless possible to find in many texts of the New Testament faith in the immortality of the soul and its existence also apart from the body (see, e.g., Lk 23:43; Phil 1:23–24; 2 Cor 5:6–8).

70. The text of Luke contains some new elements around which a discussion among exegetes is taking place.

71. We know that in the Judaism of that period there was no clearly formulated doctrine about the resurrection; there were only the different theories launched by the individual schools.

The Pharisees, who cultivated theological speculation, strongly developed the doctrine of the resurrection, seeing allusions to it in all the books of the Old Testament. Yet, they understood the future resurrection in an earthly and primitive way, predicting, for example, an enormous increase of crops and of fertility after the resurrection.

The Sadducees, by contrast, polemicized against this view, starting with the premise that the Pentateuch does not speak about eschatology. One must also keep in mind that in the first century, the canon of the books of the Old Testament had not yet been determined.

The case presented by the Sadducees directly attacks the Pharisaic view of the resurrection. In fact, the Sadducees held that Christ was a follower of the Pharisaic view.

Christ's answer equally corrects the views of the Pharisees and those of the Sadducees.

Jesus first shows them a mistake in their method: *they do not know the Scriptures*; and then an error of substance: they do not accept what is revealed by the Scriptures—*since they do not know the power of God*—they do not believe in the one who revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush.

It is a very significant and very precise answer. Here Christ meets men who consider themselves experts and competent interpreters of the Scriptures. Jesus responds to these men—the Sadducees—that mere literal knowledge of Scripture is not enough. Scripture is in fact and above all a means for knowing the power of the living God, who reveals himself in it, just as he revealed himself to Moses in the bush. In this revelation, he called himself “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and of Jacob”⁷²—of those, therefore, who were the ancestors of Moses in the faith that springs from the revelation of the living God. All of them have been dead for a long time; nevertheless, Christ completes the reference to them with the statement that God “is not God of the dead, but of the living.” One can only understand this key statement, in which Christ interprets the words addressed to Moses from the burning bush, if *one admits the reality of a life that does not end with death*. Moses’ fathers in the faith, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are living persons for God (“for all live for him,” Lk 20:38) although according to human criteria they should be numbered among the dead. Correctly rereading Scripture, and particularly God’s words just quoted, means knowing and welcoming with faith the power of the Giver of life, who is not bound by the law of death, which rules over man’s earthly history.

72. This expression does *not* mean, “God *who was honored* by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” but, “God who *took care* of the patriarchs and freed them.”

This formula returns in Exodus 3:6, 15–16, and 4:5, always in the context of the promise of the liberation of Israel: the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a pledge and guarantee of this liberation.

“God of X is synonymous with help, support, and shelter for Israel.” A similar sense is found in Genesis 49:24: “God of Jacob—Shepherd and Rock of Israel, the God of your father, who will help you” (see Gen 49:24–25; see also Gen 24:27; 26:24; 28:13; 32:10; 46:3). F. Dreyfus, O.P., “L’argument scripturaire de Jésus en faveur de la résurrection des morts (Mc 12:26–27),” *Revue Biblique* 66 (1959): 218.

In Jewish exegesis at the time of Jesus, the formula, “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” in which all three of the names of the patriarchs are quoted, indicated *God’s relationship with the people of the covenant as a community*. See E. Ellis, “Jesus, the Sadducees and Qumran,” *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963–1964): 275.

4. It seems to be in this way that one must interpret Christ's answer given to the Sadducees about the possibility of the resurrection,⁷³ according to the version of all three Synoptics. The moment was to come when Christ would give an answer to this question by his own resurrection; meanwhile, however, he appeals to the testimony of the Old Testament by showing how to find in it the truth about immortality and resurrection. In order to find it, one must not stop at the mere sound of the words, but go up also to the power of God revealed by these words. The reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in that theophany granted to Moses, about which we read in Exodus 3:2–6, constitutes a testimony that the living God gives to those who live “for him,” to those who, thanks to his power, have life, even if according to the dimensions of history one would have to number them among those long dead.

5. The full meaning of this testimony, to which Jesus appeals in his dialogue with the Sadducees, could be gathered (still in the light of the Old Testament alone) in the following way. He who is—he who lives and is Life—constitutes the inexhaustible fountain of existence and of life, just as he revealed himself at the “beginning” in Genesis (see Gen 1–3). Although, due to sin, bodily death has become man's lot⁷⁴ and access to the tree of Life (this great symbol of Genesis) was denied to him (see Gen 3:22), nevertheless, *when the living God enters his covenant with man* (Abraham, the patriarchs, Moses, Israel), *he continually renews in this covenant the very reality of Life*, reveals again its prospects, and in some way opens up again the access to the tree of Life. Together with the covenant, a share in this life, whose fountain is God himself, is given to the same human beings who, as a consequence of breaking the first covenant, had lost

73. In our contemporary way of understanding this Gospel text, Jesus' reasoning concerns only immortality; if, in fact, the patriarchs are alive after their death already now, before the eschatological resurrection of the body, then Jesus' statement regards the immortality of the soul and does not speak about the resurrection of the body.

Jesus' reasoning, however, was directed toward the Sadducees who did not know the dualism of body and soul and accepted only the biblical psycho-physical unity of man, who is “body and breath of life.” And so, according to them, the soul dies together with the body. To the Sadducees, Jesus' statement that the patriarchs are alive could only signify the resurrection with the body.

74. We are not pausing here to examine the purely Old Testament understanding of death, but take into account theological anthropology as a whole.

access to the tree of Life and, in the dimensions of their earthly history, were subjected to death.

6. Christ is God's final word on this subject; in fact, the covenant established with him and through him between God and humanity opens an infinite prospect of Life: and access to the tree of Life—according to the original plan of the God of the covenant—is revealed to every man in its definitive fullness. This will be the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection; this will be the testimony of the paschal mystery. The dialogue with the Sadducees, however, takes place *in the pre-paschal phase of Christ's messianic mission*. The course of the conversation according to Matthew 22:24–30, Mark 12:19–25, and Luke 20:28–36 shows that Christ—who, particularly in the dialogues with his disciples, had spoken a number of times about the future resurrection of the Son of Man (see Mt 17:9, 23; 20:19)—does not refer to this topic in the dialogue with the Sadducees. The reasons are obvious and clear. The discussion takes place with the Sadducees, “who say there is no resurrection” (as the evangelist stresses), that is, who cast doubt on its very possibility, and at the same time consider themselves experts on the Scripture of the Old Testament and its qualified interpreters. For this reason Jesus appeals to the Old Testament and shows on its basis that “they do not know the power of God.”⁷⁵

75. This is the decisive argument, which confirms the authenticity of the discussion with the Sadducees.

If the pericope were “a *post-paschal addition by the Christian community*” (as Bultmann, for example, held), faith in the resurrection would be supported by the resurrection of Christ, which imposed itself as an irresistible force, as St. Paul, for example, makes us understand (see 1 Cor 15:12).

See J. Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie*, pt. 1 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1971); see also I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), 738.

The reference to the Pentateuch—while in the Old Testament there were texts that dealt directly with the resurrection (e.g., Isa 26:19 or Dan 12:2)—attests that the dialogue was truly with the Sadducees, who considered the Pentateuch the only decisive authority.

The structure of the controversy shows that this was a rabbinic discussion according to the classical models in use in the academies at that time.

Cf. J. Le Moyne, O.S.B., *Les Sadducéens* (Paris: Gabalda, 1972), 124f.; E. Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), 257; D. Daube, *New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone Press, 1956), 158–63; J. Rademakers, S.J., *La bonne nouvelle de Jésus selon St Marc* (Brussels: Institut d'Etudes Théologiques, 1974), 313.