

# **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

## **THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY**

**(Catechism nn. 988-1019)**

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Traditionally, the Jews, like their Semitic neighbours, assumed that human life, which depended on the life-breath given by God, ended with death when, as Qohelet, the author of Ecclesiastes, writes in his conclusion: ‘the life-breath returns to God who gave it’ (12:7). The dead go down into the shadowy and lifeless existence of She’ol (Greek: Hades).

‘My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.  
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;  
I am like those who have no help,  
like those forsaken among the dead,  
like the slain that lie in the grave,  
like those whom you remember no more,  
for they are cut off from your hand’ (Psalm 88:3-5).

‘The dead do not praise the Lord,  
nor do any that go down into silence’ (Psalm 115:17).

‘Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you;  
those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.  
The living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day;  
fathers make known to children your faithfulness’ (Isaiah 38:18-19).

‘Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades in place of the living who give thanks? From the dead, as from one who does not exist, thanksgiving has ceased; those who are alive and well sing the Lord’s praises’ (Sirach 17:27-28).

At the same time, they longed for an enduring relationship with God, who would somehow, and against all the evidence, preserve them from death and the underworld:

‘My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore’ (Psalm 16:9-11)

‘God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me’ (Psalm 49:15).

‘I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever’ (Psalm 73:23-26).

The notion of resurrection from the dead, which includes the notion of a continuance of communion with God (and therefore a continuance of life) beyond the grave emerges in the second century BC, at the time of the publication of the Book of Daniel, though the idea continued to be disputed into the first century AD (see Mark 12:18; Acts 23:8).

The historical situation that brought about this conviction was the martyrdom of many pious Jews at the time of the persecutions instigated by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (167-165BC). It seemed to some at the time impossible for God not to reward with life those who gave their lives so heroically for their faith. The first explicit statements concerning the resurrection from the dead belong to this period:

‘At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt’ (Daniel 12:1-2).

‘Our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God’s covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance’ (2Maccabees 7:36).

Another possible witness to a belief that physical death is not the end of life, at least for those who have proved faithful to the covenant, is the following text that was included in the Isaiah scroll. On the other hand it may, like Ezekiel 37, be referring to God’s restoring the nation. We read:

‘The dead do not live; shades do not rise — because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them’ (Isaiah 26:14).

This fits with the tradition. However, the text goes on to say something that cuts right across the tradition:

‘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’ (Isaiah 26:19).

Though the situation of the heroic death of the Jewish martyrs during the persecution under Antiochus greatly influenced the notion of individual resurrection, we must also consider the influence of Egypt and of Persia where belief in the afterlife was integral to their religious consciousness.

Besides the notion of the resurrection of the dead, there were the extraordinary stories of Enoch who ‘walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him’ (Genesis 5:2), ‘He did not experience death’ (Hebrews 11:5). There was also Elijah, who ‘ascended in a whirlwind into heaven’ (2Kings 2:11). Popular legend led to other famous people being thought of as having been taken up into heaven without dying.

The Book of Wisdom picks up the idea:

‘There were some who pleased God and were loved by him, and while living among sinners were taken up. They were caught up so that evil might not change their understanding, or guile deceive their souls’ (Wisdom 4:10-11).

Neither the Book of Proverbs nor the Wisdom of Ben Sira envisaged a life of communion with God after physical death. Under the influence of Hellenist thought, the author of the Book of Wisdom (possibly a contemporary of Jesus, but living in Alexandria) embraced the idea of human beings consisting of matter informed by a soul. With physical death the matter corrupts. The soul, however, is immortal.

## Emerging Belief

The author of *Wisdom* understood our immortality differently from the Hellenist philosophers. For Plato the soul was innately indestructible. For the author of *Wisdom* it is God who graciously offers eternal communion to those who welcome his gift of *Wisdom*.

In the middle of the first century AD, the Pharisees were among those who espoused the notion that God would in some way raise the just to fullness of life. Some seem to have expected this to happen when history attained its final goal and God's reign would be fully realised. Others were perhaps thinking in terms of the end of the physical universe that we know, though this seems less likely. In either case the dead would experience a delay. It was as difficult for them as it is for us to think of after death without thinking in temporal terms. The Sadducees rejected the notion of life-after-death since it is not found in the Torah (see Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8).

It was in his discussion with the Sadducees that Jesus affirmed his belief in the resurrection (see Mark 12:24-27). He trusted that after his death God would raise him to life (see Mark 8:31; 9:9; 9:31). It was their experiences of Jesus' active presence in their lives after his death that convinced Jesus' followers that Jesus was right (see Chapter 9).

Into this world came Paul, the Pharisee who had become a follower of Jesus. He came proclaiming that God had already raised Jesus to life and taken him up into glory as the first fruits of those who would believe in him. Sheol could not hold Jesus. Furthermore Jesus would come and gather up his disciples to share his glory:

'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you' (Romans 8:11).

'If Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain' (1Corinthians 15:12-14).

Paul was not thinking in Platonic terms of human beings consisting of a material body given life by a spiritual soul. 'Body' for Paul is perhaps best translated by our word 'person'. Paul thinks of us in Hebrew terms as a living ensouled body, or a living embodied soul. He attempts to give an insight into the nature of the resurrected body:

'What is sown [the 'body' we now experience] is perishable, what is raised [in the resurrection from the dead] is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown an ensouled body, it is raised a spiritual body' (1Corinthians 15:42-44).

Thinking in Hebrew terms it is perhaps best to state that our whole human reality is taken into life, but transformed in a way that we cannot imagine. As Paul says:

'No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1Corinthians 2:9).

There are problems, too, with our understanding John's use of the expression 'the last day' (6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48); and with Matthew referring to Jesus' 'coming at the end of the age' (Matthew 24:4). As already noted, notions of time (and space) are meaningless the other side of death. In the words of Karl Rahner (*Theology of Death*, Theological Investigations volume 13, page 174): 'Death is the absolute end of the temporal dimension of a being.' He goes on to state: 'We are not forced to posit a temporal interval between the death of the individual and that which we really mean when we speak of the "resurrection of the flesh" (176).

Death is a definitive liberation into divine communion. We are to yield to love. Hope is founded on the experience of the Transcendent Mystery offering Himself to us in offering divine communion.

The Catechism appears to be unclear when it interprets the Genesis narrative as meaning that 'even though our nature is mortal, God destined us human beings not to die' (n. 1008; see n. 1018). If it is referring to 'death' in the sense of separation from God the source of life, it is clearly correct. If it is speaking of physical death, there is a problem. In the story, Adam and Eve never touch the fruit of the 'tree of life'. As the story goes God banishes them from the garden precisely to prevent this (Genesis 3:22), for human beings, unlike the gods, are essentially mortal.

A very early witness to belief in 'the resurrection of the body' is Ignatius of Antioch. In his Letter to the community in Rome (6:1-2), composed in the opening years of the second century, he has this to say (quoted Catechism n. 1011):

'Leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am his wheat, ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread for Christ. So intercede with him for me, that by their instrumentality I may be made a sacrifice to God ... He who died for us is all that I seek; he who rose again for us is my whole desire ... Here is one who longs only to be God's; do not delude him with the things of earth. Suffer me to attain to light, pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the passion of my God. If any of you has God within himself, understand my longings, and feel for me, because you will know the forces by which I am constrained ... Do not have Jesus Christ on your lips, and the world in your heart ... Here am I, yearning for death with all the passion of a lover. Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, "Come to the Father". There is no pleasure for me in anything that perishes, or in the delights of this life. My heart longs for the bread of God – the flesh of Jesus Christ; and for my drink I crave that blood of his which is undying love.'

In the creed we declare our faith in God's love and purpose in our lives. It is God's will to draw us, and every aspect of our being, into fullness of communion with him for all eternity. We know-in-faith that God has done this for Jesus, and we believe that, through our union with Jesus, we, like Jesus' mother, will, on leaving this life, be transformed, so that we can 'see God, face to face, and enjoy the communion of the saints in glory.

