

6 November 2022

Haggai 1:15b-2:9
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17
Luke 20:27-38

How would anyone be able to tell if God is in fact “God of the living” as Jesus asserted?

The Sadducees thought they had got him: either Jesus would have to oppose the direct teaching of the Torah, the Law of Moses, or he would have to side with them on the matter of resurrection.

So what is Jesus going to do? Is he going to say that the Holy Torah is invalid? Or is he going to say, “Of course you’re right: there is no resurrection.”

Who were the Sadducees? “By Jesus’ day, the Sadducees were the aristocracy of Judaism, possibly tracing their origins to the family of Zadok, David’s high priest. Based in Jerusalem, and including most of the leading priestly families, they had their own traditions and attempted to resist the pressure of the Pharisees to conform to theirs. They claimed to rely only on the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), and denied any doctrine of a future life, particularly of the resurrection and other ideas associated with it.”¹ They did not believe in resurrection because they could find no evidence for it in the Pentateuch. Much of the rest of Judaism found hope for resurrection in passages found elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures: the Sadducees however did not accept these scriptures.

So the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, come to Jesus with a curly question. “Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.” There is no controversy here. This is what was called the Law of Levirate Marriage, and is found in Deuteronomy 25. It seems the purpose of this law was to prevent family lines dying out. To the people of God, God had made promises that their seed or descendants would never die out. As far as possible, the

¹ Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, p.224.

people were to prevent family lines and tribal identity dying out in Israel. This law was one way of doing that.

After the non-controversial start, the Sadducees build their argument. Seven brothers; the first marries, then dies childless; the second follows the required law and marries the woman, but dies ... and on it goes. You can just imagine the audience sniggering behind their hands. But then comes the question: "Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since all seven were married to her?"

I imagine that the sniggering stopped, and all held their breath, aware of the implications of the question, and the dilemma the Sadducees had put before Jesus.

But Jesus is clear-thinking and his response is inspired. He responds in two parts. The first part is the negative part, the rebuttal, showing the Sadducees that their argument is built on a faulty premise.

"The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection."

The point is that when God raises people to new life, they will have passed into a new world order in which death itself has been left behind. We don't know all the details of what it will be like; but because there is no longer any death, there is also no need to continue to propagate the species.

And all will be God's children anyway. In other words, the need to continue family lines and to maintain tribal identity in this age is rendered irrelevant because Jesus has come to bring about God's renewal of his people. They will be a worldwide family, marked not by ethnic origin or tribal identity but by the new creation of the gospel.

So, Sadducees, your argument is cut away: your argument does *not* disprove resurrection because your premise that marriage would exist in any resurrection is flawed. Whatever resurrection life may be, it is not simply a continuation of life before death; there will be some kind of discontinuity as well.

"If the concern expressed in Levirate marriage is for a man to have a type of 'afterlife'

through his offspring, then Jesus shows how this hope is ultimately realised in a new age characterised by God raising the dead to imperishable lives as ‘children of God’.” “Jesus declares that the very issue that brought about Levirate marriage – death – will itself be abolished.”²

Jesus then goes on to mount a positive argument *for* resurrection:

“But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”

Jesus is referring to Exodus 3:6. This is a clever move, because Exodus is part of the Pentateuch, which the Sadducees *do* accept. In Exodus 3:6, as Moses encounters God Almighty in the burning bush, God says to him, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Now by the time Moses lived, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were long since dead. But God seems to speak of them as still alive.

Now this can come across to us as merely a clever trick on Jesus’ part: a bit of wordplay. But that’s not what’s going on here. Israel’s God was and is the creator of the world, who condescends to name himself as the God of the patriarchs, even though they are long dead. The implication is that God, the creator of life, is holding them in life still. And, although this isn’t stated, the standard Jewish understanding – held by Sadducee and Pharisee alike – was that there could not be a permanent disembodied existence. So if Jesus is asserting that the dead patriarchs are still somehow alive in God, then Jesus must also be asserting that they will be raised to embodied life in the future: not one of the participants in this argument believed in a long-term disembodied existence.

So why did this all matter to the Sadducees anyway? Was this merely a theoretical argument, a point of theological detail with no relevance to the present life?

² Pietz, “Resurrection Perspective”

Why did it matter to the Sadducees? It mattered because it was *political*.

Remember the Sadducees were the aristocrats. They had a vested interest in maintaining the present order of things. But belief in resurrection is revolutionary. Belief in resurrection puts all present powers in their place, because the ultimate force they can use – the force of death – is rendered powerless in the final analysis. In the end God will get perfect justice.

And this is why after Jesus was raised from the dead his followers were sustained by belief in resurrection as they gave their allegiance to Jesus rather than to Caesar. The resurrection of Jesus was an unexpectedly early resurrection to renewed bodily life, ahead of the general resurrection. But they came to understand the resurrection of Jesus as the firstfruits – the beginning of the full harvest that was still to come – and thus the proof that they too would enjoy resurrection life at the end of the age.

What was true then is true now: that our view about what is going to happen ultimately determines how we behave now. So let us have our thinking straight on this passage from Luke; let us be clear about the resurrection.

Belief in bodily resurrection should make us more ready to work for God in the present, more eager to see God's promises of justice, peace and new life begin to take effect in the present in anticipation of the new age in which God's rule over all will be complete.

To the Sadducees, Jesus declared "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."

I do find, however, that this rather begs the question. For we too, all these years later, are meant to be a *living* people, worshipping a *living* God.

But all too often we tend to treat God merely as a dead historical artefact – to be ignored, or merely studied for information and debated over, rather than someone with whom we have a living encounter, a living and ongoing relationship, the living one who commands us to live and be and act in particular ways.

All too often we, who are meant to be the *living* people of God, see and display death – or at least signs of mortal illness and decay.

We are all too comfortable with the dry rot of concern for self and our own comfort. God calls us to worship and work and witness, and yet we pick and choose

according to what satisfies or interests us, or what is easiest, least challenging and costly.

We too readily spread the pollution of gossip and the poison of talk that undermines and breaks down. We are too quick to take our criticism and complaint to others, rather than going in humility to the one we have issue with, thus spreading the virus of hurt, resentment and unforgiveness.

We are too focussed on inward things, suffocating ourselves; rather than risking the bracing fresh air of reaching out into the community.

We give far too little energy to things that nourish and give us the Spirit's breath: things such as prayer, Bible reading and study, fellowship and generous hospitality, spiritual disciplines, and so on.

So against these deathly tendencies I rejoice at the signs of life I see – for example:

- People remaining faithful during the difficulties of the present season;
- People coming forward with new ideas, which they are prepared to invest their own time and resources in;
- People who are willing to engage deeply with one another in disagreement, caring about the relationship enough that they are willing to risk the pain of discovering that those with whom they disagree could well have a point;
- People participating in things like EFM, Cursillo, or Emmaus study courses, or committing to intentional forms of life-long discipleship and transformation;
- People responding generously to appeals for household goods for refugees, or for Christmas gifts for children at Terrace End School, or knitting beanies for seafarers;
- People responding prayerfully and generously to our stewardship campaign;
- People signing on to be part of our renewed approach to pastoral care;

And so on.

These things could well have, or contribute towards, life beyond our own deaths. What won't be resurrected are all the petty squabbles, hurts, selfishness, and theological quandaries of our times. They will be relegated to the realm of dead

things. Resurrection does not come without death, but the difference is that it leaves the dead things in its wake.³

The Sadducees were caught up in their own contemporary, temporal, *temporary*, concerns. Jesus directed them to what is ultimate. The Sadducees used the law as a means for gaining leverage; for them it was a tool which they felt free to employ to suit their own ends. Jesus applied the law towards what is good, just, and beneficial; for him it was a signpost and aid towards God's ultimate purpose and end for humankind.⁴

We serve a *living* God; we serve the risen and living Christ; we look forward to our own risen life in the new creation; and in anticipation of that we are called to be the *alive* people of God, bringing the qualities of his kingdom life to bear on the Church and the world even now.

Sources

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³ Kyle Brooks, "Commentary", with some adaptation.

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