

'WHAT'S ON THE OTHER SIDE?' THE RESURRECTION REVIVED: A CRITICAL ENQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

In a fear-filled world people are asking – perhaps more than ever – what happens after we die. This popular fascination with the end, with death and with what (if anything) lies beyond it has also influenced the theme and the direction of academic work in the theological field. For this reason, an informed analysis of the resurrection debate has become necessary – a process of analysing the different strata of understanding as they relate to current resurrection research. An effort is made to give consideration to gender and power, to birth and burial, to money and food in order to be able to situate the debates being studied. The current study asks: What if we see things differently or ask a different set of questions? In order for this to be possible, we need to develop an ethics of interpretation – not asking the expected questions, but rather: What interests and frameworks inform the questions we ask and the way in which we interpret our sources? How does scholarship echo (and even participate in) contemporary public discourses about Christian identity?

IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD, AND WE'RE LOVING IT

Why has the resurrection once again become the centre point of a new storm brewing in both popular and academic culture? It has become so possibly because of a combination of the realisation of the phenomenon of death with human beings' need to interpret its mysteries, as this combination presents one of the most consistently featured problems in the history of religions. This is a problem whose intensity has reached fever pitch in the last decade and not only in the history of religions. There is a powerful scene near the end of 'The Road' (2009), the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel (2006), where a father and son huddle together under soulless skies on a desolate, nameless beach littered with whale and human skeletons. They have finally reached the coast after traversing by foot a post-apocalyptic landscape fraught with unspeakable dangers, toils, and snares. The boy, aged about 10 years old, has never seen the sea. 'What's on the other side?' he asks. 'Nothing', replies his father, suffering from malnutrition and weakness after fending off all sorts of evils. All along he has encouraged his son to maintain hope – to 'carry the fire' – but has slowly lost his own. The boy, who believes that there is still goodness somewhere in their dark and dying world, looks out to the sea and says: 'There must be something'. Wanting to keep his son's hope alive, the man relents: 'Maybe there's a father and his son, and they're sitting on the beach too'. This particular scene speaks volumes for all of us who ask a universal question – *what's on the other side?* People are asking, perhaps more than ever, what happens after we die – whether by natural causes or because of some cataclysmic event like war, terrorism, earthquakes, teen-idol vampires, hell-bent robots or wandering zombies. The question is innate to human experience and Hollywood knows it – as evidenced by the spate of spiritually themed films to debut after the blockbuster success of 'The Passion of the Christ' in 2004. In a fear-filled world where war, terrorism and economic collapse bring the question of death (and the afterlife) to the fore, the film industry has delivered increasingly more stories to fuel the question – without necessarily providing any answers. When '2012' came out in November 2009, *The Fresno Bee* asked scholars and religious leaders what to make of filmgoers' fascination with the end-times. Margaret Gonsoulin, a sociology professor at California State University, speculated that such fascination reflected a hunger for meaning in anxiety-ridden times: 'They want to know about the future', she told the *Bee*. However, there is far more than mere curiosity about the future at work here. Brett McCracken (Moring 2010), a critic for *Christianity Today Movies*, wrote for *Relevant* that we are 'compelled' to watch these films because

[t] here is in each of us an innate sense of justice – a sense that all of us probably deserve calamity or worse. When an act of God is on display, we marvel at what we suspect (perhaps hope) is his sovereignty at work, wrathful and terrible though it may be.

(Moring 2010)

So, filmgoers want to escape reality and to see films (even bleak and scary ones) about escape into another world: the afterlife and the 'other side'.

The writer of Ecclesiastes says that 'God has placed eternity in our hearts' (Ec 3:11), implying that we are divinely wired to wonder what comes next. And in the act of wondering, we are acutely aware of our own mortality – whether our death is caused by natural causes or by the end of the world. The films discussed here feed that fascination – a fascination that runs as high in Christians as in anyone else (look no further than the *Left Behind* series, which has sold more than 65 million copies). 'In difficult times, our restlessness for more comes to the surface', Richard J. Mouw (president of Fuller Theological Seminary) told *Christianity Today*:

[T]hese are difficult days, and it should not surprise us that yearnings for eternity – for a final resolution of all the struggle with good and evil – will come to the fore.

(Moring 2010)

Maybe there is a father and his son

The Son resurrected / What is on 'the other side'?

This popular fascination with the end, with death and with what (if anything) lies beyond it, has almost automatically also influenced the theme and the direction of academic work – especially in the theological field – and the possible answers it can give to the world's dilemma. At the beginning of the 21st century, the issue of the resurrected Jesus continues to captivate the attention of scholars as 'one of the most profoundly studied issues in Christology that this century has experienced' (Osborne 1997:7).

This attraction is not limited to the pious – non-believers also question the resurrection of Jesus, having various different opinions that range from the most sceptical to the most affirmational. However, whether Jesus' resurrection was mythical, mortal, or immortal and whether it was he or those who wrote about him who are responsible for the phenomenon, few (if any) other historical figures have received the same amount of attention that Jesus and his (alleged) resurrection has.

But why the resurrection specifically? The answer might be because the power of the resurrection of the dead is, indubitably, a solution to the human fear of death (our 'ultimate other', according to Bynum [1995:43–51]). Alternatively, the answer might be because it is the belief that the ancient writers themselves chose, as the definitive crucial test, a marker for declaring other people as existing either inside or outside their own communities (Setzer 2004a:6). Complicating the matter (and any study of the subject) is the fact that no direct and steady (i.e. without detour) unfolding of the doctrine of the resurrection has taken place over time – such unfolding took the form of a conviction that took shape in different times and places, in confrontation with other cultures (in response to outside events) and as a result of internal developments. This meant that streams of belief in the resurrection of the body ran parallel with belief in the immortality of the soul, and often mingled – one did not replace the other over time.

For this reason, it has become commonplace in the field of New Testament studies to say that early Christianity was diverse, with debates taking place within larger contemporary discourses about religious pluralism and Christian identity and then speaking in terms of pluralities – of communities, Christologies and Judaisms in the 1st century CE (Bauer 1996). However, although the theme of diversity emerges regularly in scholarly discussions about Jesus, the debates themselves tend to be somewhat bi-dimensional, being often built upon recurring dichotomies and characterised by the making of stark choices (Johnson-DeBaufre 2005:35), leading to 'the experience of fragmentation which is increasingly affecting our apprehension of what it means to be a subject, and how we conceive of our subjectivity' (Arnal 1997:310).

Perhaps such dichotomies persist because they are doing work that we do not sufficiently recognise – namely that it is possible to isolate a scholarly practice, such as literary analysis, from the rhetorical strategies and ideological interests of biblical studies in general. It becomes especially important to remember that reconstructing Christian origins is never only about reconstructing Christian origins; it is also quite conversant with (and relevant to) contemporary debates about Christian identity and religious and cultural diversity 'trying to locate the symbols that may constructively address the problems of our time' (Mack 1993:254).

These debates include engagement with the Christian tradition's view of Jesus as diverse, which has implications for seeing (and authorising) the diversity of contemporary Christianity (e.g. Crossan 1994:200). Such epistemological challenges have brought about the realisation that the claim of ethical neutrality in historical-critical methodology serves as a form of insulation from ethical accountability for interpretations, and as a denial of the perspectival contributions of those who clearly articulate their location and interest (Patte 1995:17–21).

Approaching the resurrection

With the above in mind, it becomes clear why an informed analysis of the resurrection debate is necessary – more strongly put, such an analysis is essential; no matter how difficult it might be to analyse the different strata of understanding as they relate to current resurrection research (De Mey 1998:246–273). This analysis will study several moments in the Western tradition in which the doctrine of the bodily resurrection was debated, challenged and redefined. In the process, the focus will not necessarily be on the formulation of doctrine as such, but rather on the ways in which the theologians and philosophers argue. In this way, it becomes possible to situate the debates in the context of: changing attitudes towards bodies (of both the living and the dead), evolving ideas about the soul, the emergence of new eschatological places (e.g. purgatory) and fundamental shifts in the concepts of time and self. In such a context the linguistic trappings of a text are often more telling than are the explicit arguments made in terms of the context – the ideas expressed sometimes being elaborated on and sometimes betrayed by the specific metaphors that clothe them.

It is exactly for this reason that it is so important to start with the texts before us and to follow *their* metaphorical connections, rather than choosing a modern theoretical construct that predetermines what the context is (Bynum 1995:xvi–xvii). Thus, any consideration given to gender or power, birth or burial, money or food is made in an effort to situate the debates being studied and then only because the authors slip easily into using analogies drawn from the specified aspects of human experience at points of tension, confusion, fallacy, self-contradiction or absurdity.

Doing so begs the following questions: Can a reason for these still varied conclusions on the subject be that those writing on it have not received the same training in philosophy of history and historical method as have their cousins (i.e. the professional historians) outside the community of biblical scholars and philosophers? How do the historians of non-religious matters go about their work? And would an application of their approach then lead us closer to solving the puzzle? In order to be able to begin answering such questions we have to learn about and apply the approach of historians, outside the community of biblical scholars. In this way, we can provide interaction with philosophers of history related to hermeneutical and methodological considerations and then apply the knowledge that we have gained to an investigation into the Resurrection itself. An exercise such as this may allow us as biblical scholars to learn from the discussions conducted among philosophers of history, allowing us to avoid repeating the work of others, so that we can focus on new areas.

If we accept that interpretation does not happen in a vacuum and that we are all shaped by our social locations, contexts, experiences and commitments, then we are confronted with ethical questions, especially when keeping in mind the following: What has been mentioned before in a text may become an indexed feature of the co-text of a later utterance. At the same time, it forms part of the situation-specific common background (context) knowledge on which participants may rely on in the production and interpretation of future activities (Auer 1996:18–19).

Why is any history constructed as it is? Whose interests are served by any historical account? What material effect does this historical account have on people's lives and what effects does it continue to have (Burnett 2000:111)? What are the effects of our interpretations of these histories? Whose interests have been and are being served in the texts and in our interpretations? (Patte 1995:114–115). Clearly, all such questions concern a problem that is in need of a critical evaluation of its many different origins, dimensions, understandings, implications, promulgators and critics. The method proposed here is a combination of historiography with an ethics of understanding – because, with such a combination, we may be more assured of covering all the different facets of the phenomenon referred to as the 'resurrection'.



SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

As a result of these postulations, the current researchers wish to attempt to address both the different questions and the analyses of the debate by asking: What if we see things differently? What if we were to look from a different perspective? What if we were to ask a different set of questions?

In order for an appropriate answer to be obtained to such questions, we need to develop an ethics of interpretation (Johnson-DeBaufre 2005:2), so that we can attend in our study to the way in which interpretation is done, encompassing the following aspects:

- Firstly, we need to investigate what we do and how we do it, using *method* as a means of achieving greater objectivity (by reducing the amount of control that the limits of historians have on their research; Licona 2008:32–36) and as a means of revisiting the foundation of their views (including the nature of truth itself).
- Secondly, we need to devise a set of ethically-grounded interpretive practices, so that we can check the explanatory narratives that it is possible to construct (McCullagh 1984:236). We then need to make our horizon and the methods that we employ for achieving results as *clear* and as *public* as possible (thus exposing them to scrutiny), after which we need consciously to detach ourselves as far as is possible from our own biases by becoming '*willing to part with the way tradition and conventional wisdom sayings are...the way... [we]... would prefer them to be and be ready to accept the way things really are*' (Hoover 2000:127–128).
- Thirdly, we need to consider the process by which we evaluate our ethics and practices, as well as the *effects* of our interpretations. In doing so, we invoke the relationship between the individual and the 'other' (Patte 1995:14), also enlisting the help of *peer pressure* to act as a check on possible biases, thereby minimising the impact of our own limits. This process not only enlists the help of *peer pressure*, but also takes it to the next level, in the form of submitting our ideas to *unsympathetic experts*. For they are certain to have a different hypothesis (and therefore, a motivation to locate weaknesses in competing hypotheses). As McCullagh [1984:236] says, 'one can be reasonably sure that historical descriptions which have won the approval of unsympathetic or impartial expert critics are not biased, but are well justified and merit belief'.

Instead of asking the expected questions (e.g. 'What is eschatology?'), the current study asks: What interests and frameworks inform the questions we ask and the way in which we interpret our sources? How does scholarship echo (and even participate in) contemporary public discourses about Christian identity?

Using the tools of historical criticism within a larger framework is suggested, with the 'meaning of the Bible and the meaning-making of biblical studies' (Schüssler-Fiorenza 2000:ix) being attended to in the form of the following three roughly intersecting practices (Johnson-DeBaufre 2005:12):

- *Critical reflexivity* asks about both what our patterns of interpretation are (the analysis of interpretive practices) and what their effects are (the ethical evaluation of the results of the interpretation; Schüssler-Fiorenza 1999:196–197). The process is, thus, an oscillation between investigating how we read and analysing how our readings shape (and are shaped) by our current contexts. According to Johnson-DeBaufre (2005:14), '[i]f our perspectives shape our interpretations, how do we adjudicate between readings? What makes my reading preferable to any others?'
- *Textual rereading* includes evaluating the effectiveness of dominant readings of a text and arguing for the plausibility of alternative readings.
- The practice of *public debates* in other words, encompasses ongoing methodological, historical and textual investigations,

not only as a rarefied scholarly discipline, but also as a part of the ongoing public discourse. In this way, the practice pays heed to the public character and context of scholarly discourse, as well as intentionally entering into the conversation.

However, these steps are not methodical in a linear progression, but are mutually interacting practices that draw on (and shape) one another. Through the use of such practices we will not be lulled into thinking that we engage with a text apart from contemporary rhetorical trends. As a consequence, new possibilities are raised regarding the way in which we historically reconstruct the Jesus movement (and its relationship to other groups within Israel). We are also enabled to enter into the public debate about Jesus and eschatology in a way that takes the ethical possibilities and consequences of our reconstructions (of Christian origins and identity) seriously.

THE RESURRECTION IN BROAD STROKES

Because most of our information about the past comes to us in the form of texts, we must ask how such texts should be approached. In bracketing considerations of genre, methodical credulity views texts as reliable, unless they possess indicators that they should be regarded otherwise (i.e. as internal contradictions and states of affairs described that contradict existing data and manufacture new and misleading data in order to promote the author's cause). However, such a view lays some unwanted landmines – ancient historians could also lie, spin and embellish just as any modern historian can and genre questions are not always easily answered caused by a distance in time and horizon. Accordingly, only when the intention, method and the integrity of the author are understood does credulity function as the best method to employ (Licona 2008:62).

ANCIENT TRADITIONS REVISITED

We have to resist the powerful temptation to assimilate the evidence about the religion of the Israelites that the Hebrew Bible provides uncritically in relation to the patterns of the antecedent and neighbouring cultures (patterns that are themselves more varied and less clear than we might wish). In doing so, we can avoid the more extreme speculations about the role of the dead in the lives of their kin, which have abounded among biblical scholars in recent years (Levenson 2006:57). But just as biblical exegeses need to remember that the religion of the Israelites was a larger and more variegated phenomenon than that which the Hebrew Bible authorises, so scholars of Ancient Near Eastern religion need to remember that the biblical authors make their selections from a relatively large repertory of religious forms in terms of their own criteria so as to be able to propound patterns, with an integrity of their own, of religious belief (Levenson 2006:58).

Agreeing to agree?

When viewing the field of biblical studies, which is renowned for its deficit of basic agreement and the depth of its controversies, one cannot but be impressed by the longevity and breadth of the consensus about the early Israelite notion of life after death, in short, that there was none. According to Pedersen (1991:461), the common belief was that 'everyone who dies goes to *Sheol* just as he, if everything happens in the normal way, is put into the grave'. The irony lies in the Hebrew Bible containing little to no mention of the afterlife, although the concept of natural healing (including healing from nature's worst affliction or infirmity – death) had long played a major role in both Canaanite and Israelite theology (Levenson 2006:xii).

Jewish apocalyptic thinking projected the fulfilment by means of a miraculous reversal onto the anticipated end-time, although, in doing so, such thinking linked up with a number of other aspects of Judaism that were already ancient when the thinking

first emerged. Although some scholars conclude that ancient Israel must have rejected such beliefs, the picture is not as clear as it could be. As Friedman and Overton (2000:36) put it, the biblical silence on the afterlife is really more of a whisper than a full-throated utterance. In fact, both the Hellenistic and the Roman literature of the Second Temple period presents a vast and memorable array of responses to the problem (Elledge 2006:1), displaying a diversity of pre-rabbinic and non-rabbinic thought on death and life (and the 'organic connections between earlier and later visions of redemptions') that should neither be missed nor underestimated (Levenson 2006:xiii). Cavallin (1974:23–165) once cited over thirty distinct ancient writings that contain a significant amount of reflection upon the topic, ranging from the traditions covered in the Hebrew Bible to the advent of the Rabbis. In terms of such evidence, it can be seen that the concept of the resurrection of the dead did not appear as a sudden, jarring innovation of Second Temple Judaism, but, rather, developed slowly and sporadically over the preceding centuries. According to Levenson (2006:xii–xiii), the concept grew out of the convergence of a number of biblical themes, 'most centrally on the long-standing conviction that God would yet again prove faithful to his promises of life for his people'.

Resurrection seen nationally

Keeping in mind that metaphors cannot communicate if they have nothing to do with the way in which people think and live and given the thoroughly social and relational character of life and death in the Hebrew Bible, it becomes clear that the well-being of Israel could never be detached from the relationship of the nation (and its subsidiary kin groups) to its Deity. The truth of such a finding can be seen in classical Judaism actually insisting upon the resurrection as a defining tenet of the community, for 'without the restoration of the people Israel, a flesh and blood people, God's promises to them remained unfulfilled and the world remained unredeemed' (Levenson 2006:x). Proof of the existence (and, in fact, the thriving) of such ideas of redemption, life after death, resurrection and restoration can be found in the following manifestations:

- The archaeological finds from the Iron Age bear evidence of such beliefs (see e.g. Bloch-Smith 1992; Levenson 2006:46–48, 51, 83, 119; Gn 28:1–4; Is 43:1–8; 44:1–5; 54:1–10; Jr 31:15–17; Ezk 34:32).
- Necromancy and divination are regularly condemned, without being declared ineffective. The need to suppress such practices testifies to their presence in Israel (see e.g. Levenson 2006:51–55; Lv 19:26; 20:6; Dt 18:11; 1 Sm 28:2; 2 Ki 23:24; Is 8:19).
- Three resuscitation stories show that death can be overcome, even if only temporarily (1 Ki 17; 2 Ki 4; 13:20–21).
- A chain of associations suggests that the Temple was also thought to provide the antidote to death for the Israelite nation, as it was the place where God had ordained the blessing of eternal life (Levenson 2006:92), giving a kind of immortality to those who dwell there in innocence, purity and trust (e.g. Ps 36:6–11; 52:10, 133; Pr 3:18; Ezk 31:2–9; 47:1–12).
- More importantly, vividly descriptive apocalyptic images and ideas (also surrounding the resurrection) can be found in several places in the Scriptures:
 - those pertaining to angels (Ezk 37:1–15; Job 1–2; Is 25:8; Dn 7–12; Zch 3)
 - the references in several Old Testament passages to a book that contains the names of the righteous, which is also known as 'the Book of Life' (Ps 69:28; Is 4:2–6; Mt 3:16–17)
 - the motifs of the division between the righteous and the wicked and the rescue and restoration (resurrection) of the righteous as acts of divine judgement (Is 24–27; Jr 30; Dn 12).

These traditions, which are remarkably diverse in their respective notions of resurrection, immortality and related concepts, are historically significant in their own right, as they often reflect sophisticated theological attempts to come to terms with a world in which God and human fortunes clash violently (Elledge 2006:2). Although it is true that evidence of the afterlife is certainly sparse in the Hebrew Bible in comparison with the surrounding cultures in Egypt and Mesopotamia and while Persian and Canaanite thought can be said to have played a role in such conceptualisation, 'the essential idea is nevertheless found in Israel itself' (Martin-Achard 1960:221). Like creation, resurrection is a pre-eminently *supernatural* act, being a miraculous reversal of the course of nature. Through it, God transforms death – nature's last word – into a prelude to his own new act of creation, namely the recreation of human beings, thus both recapitulating and transcending the creation of humanity, with the miracle of the end-time restoring the miracle of the beginning (Levenson 2006:6). As Martin-Achard (1992:683–684) aptly puts it: 'The resurrection of the dead, that is, of the body, is etched within the logic of Old Testament concepts.'

These dry bones

These different ideas and visions of the restoration of Israel as a nation later became connected to the oldest vision of resurrection in the Hebrew Bible (Ezk 37:1–14) which is a symbolic representation in which national recovery and restoration is significantly brought about by the resurrection of the dead and the despondent of Israel from their graves, in order to return to the land that God had indefeasibly promised them. In the description contained in the above-mentioned verses, we find the best approximation to the developed doctrine of a general resurrection to be found in Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism (as well as in early Christianity). The reversal of national death is seen to anticipate (but not quite yet to approximate) the end-time resurrection that appears later in Jewish history, the essential ingredients for which were, in a sense, always present in:

- the affirmation of God's power
- the granting of God's favour to Israel
- the portrayal of death as God's enemy (Setzer 2004a:11).

What we do know is that such an understanding of the resurrection first appears explicitly in 2 Maccabees 7 and 12:43–45 and in Daniel 12 and was, therefore, apparent by the time of the confrontation between Judaism and Hellenism, as well as that of the Maccabean revolt. Moreover, beyond their own intrinsic value, such traditions also provided the ground and nutriment for both the early Christian and rabbinical belief that God raises the dead. In this sense, these traditions from the Second Temple period have left an enduring impression on the history of religions in the West far beyond the ambit of their own time (Elledge 2006:2).

The injustice of persecution

The theme of the reward awaiting the righteous at some future time was thus implanted in Israel's consciousness, to be drawn on if and when a religious need should arise. Such a need would arise in the Hasidic community, because of the serious and existential theological problem presented by the persecution and death of many Hasidic Jews precisely because they had wilfully chosen to obey the Torah (1 Macc 1:50, 60–63; 2 Macc 6–7), with their piety resulting in their death. Conversely, the Hellenising Jews had saved their lives by what the Hasidic Jews considered to be a gross disobedience of the Torah. Consequently, it seemed that piety led to death, whereas disobedience led to life confounding the standard Israelite canons of justice and retribution (Nickelsburg 2006:32). In contrast to the prophet's promise in Third Isaiah, the Hasidic Jews were being slaughtered (instead of living long lives in Jerusalem) and although some of the Hellenisers had already died, their bodies were not lying in full sight in the Valley of Hinnom. Occurrences such as these led to the belief that the prophesies concerned could only come true (and the injustices of the present life be adjudicated) if the

dead were to come to life – making resurrection either to life or to punishment the seeming answer to the problem (Levenson 2006:8; e.g. Is 56:2, 4, 6; 58:2; 59:15; 65:8–9, 13, 15, 22; 65:4, 11; 66:3, 5, 14, 17). The expression of such a solution was a mixture of images of bodily and spiritual survival and revivification, with many of the ideas of the afterlife not fully spelled out. However, it should be kept in mind that we should not expect to find definitions in materials that are poetic and often apocalyptic.

As images of the resurrection started surfacing in various texts, the linked concept of the immortality of the soul (as apart from the body) also started appearing in the form of a reward for the righteous. A brief survey of the literary evidence for Jewish faith in a or the future life reveals multiple basic options for belief in life beyond death, as indicated by the following basic lexical patterns that recur within the literary evidence (Elledge 2006:5) from the 2nd century BCE through to the 1st century CE, which exhibit a range of understandings of the afterlife:

- Fairly explicit claims of bodily resurrection appear in these texts as 1 Enoch 10; 16–17; 21–22; 25; 37–39; 51; 61–62; 81–82; 91–93; 100; 102–104; the Testament of Moses 9; 1 Baruch 4:17–29; 2 Baruch 49–51; 2 Maccabees 6:12–17, 26; 7:6, 9, 11, 14, 22–23, 27–29, 36; 12; 14:45–46; 1 Maccabees 2; 4Q521 and the *Sibylline Oracle* 4. Almost all of these texts also accentuate the notions of retribution, such as imprisonment in fire and annihilation in darkness (Wis 3:9–10; 1 En 22:10–11; 46; 62–63; 2 Macc 9; 1 Macc 6; 4 Ezr 7:36) and reward (consisting of various different rewards, including restoration, protection from punishment, joy and elevation to heavenly status, e.g. Wis 3:3–8, 11–12; 13–15; 1 En 22:9; 4 Ezr 7:39–42, 97, 125).
- A mix of concepts of resurrection of the body and immortality of the soul appear in 1 Enoch 91; 103; 1QH 7:17–25; 11:19–23; 14:29–35; 19:10–23; in 4Q358–388; 391; 521; in 4 Ezra 7:36–37, 75, 78, 80, 85, 97; 8:52–54; in 2 Baruch 44:15; 49:2; 50:2; 51:2, 10–12 and in the *Pseudo-Phocylides*.
- Ambiguity prevails in works that, nevertheless, imply resurrection, such as the 'Book of the Watchers' in 1 Enoch; The Testament of Judah 25; the Psalms of Solomon; the Testament of Benjamin 10; and Cairo (Genizah text) of the *Damascus* 2:7–12.
- In contrast, the vindication of the righteous through the immortality of the soul can be seen to await the just in Jubilees 23:17–31; in 4 Maccabees 1:9, 13, 19, 30; 2:6, 24; 6:27–31; 7:3, 16–23; 9:1, 22–24; 11:12, 20; 12:18; 13:1, 13, 15, 17; 14:5–7; 15:3; 16:1, 13, 25; 17:12, 15–19; 18:1–4, 23; in the Wisdom of Solomon 1:1–6:21 and in the works of Philo (e.g. *Gig* 12–15; *Post* 39; *Migr* 9; *Opif* 134–135).

Within the above-mentioned broad categories, certain subcategories or subthemes can be seen to emerge, such as those of:

- translation into angelic beings (e.g. 1 En 39; 80:6; 108; Sir 43:8–9; TMos 10; 2 Bar 51:10; 1 QS xi; 1QH xi; xiv)
- determinism and saving knowledge (e.g. 1QS 2:4–9; 4:11–14; 4Q416; CD 2:7–8)
- resurrection as a reward for martyrdom (e.g. 2 Macc 7).

Qumran and the absence of death's malady

The published scrolls of Qumran – originating in about the same timeframe as the above-mentioned texts – are remarkable in that they contain not a single passage that can be interpreted with absolute certainty as a reference either to resurrection or to immortality (Ringgren 1963:148). Why does such a large collection of apocalyptic texts contain no clear reference to a belief in resurrection – a topic generally agreed to be integral to apocalyptic theology (Nickelsburg 2006:1)? As we have seen earlier, the belief in the resurrection (or in its equivalent) was conveyed through the practising of certain forms or traditions, comprising, for the most part, apocalypses, which can be described as lengthy descriptions of the events leading up to and including the end-time. Although certain sections of the Qumran commentaries and other exegetical writings do focus

on the events of the last times, the following limitations still exclude the likelihood of (extended) references to resurrection or immortality (Nickelsburg 2006:180–181):

- The descriptions or statements that we find about the coming salvation are usually no more than a sentence in length. The implication, therefore, is that (for the most part) the published scrolls do not contain the kind of apocalyptic descriptions in which one might expect to find references to resurrection and immortality – as the Essenes understood it, as the malady is not present, a remedy is unnecessary. The paucity of apocalypses notwithstanding, much of the scroll material is shot through with the terminology and presuppositions of apocalyptic thinking (Cross 1961:76–78, 198–206):
- In 1QH x:20–37 the author's enemies are set against God and are intent on taking the author's life because he was a true servant of God. He thanks God for having delivered him from his enemies, presupposing that such deliverance has already taken place.
- The language of exultation and light is used in 1QH xv:6–25.
- Although the author of 1QH xii:5–xiii:4 is still awaiting the time of judgement, he does not mention the possibility of his death, making any reference to resurrection (or its equivalent) unnecessary.
- The persecution of one devoted to the service of the Lord and his participation in the final apocalyptic battle, is described in 1QH xiii:20–xiv:vi.
- In 1QH xi:19–23, the blessings of the eschaton are already a reality for the author of the hymn (with the thought being confirmed in 1QH xix:3–14).
- 1 QS iii:13–iv:26 (with parallel ideas to be found in Wis 1–5; *Did* 1–6; *Barn* 18–20; *Doctrina Apostolorum* 1–5; and the 'Mandates' in the *Sheppard of Hermas*) describes itself as a kind of catechism to be used in the instruction of the community, with life and death functioning as the blessing or curse (i.e. the reward or the punishment) dispensed by God to those who obey, in the former case, or disobey, in the latter case, the stipulations of his covenant.

We can thus conclude that, because of the Qumran community's lack of concern regarding suffering, persecution and death, neither resurrection nor death is as much as mentioned in the published Scrolls of Qumran. The coming judgement that the community does describe has a different function – the judgement scene is in service of the final consummation of this covenant form (the destruction of evil). In this scene, the faithful are seen to pass fluidly from the blessings of this world to eternal ones, without any mention of death.

The faith of the institution

The 'plastered graves' on death and the afterlife

The first time that resurrection appears as a doctrine is in the case of the Pharisees – as reported on in three different sets of sources – Josephus (JA; JW); in both the Synoptics (e.g. Mk 2–3; 7:7–8, 16; 12:18–27 and parallels) and in Acts (4:1–2; 5:17–34; 15:5; 17:18, 31–32; 23:6–9; 24:14–15, 21; 26:5–8, 22–23); and in rabbinic literature (e.g. *'Abot de Rabbi Nathan B'*, in Saldarini 1975). Although our sources are limited by their dating and tendentiousness, a striking agreement does emerge in the attributes with which they associate the Pharisees (Setzer 2004a:35):

- possessing a vast and impressive knowledge of Scripture
- the ability of the early teachers to interpret the Scriptures according to their own traditions
- their punctiliousness in observance
- their authority with the people
- their understanding of God as having a powerful sway over human affairs, combined with their belief in an afterlife (including resurrection from the dead for either reward or punishment).

It has been suggested that the preaching of the resurrection served in some way to shore up the influence and authority of the Pharisees, forming part of a strategy that allowed them to negotiate a position as mediators between the Romans and the people (Saldarini 1988, 2001:284–285, 295–296). In this sense, the idea of the resurrection has been transposed into the liturgy, the law and the lore, becoming the tool for marking the boundaries between groups.

The rabbinic Judaism of the *Diaspora*

Within their own theological universe and within their own understanding of biblical interpretation, the rabbis found the idea of the resurrection to be present in the Torah itself. The presence of such an idea is confirmed by the fact that, in both the Mishnah and in the Tosefta, 'epicurean' is used as shorthand for those people who deny providence, which is defined as God's powerful work in the world (Setzer 2004b). Thus both documents still link resurrection, a correct understanding of Torah, an affirmation of God's power in the world and ultimate justice – with the denial of justice being the assumption behind the concept of 'epicurean' – as the authority behind their promotion of their own legitimacy as the correct interpreters of the Torah and of their assumption of the right to pronounce judgement on the fate of different categories of people. So, as was the case with the Pharisees, in rabbinic Judaism resurrection also functions as part of a constellation of values consisting of God's power, a proper interpretation of Scripture, the legitimacy of certain groups as authorities for their community and the promotion of a certain set of practices.

INTO A NEW AGE

Something old

Early Christian beliefs inherited and amplified the Jewish themes attached to the resurrection in their understanding of Jesus' resurrection as a manifestation of God's power and as a guarantee for the resurrection of believers (Setzer 2004a:19). Their belief sprang from the fertile soil of belief in resurrection in 1st century CE Judaism and, as was the case in Judaism, the belief in Jesus' resurrection in the New Testament is also understood and described in different ways, especially in its intensified apocalyptic form (Keck 1992:83–96).

In this context, it is important to remember that the meaning of the term 'eschatological' is determined less by its content or its ideology than by its genealogy. In identifying the eschatological or non-eschatological roots of the resurrection tradition, Jesus is anchored within a stream of ancient identity and within a particular social and/or intellectual framework (Johnson-DeBaufre 2005:22–23).

Last disciple, first witness

When considering the functioning of the resurrection as symbol and strategy in New Testament times, our findings in the Jewish materials are echoed by the use of most of the same elements embedded in it, most important of which is its function as an anti-imperial programme (Setzer 2004a:58). For Paul, belief in the resurrection is a necessary element in a whole set of realities that influence the worth of the Church's faith, the value of their lives, the meaning of their living in danger and their potential martyrdom, as well as the fate of those believers who have already died. To disbelieve the resurrection is to short-circuit the apocalyptic drama, thereby disrupting the process of liberation that began unfolding with Jesus' own death. The resurrection is described by Paul (especially in 1 Corinthians) as the final proof that the pyramid of power has been overturned and that an alternative society has emerged.

However, because Paul's hearers were better versed in the Greco-Roman idea of immortality aside from the body, his preaching of the resurrection made him a minority – the idea

was, literally, 'strange' to those to whom he spoke and therefore had to be explained at length. For this reason, we find more on the resurrection in Paul's writings than in any of the other New Testament writings (e.g. Horsley 1997:242–252; 1 Cor 1:18–24; 2:4–8; 15:3–7).

In the process described above, the mere survival of the soul or spirit would be insufficient to prove God's victory, with the survival of the body being needed for God to be ultimately victorious. In this way, the resurrection of bodies from the dead becomes a powerful idea wielded by Paul against prevailing political and cultural assumptions (see also, e.g. 1 Th 4:13–18; cf. Setzer 2004a:66).

A new testament

Meier (2000:3–24) suggests that the resurrection was a genuine, but relatively marginal, part of Jesus' preaching, because his apocalyptic message focused on the immediate arrival of the kingdom of God. Jesus' prediction of the heavenly banquet, alluded to in the prophecy that he delivered at the Last Supper (Mk 14:25 and parallels), assumes resurrection. From what we have discussed so far, the idea of resurrection was already a given amongst the majority of Jews to whom Jesus preached – an idea that was strengthened by the fact that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection clearly imply the same range of interpretation as has been discussed above (e.g. Lk 24: 16–31, 36, 39, 41–43, 51; Jn 20:14, 19; 21:4). In this context, it is both important and understandable to note that Jesus' defence of the resurrection, in his encounter with the Sadducees in Mark 12:18–27, is generally seen as an anomaly.

In John we find a tension between a future and a realised eschatology, with the latter predominating and pervading the author's references to resurrection and eternal life (Nickelsburg 2006:242). Death, in the Johannine sense, is not a possibility for the believer, who 'does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life' (Jn 5:24; see also 3:18; 3:36; 6:47; 11:25). The Christology of Hebrews is governed by a combination of the motifs of the descending and re-ascending Wisdom or Logos and the pattern of suffering and vindication or exaltation (Heb 1:1–3; 5:5–10). Typical of the latter pattern, the author employs none of the traditional verbs for resurrection; instead, he refers almost exclusively to Jesus' exaltation in the same way as John does (see, e.g. Heb 1:3; 2:9; 4:14; 5:9; 7:26; 10:12; 12:2; 13:20).

The New Testament's apocalypse begins with a commissioning vision, in which the risen Christ commands John to write down what he sees and hears (Rv 1–3; see also Rv 22:10–16). Presumed throughout the book is not only Jesus' resurrection, but also his exaltation as the 'son of man', the 'messiah' (conveyed in the language of the Old Testament books, i.e. Ps 2:7–8; Is 11:4; Dn 10; Zch 12:10; 1 En 48; 62:2; 4 Ezr 13:4, 10–11) and therefore the 'ruler', in this sense referring back to Daniel 7.

The Apostolic Fathers

Earliest inclinations

A smattering of references to resurrection appear in the Apostolic Fathers, occurring as a standard idea in homily (e.g. 1 Clem 25–27; Barn 21:1), doctrine (e.g. Did 16:6; Barn 5:6; Mart Pol 14:2; Smyrn 3:1) and instruction (e.g. Barn 5:6; Did 16:6). In such texts, the resurrection of the body is assumed, with it naturally and simply forming part of the hortatory catechetical language throughout the literature concerned. The absence of a sustained defence of the belief in resurrection prevents us from reconstructing a set of opponents, although two references, namely those in 2 Clement (9:1–5) and in Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians (7:1), allude to some opposition to the belief in the resurrection of the body. Pagels (1979:3–27) argues that the physical resurrection of Jesus was also essential to the establishment of apostolic authority in the early church (see also the work of Crossan [1994, 1998]).

In dialogue with Justin

A hundred years after Paul, Justin (drawing on pagan and Christian arguments alike and addressing multiple audiences) cites the belief in the resurrection of believers as being the mark of a genuine Christian. In this way, an idea that is merely alluded to by the earlier Apostolic Fathers assumes definite form as a mark of orthodoxy (e.g. Dial 80:4–5). The assumption of such a definite form becomes especially clear when keeping in mind that the said occurrence is the first appearance of the term 'resurrection of the flesh' in any text (Setzer 2004a:75). For Justin, as for earlier Jews and Christians, the resurrection of the dead (now flesh) is a conviction that carries with it other ideas: the demonstration of God's power (e.g. 1 Apol 19; Cels 5:14); the idea of resurrection as being the other side of creation and the concept of the goodness of the created being; the demonstration of fidelity towards God and his teaching (e.g. Dial 80:3); the association of loyalty with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the manifestation of a sign of an authentic Christian (e.g. Dial 80:4–5); the existence of a system of justice incorporating the concept of recompense for the righteous and punishment for the wicked (e.g. 1 Apol 18:1; Dial 117:3; 130:2) and the final establishment of the correct interpretation of Scripture (Dial 80; 117), which has proved instrumental in the settling of grievances (especially between Jews and Christians). The concept of the resurrection of the body also formed a conspicuous element in the early construction of community (Setzer 2004a:78).

Athenagoras' dual-edged argument

Two decades after Justin, Athenagoras promoted the Christian belief in bodily resurrection in the following two ways:

- as a weapon of defence against widespread charges against Christianity, in *Plea on behalf of the Christians* (addressed to the Emperor and his son)
- as a defence of the doctrine itself, in *On the resurrection* (which was probably addressed to three sets of hearers in a public context – pagans, Christians who do not accept physical resurrection and Christians who accept the concept, but who need help arguing their case; Barnard 1984:44–45).

Athenagoras' work is valuable, in that it provides a window into the larger debates over resurrection that raged during the second century CE (Setzer 2004a:88). Athenagoras set out to disprove three well-known charges against Christians – those of atheism, cannibalism (especially in terms of the Thyestean feasts) and sexual excess (especially in incest). In his rebuttal of such charges, he applied many of the (then traditional) rhetorical strategies (as later outlined by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca [1969]). Athenagoras' treatment of the resurrection in *On the resurrection* differs slightly from that in the above-mentioned *Plea*, in that he argues vigorously, in the former, on behalf of the argument for the resurrection of the body against its detractors. Similarly to the *Plea*, *On the resurrection* is an apologetic to outsiders (Res 1:5; 11:1; 19:2), although, unlike the *Plea*, it is an in-house document (Res 1:5; 19:1). Athenagoras makes the following familiar arguments for the resurrection:

- The overwhelming argument for resurrection, which is the argument from which all other arguments spring (according to Athenagoras), is that emanating from authority (Res 2:3; 3:1, 3; 5:1; 9:2; 17:1–2; 18:1).
- The second argument that Athenagoras makes is that emanating from the field of justice (Res 14:4; 18:2, 4; 19:7), to which he adds the argument of logic in saying that humans alone of all God's creatures enjoy resurrection (Res 10:4; 11:1; 13:1–2; 14:4; 15:2–5; 18:1; 24:2, 4).
- His third argument, which is a derivative of the first and second arguments, constitutes an argument by definition (Res 10:4; 12:7; 13:1–2; 16:1–4; 19:3; 21–22).

Accordingly, although belief in the resurrection was, by the time of Athenagoras, widely recognised as part of being Christian, it still drew some refutation and ridicule from the pagan world. This meant that Athenagoras had to bridge the gap between the particularism of a group associated with Palestine (and a leader

executed by the Romans) and the dominant Greco-Roman culture.

The outsiders

The different Christian defences of the resurrection belief referred to above hint at the specific objections made by outsiders. When the apologists (such as Justin and Athenagoras) argue at length for the resurrection of the unified person as body and soul (see also, e.g. Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* 2.31:1; 2.34:1–2; 5.6:1–2; 5.9:2–4; 5.10:2; 5.12:3; 5.13:1; 5.14:1, 4; and Tertullian's *Resurrection of the Dead* 3:1–3, 5–6; 16:1–2, 4–7; 22:8, 11), we can make an educated guess that their doing so meant that there were others who argued for an essential dissimilarity of body and soul. When the apologists laud God's power to create the human body (see also, e.g. Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* 2.1:5; 2.13:3, 8; 2.28:4; 2.29:1; 3.20:2; 3.24:1; 5.3:2; 5.5:1–2; and Tertullian's *The Apology* 48:5–8, 14–15; 49:4, 5–6; 50:5–9, 11, 13–14, 16) – as proof that he can also recreate – we can guess that others insisted that God neither could (nor would) reform a disintegrated body.

Two specific pagan representatives, Celsus and Caecilius, provide a mirror for the Christian arguments. Both of these representatives of entrenched pagan attitudes wrote in defence of their stance against the Christian refutations of their ideas. Both writers show a class snobbery that accused the Christians of four interlocking characteristics: they are lower-class and uneducated boors (Cels 2:55; 3:16; 6:34; 7:28, 32, 45; Oct 5:3–4, 6; 8:4; 12:7; 13:4; 17; 20:1; 34:5), which makes them disrespectful of the civic life, the religion and the culture that surrounds them (Cels 8:49, 55; Oct 4:6; 8:1, 3–4; 11:6; 12:5–6) which, in turn, causes them to denigrate the value of life in this world (Cels 8:54; Oct 8:4–5; 12:5–6), so that they also fail to appreciate the goodness of this life thereby making them arrogant, overconfident and lacking in the modesty that befits their low social status (Cels 5:14; Oct 3:4; 11:3, 5; 12:7). Such attacks on Christians – linking them with poverty, women and foreigners – were part of conventional pagan slanders (Beard, North & Price 1998:291–295; see also Tacitus' *Ann* 15.44:2–8; Suetonius' *Nero* 16; and Pliny's *Letters* 10.96:1–10). The Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body offended both writers, who regarded such a doctrine as offensive to all reason and logic, due to the nature of the body and the inferiority of the flesh (Cels 2:55; 4:52; 5:14; 8:49; Oct 11:7–8; 34:9, 11–12). By nature, bodies change over time and return to their original state – put another way, since they are matter, they are subject to decay and corruption and cannot be permanent (Cels 4:58, 60–61; 5:14; 6:72–73; 7:42; 8:49, 53).

'GROUNDED' THEORY

Missing in action?

Because all the literary materials that we have considered in the course of writing this article express the importance of the belief in resurrection as an element that is integral to community self-definition, it would only be logical to also expect material evidence (particularly funerary inscriptions) to bear out such a belief, meaning that references to the resurrection, or to certain burial practices, may have been typical in some communities, while conspicuously absent in others. However, in reality, material evidence for the resurrection is scarce in Judaic writing and even scantier in the writing of early Christians. Of all the Roman Jewish inscriptions, only three per cent have been found to refer to an afterlife (Rutgers 1998:159), whereas, for Christians, the amount of epigraphic material evidence from before the 4th century CE (mostly from Rome and Anatolia) rarely mentions resurrection. Iconography tells a similar tale; the earliest Christian examples of any depiction of the afterlife are images of the raising of Lazarus, also from the mid-3rd century CE, whereas images of Jesus' resurrection do not appear until the late 4th century CE (Jensen 2000:156–182). Further complicating our search for material evidence is the fact that many of the phrases

used in funerary inscriptions were conventional and therefore may or may not reflect their original meaning (see e.g. Van der Horst 1991:11–21), nor is it always clear who is Jewish and who is Christian, or what the religious symbols used actually meant (Kraemer 1991:141–162).

Identifiable evidence

With all of the above in mind, three kinds of material evidence still come into play when searching in early Jewish and Christian communities for evidence of resurrection belief: inscribing ‘ever after’, packaging forever and taking the present life into the afterlife.

Inscribing ‘ever after’

Jewish and Christian inscriptions in the early centuries (of which the former, although sparse, far outnumber the identifiable latter) usually describe the customs of the time and what the person whose inscription it is did in their life (see e.g. Rutgers 1998). We only possess singular and anomalous inscriptions displaying explicit expectations of an afterlife. Interestingly, the most common references to resurrection in early Jewish and Christian funerary materials do not point to the deceased, but rather to those who might violate the tomb (see e.g. Park 2000:144–145; Van der Horst 1991:54–60).

Packaging forever

The Jewish practice of secondary burial (Rahmani 1981:43–53, 1982:109–119) has been linked by some to an increased belief in bodily resurrection, as care was apparently taken to keep the individual body intact and to avoid mingling the bones of one body with those of another. The bones were also arranged in a certain order, with the skull on top and usually in ossuaries of stone, ensuring that the box would not decay and allow the bones to mingle. The question here is whether such a custom points to a change (or amplification) of belief in an afterlife (especially in terms of a resurrection) or whether this was simply a more efficient way of burial, allowing for more burials to take place in a family grave (e.g. Kraemer 2000:50–53; Park 2000:50–53)?

Taking the present life into the afterlife

In considering the taking of the present life into the afterlife, we refer to the presence of grave goods buried with the deceased, which is probably the most ambiguous evidence of all concerning belief in an or the afterlife. Such evidence is prone to misinterpretation, as it has led to the questioning of whether the presence of such goods came about as a matter of convention or due to a deeply held belief. A range of opinions and a variety of proposed explanations have been offered for the presence of the artefacts concerned (for the range of the spectrum, see e.g. Hachlili 1998:292, 303, 309–310; Park 2000:41–44).

Resulting conclusions

Our expectation of the material evidence showing communities to be distinguished by their belief in the resurrection has not been fulfilled by the material evidence, as one kind of expression, either for or against resurrection, does not typify one community over another (Johnson 1997:37–59; Rutgers 1998). Thus, the material evidence is generally mute on the matter of an afterlife, with relative uniformity prevailing across the Mediterranean in this regard. This points us in the direction of a generalised Roman culture, in the face of which certain groups felt compelled to distinguish themselves by defending (both in their writing and in their preaching) their distinctive teaching of resurrection. So, while ideas of some form of afterlife were common in the ancient world, those who believed in the resurrection of the body were a minority (Setzer 2004a:2). Of such believers, the Christians defended the idea most stridently and extensively.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Using some of the categories presented by Cohen (1985) in his work on the use of symbols in the modern construction of community, I suggest that some of the reasons why the idea of the resurrection worked so effectively as a symbol were possibly the following:

- The idea condensed a world view – as Douglas (1973:195) puts it, ‘body attitudes are condensed statements about the relation of society to the individual’.
- As an imprecise and abstract symbol, it could capture and contain a variety of subjective meanings and individual interpretations (Cohen 1985:21).
- It drew boundaries, functioning as a visible marker that distinguished those on the inside from those on the outside, which was especially important in times when the structural base of the community was weakening.
- The idea helped to construct the community by erecting symbolic boundaries, strengthening the cohesion of people within the framework of the group’s sense of common identity.
- The concept conferred legitimacy on those who preached it, although such a symbol only works if others recognise it. The symbol of the resurrection conferred authority on those who promoted it exactly because it was recognisable to a significant number of people (Setzer 2004a:47).
- It solved a set of problems created by Palestine’s incorporation into the Roman Empire: the loss of Jewish sovereignty, the suffering of the Jews under Gentile domination and the seeming withdrawal of God’s favour towards Israel.

For the early Jews and Christians, a belief in the resurrection thus seemed to say that outward forms did not necessarily tell the whole truth about deeper realities (Setzer 2004a:2). Such a belief allowed its adherents to live in the world as it was, enabling them to reconcile the gap between beliefs and reality to ‘massage away the tension’ (Cohen 1985:92) created by the disparity between what was and what ought to have been (according to the community in question’s beliefs). The belief also allowed them to retain their commitment to a certain community and its history, ‘to imagine and construct an alternate reality to the dominant social institutions of their immediate context and its moral values’ (Vaage 1994:56).

The importance of Christ’s uniqueness

Popular public discourse on religion links Christian identity to an understanding of Christ as unique (Woodward 2000:52). Interesting to note is that it is ‘eschatology’ that is often implicated in establishing that uniqueness (Johnson-DeBaufre 2005:116). Logically, the Christians’ belief in the first claim (which belief was considered to be essential) necessitated the second claim, with the first claim invoking the ontological truth of Christ’s uniqueness. Many theologians have pointed out the difficulty raised for interreligious relations by such claims to ontological uniqueness, together with its attendant claims of superiority with respect to other religious tradition. Although many other scholars have also criticised the ways that claims of uniqueness have functioned to insulate Christianity from unwanted comparisons, such scholars rarely articulate their own interests in the acceptance or rejection of Christian uniqueness. Johnson-DeBaufre (2005:116–128) discusses four such possible interests or characteristics of contemporary debates over Christian uniqueness:

- Christian apologetics and the quest for pure origins, whether such origins take the form of a singular and momentous person (the historical Jesus), a programme (the *basileia* [rule and reign] of God), or an event (the crucifixion and/or resurrection), ‘have rarely been cognitive, but rather almost always apologetic’ in nature (Smith 1990:143).
- An emphasis on eschatology as an existential understanding of life, individualising eschatology to the exclusion of the ‘political and social factors which determine such experience

of existence in a particular historical situation' (Koester 1985:72), removed both Jesus and early Christianity from their complex historical contexts.

- In terms of the understanding and implication of the idea that the debates over Jesus' uniqueness (whether human or ontological) took place within the larger field of Christological reflection and its relationship to Christian identity and self-understanding, 'eschatology' stands out as a cipher for finality and ultimacy (Freyne 1997:90).

Does rejecting uniqueness claims involve 'deconstructing Jesus' divinity' and accepting that he was 'just a Jew who chose to emphasise certain ideas'? In response, once again, 'eschatological' and 'non-eschatological' emerge as terms in the debate which point to larger issues – in this case, the discourse about Christology and the continuity between the early Christian *kerigma* (preaching) and teaching of the historical Jesus.

The great divide

The methodological critique of uniqueness claims often constructs a divide between theological apologetics and respectable and disciplined historical scholarship, constructing a sharp break between the theologically or ethically or politically-engaged scholar as religious practitioner and the 'interested only in knowledge' scholar as legitimate academician (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1999:69). One of the reasons for such a divide to emerge is the fact that scholars are not in the habit of articulating their own theological and/or ideological interests. However, it is to be understood that knowledge is never produced just for its own sake. Indeed, the divide has long been deconstructed in both theory and practice. Insofar as scholars use historical arguments to 're-make the Jesus sign' (Arnal 1997:308–319) for their contemporary readers, they participate in the larger public discourse about Christian identity in a pluralistic world (Arnal 1997:317). The epistemological nature of the dichotomy becomes apparent in Johnson's (1996:57) characterisation of the current state of biblical scholarship as a contest between two orientations to Christianity: 'Christianity regarded as a way of life rooted in and organised around a genuine experience of ultimate reality mediated by the crucified and raised Messiah' and 'Christianity as another among the world's religions (i.e. fundamentally a cultural reality rooted in the human construction of symbolic worlds)'.

MOVING FORWARD

In the context of such an epistemological divide, historians are expected to continue to avoid articulating their own interests. But Christian claims of 'difference plus superlative value' – particularly with regard to the interpretations of Jesus – are as old as the Gospels (and the *kerigma*) themselves. Indeed, the doctrines that are often at stake in discussions of eschatology and uniqueness claims are Christological doctrines, which form the basic building blocks of Christian identity.

Without setting aside our own interests in the contemporary discussion, we need to locate our interpretations within the ongoing debate on such issues. In order to develop criteria for evaluating the discourses of Christian uniqueness, we must begin not with 'disinterested' methodology, but rather with the contemporary situation and with the process of analysing our contemporary discourses alongside (and towards informing) our exegetical work. In this way, we may be opening up new possibilities for thinking about the texts and materials of early Christianity. The work of envisioning the *basileia* cannot end with the biblical texts and authoritative interpretations of them, but must continue on through participation in the present ongoing public discourse that seeks to shape Christian identity in a diverse world. A world such as this possesses a scientific ethos demanding both ethical and cognitive criteria that must be reasoned out in terms of standard knowledge, which simultaneously has the capacity to be intersubjectively understood and communicated (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1999:195–196).

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