

No Sex in Heaven—Nor on Earth?

Luke 20:27–38 as a Proof-Text in Early Christian
Discourses on Resurrection and Asceticism

OUTI LEHTIPUU

ACCORDING TO ALL THREE Synoptic Gospels, Jesus engages in a controversy with the Sadducees over the resurrection of the dead.¹ The story has puzzled scholars and other readers of the Bible alike. In her monograph *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke–Acts* and subsequent articles, Turid Karlsen Seim has offered a persuasive reading of Luke’s version of the debate demonstrating that the Lukan Jesus promotes celibacy as a sign of an anticipatory participation in the resurrection. Those who “neither marry nor are given in marriage” are like angels (*ισάγγελοι*) and cannot die. The passage became important for several early Christian writers in their discussions on resurrection and on celibacy. In this essay, I analyze some early interpretations of the passage as a token of my gratitude to all that I have learned from Turid and her scholarship.

In the narrative, some Sadducees who “say that there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit”² try to trip Jesus up by asking him whose wife a woman who has married seven brothers, one after another, will be at the resurrection. Jesus escapes the trap by denying any marriage after resurrection: “For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given

1. Mark 12:18–27; Matt 22:23–33; Luke 20:27–38.

2. Cf. Acts 23:8. All biblical passages are according to the *New Revised Standard Version*, copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, if not otherwise noted.

in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” He then confirms the reality of resurrection by quoting the story of Moses and the burning bush: “And concerning 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, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.”

Jesus’ answer contains several peculiarities. If Jesus wants to demonstrate the reality of resurrection, why does he appeal to the example of the patriarchs? In what sense can they be a proof of God being “God of the living”—were they not dead both at the time of Moses and at the time of Jesus, until the resurrection on the last day? The incongruity is even stronger in Luke’s version of the story, for he has made an addition: “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.”³ The present tense of the verb ζῶω implies that the patriarchs are alive—have they, then, already been raised from the dead? The phrase “all live to him” has a close counterpart in 4 Maccabees, a writing that does not speak about resurrection but about immortality (ἀθανασία) and that links “living to God” both to the patriarchs long gone and the contemporary faithful: “they believe that they, like our patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, do not die to God, but live to God”⁴ and “those who die for the sake of God live to God as do Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the patriarchs.”⁵

It may be asked, however, whether the tension is only ostensible, or whether it is based on the presupposition that “resurrection” is something other than “immortality.” This has been the traditional view in scholarship where the “Hebrew” concept of the resurrection of the body and the “Greek” concept of the immortality of the soul have been sharply contrasted and taken to be mutually exclusive.⁶ Early Jewish and Christian belief, it has been claimed, cherishes a monistic understanding of the human being where body and soul make up a unified whole. Greek thinking, in contrast, is believed to promote strict dualism of body and soul. The evidence does not support such a clear-cut dichotomy, for both ideas and different kinds of combinations of them exist side by side in early Jewish sources and the many Greco-Roman polytheistic cults and mythological stories were no less

3. This is a literal translation of the Greek πάντες γὰρ αὐτῷ ζῶσιν. The NRSV’s rendering of the phrase is “to him all of them are alive.”

4. ζῶσιν τῷ θεῷ; 4 Macc 7:19.

5. ζῶσιν τῷ θεῷ; 4 Macc 16:25.

6. A classic example of this is Cullman, “Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead,” 9–35.

diverse. The traditional stance has been thoroughly refuted⁷ but echoes of it still frequently appear in the scholarly literature.⁸

The Lukan version of the resurrection debate shows how, instead of representing clearly distinguishable alternatives, the concepts were often blurred and conflated. Jesus gives the Sadducees a “double answer”;⁹ the dead are raised and the patriarchs are alive. The logic of Jesus’ argument in v. 38 requires that the patriarchs have been alive all along. Their resurrection means their postmortem exaltation to heaven where they already participate in spiritual and immortal heavenly life.¹⁰ “Resurrection is being recast as immortality,” as Turid has phrased it.¹¹

There is more to Luke’s reshaping of Jesus’ answer. Whereas Mark—and Matthew who follows Mark closely in this passage—makes a temporal distinction between life now, when people marry and (be)get children, and life after resurrection, when they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven, Luke puts less emphasis on the chronological dichotomy. According to Turid’s reading, while Luke’s Jesus does not totally abandon the temporal categories, his accent is on spatiality and on transfer from an earthly to a heavenly sphere.¹² This means that the distinction in Luke’s version is not so much between now and then but between two groups of people: “children of this age” and “children of the resurrection.”¹³ These are concurrent groups that are not differentiated by time but by ethical characteristics.¹⁴ Those who are considered “worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead” show their belonging to this group by not marrying; that is, by choosing celibacy. They have become like angels and can no longer die.¹⁵ Through their ascetically inclined lifestyle they already participate in the resurrection and “live to God” like the patriarchs.¹⁶

7. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life*, 219–23.

8. For a recent example, see Segal, *Life after Death*, 533–35.

9. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1301.

10. McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, 26–27.

11. Seim, “In Heaven as on Earth,” 28.

12. Seim, *Double Message*, 215–17; “Children of the Resurrection,” 119–20; “In Heaven as on Earth,” 23.

13. Luke 20:34, 36. Seim, *Double Message*, 216–17.

14. Cf. the juxtaposition of “children of this age” and “children of light” in Luke 16:8. In this passage, it is clear that Jesus refers to two coexisting but morally different groups of people.

15. The connection between celibacy and immortality shows that there is a link between marriage and death: marriage and procreation are needed in order to overcome death by gaining afterlife through progeny. Seim, *Double Message*, 219.

16. There are several other early Jewish and Christian texts, such as *Joseph and*

Angelic Beings and the Resurrection of the Flesh

The question of how Jesus' answer to the Sadducees should be interpreted became a topic of a heated debate early on. During the formative centuries of Christianity, the resurrection of the dead—one of the most controversial issues—was often used as a test or touchstone for belonging: in several texts only those who understand resurrection in the same way as the author are counted as authentic Christians.¹⁷ Often the question evolved into a dispute concerning the resurrection of the flesh: would resurrection entail the recovery of the earthly body or not? Jesus' words about the resurrected ones as angels offered an important proof-text for those Christians who rejected the belief in the resurrection of the flesh. It is noteworthy that they did not necessarily refute a bodily resurrection—but for them the resurrection body would undergo a complete transformation and be made of another substance than the imperfect and weak earthly flesh. The defenders of the resurrection of the flesh did not deny that there would be some change; the resurrection body would be a perfected body, no longer subject to sin, weakness, and corruption. However, they insisted that it would still be the same body of flesh and blood.

There were several reasons why some Christians found the idea of the resurrection of the flesh untenable. In a writing entitled *On the Resurrection* that was formerly ascribed to Justin Martyr (and whose anonymous author is therefore called Pseudo-Justin) three sets of reasons are given. First, the resurrection of the flesh is impossible (*ἀδύνατον*), since that which is corrupt and disassembled cannot be restored to the same state in which it was previously. Second, it is useless (*ἀσύμφορον*), for who would want back the weak flesh that causes humans to sin. If the flesh will rise, its deficiencies will also rise with it. Third, either the body will rise in its entirety, with all its members and body parts, or it will rise only in part. If the latter is the case, God's power is manifestly imperfect since he cannot make the whole body rise. The former alternative, however, is strange and out of place (*ἄτοπον*), since there is no need for all body members after the resurrection. Had not Jesus said "they will be like angels" and being angel-like denotes life without sexual intercourse and eating? Why, then, would the risen body include sexual and alimentary organs?¹⁸

Aseneth or Philo's idealizing description of the Therapeutae in *De vita contemplativa* that link immortality with a certain lifestyle; see Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism*, 39–42.

17. I discuss the topic in detail in my book *The Debate over the Resurrection of the Dead: Constructing Early Christian Identity*.

18. Pseudo-Justin, *On the Resurrection* 2.

For Pseudo-Justin, an ardent promoter of the resurrection of the flesh, this is an inferior opinion (*χειρῶν*) and the arguments used only mislead the faithful ones. Both this and the fact that his opponents use Jesus' words as their proof show that these deniers of the physical resurrection are other Christians. Strikingly, their arguments are very similar to the ones that Celsus, the most famous second-century critic of Christianity, brings forward.¹⁹ This indicates that there were no clear borderlines, on the one side Christians defending the resurrection of the flesh and on the other side non-Christians ridiculing it, but the boundaries crisscrossed and often ran between diversely thinking Christian groups. For example, Origen, Celsus' Christian partner-in-dialogue, did not attack Celsus' reasoning against resurrection, but rather complained that he had not understood the true Christian position. It is only the "simpler believers" who maintain that the earthly flesh will rise again. In his reading of Jesus' debate with the Sadducees, Origen takes "being like angels" to mean that at the resurrection the human body will be transformed into a celestial spiritual body that is of a much finer and higher substance than the earthly body.²⁰

In his counterargument, Pseudo-Justin creates an alternative exegesis of Jesus' words. He does not reject the reasoning of his opponents as such; he agrees that there is no sex or eating in heaven. However, the rival interpretation goes wrong when it maintains that this logically leads to the conclusion that there is no bodily resurrection.²¹ At the resurrection, sexual organs will remain intact but they will not be used for the same functions as on earth. The basic function of the womb is to become pregnant and that of the "masculine part" (*μόριον ἀνδρικόν*) to beget. However, neither function is necessary: there are barren women who do not become pregnant even though they have a womb and others, both women and men, who abstain from sexual intercourse and still have their sexual organs.²² To strengthen his argument, the writer even refers to the animal world; mules have sexual organs but they do not bear or beget. If having sexual organs does not unavoidably lead to sexual intercourse in this world, it will certainly not do so in the world to come.

19. See Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.14.

20. Origen, *On First Principles* 2.2.2. This passage, as most of the work, is only preserved in Rufinus's Latin translation, which is not a literal one. Thus, it is not entirely certain whether it corresponds to what Origen wrote in the original Greek.

21. Pseudo-Justin, *On the Resurrection* 3.

22. Cf. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection* 61.6–7: "We also, as we are able, give the mouth release from food, and even abstain from sexual intercourse. How many voluntary eunuchs are there, how many virgins wedded to Christ, how many barren of both sexes equipped with genitals that bear no fruit."

All in all, the writer has a negative attitude toward sexual intercourse. He praises Jesus for not falling to the “desires of the flesh” and values the virgin birth which “destroyed begetting by lawless desire.” In his life, Jesus showed that sexual intercourse can be abolished; even though he otherwise submitted himself to a fully human life and had to eat, drink, and clothe himself, he did not have sex. This, in Pseudo-Justin’s view, shows that sexual intercourse is not a necessity like the others. The logic of this line of thought for bodily resurrection is not completely clear. Pseudo-Justin draws an analogy between this life and the life to come. If the redundancy of sexual intercourse in this life implies that it is not necessary in the world to come, does not the necessity of food, drink, and clothing for the earthly flesh imply their inevitability for the resurrected flesh as well? According to a strong tradition, however, angels did not eat²³—how could those who will be like angels in heaven need food or drink? In his counterargument, however, Pseudo-Justin does not address the question of eating but restricts his discussion to sex.

Another early defender of the resurrection of the flesh was Tertullian of Carthage. He faced similar challenges as Pseudo-Justin when interpreting Jesus’ words about angels and solved them much in a similar fashion but went even further in elaborating a counterexegesis. In his treatise which is also known by the name *On the Resurrection*, Tertullian reminds his readers that those who asked Jesus about the woman of seven husbands at the resurrection were Sadducees, who were known for refuting the resurrection of both the body and the soul. In his answer, the Lord affirmed the resurrection of both parts: the scriptures openly preach resurrection and God certainly has the power to raise the dead. The Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection, show ignorance of the scriptures and disbelief in the power of God, he claims,²⁴ as do all those who understand Jesus’ words

23. The Jewish tradition knew many stories where angels appear in human guise and seem to be eating but this proves to be an illusion. For example, in Tobit, when the archangel Raphael discloses his true identity, he explains that “although you were watching me, I really did not eat or drink anything—but what you saw was a vision” (Tob 12:19). Similarly, in the *Testament of Abraham*, the archangel Michael is one of the three men who visit Abraham in the oaks of Mamre. Abraham invites the visitors to dine with him and Michael needs advice from God. He says: “Lord, all the heavenly spirits are incorporeal, and they neither eat nor drink. Now he has set before me a table with an abundance of all the good things which are earthly and perishable. And now, Lord, what shall I do? How shall I escape his notice while I am sitting at one table with him?” The Lord answers: “Go down to him and do not be concerned about this. For when you are seated with him I shall send upon you an all-devouring spirit, and, from your hands and through your mouth, it will consume everything which is on the table” (TAbr 4:9–10; trans. Sanders in *OTP*).

24. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection* 36. Cf. Mark 12:24.

as proof of a non-bodily resurrection. What the Lord says is: “they will not marry”—he does not say “they will not be raised.” They will certainly be raised but they will be transformed “into an angelic state by that garment of incorruptibility” (*in statum angelicum per indumentum illud incorruptibilitatis*). Since their substance has changed, they do not marry and they do not die—yet they are raised in a fleshly substance. Tertullian turns the reasoning of his rivals upside down and states that the whole question of the Sadducees about the prospective heavenly marriage of the woman implies that they will be raised bodily—without a body with all its members capable to marry, the whole question would be senseless.

Tertullian also emphasizes that the body will be raised in its entirety. His rivals ridicule such a view by asking what mouth, teeth, throat, gullet, intestines, and stomach would serve when eating and drinking have ceased. And why would there be a need for the reproductive organs, when there is no marriage and no procreation?²⁵ Tertullian counters these contradictions with arguments similar to those of Pseudo-Justin; the members have one set of functions in this life and another set in the future life. “When life itself has been delivered from necessities the members also will be delivered from their functions: but they will not for that reason be unnecessary.”²⁶ First of all, it is necessary that all body parts will remain since they will also be judged. Secondly, there are many other functions for them. For example, the most important function for teeth is not eating but praising God, as the example of Adam shows. “Adam pronounced names for the animals before he plucked of the tree: he was a prophet before he was an eater.”²⁷ Other important functions for the teeth consist in helping in articulation and adorning the mouth.

Similarly, the different apertures of the “lower parts” of men and women (*inferna in viro et in femina*) are not needed for copulation only but also for health so that “the excreta may be filtered” and the function of the womb is not only to gather the male seed but to control the excess of blood “which the less energetic sex has not the strength to throw off.”²⁸ These functions may be in line with ancient medical understanding, but Tertullian’s reasoning faces the same problem as those of Pseudo-Justin above: if angels, and those like them, do not eat, do they then need to defecate?

25. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection* 60.2–3.

26. *Ibid.*, 60.5. Translation here and elsewhere follows that of Evans in Tertullian’s *Treatise on the Resurrection*.

27. *Ibid.*, 61.1.

28. *Ibid.*, 61.3.

In a further passage of the same treatise,²⁹ Tertullian develops another line of argument. When Jesus speaks of the “children of the resurrection” he says that they will be *like* angels—not that they will be angels. He refers to the story of the three men visiting Abraham in Mamre, who were widely believed to have been angels.³⁰ According to Tertullian, the story shows that angels can be like human beings. Even though they do not lose their angelic substance and have no human flesh, they eat, drink and have their feet washed. If angels, who are spiritual beings, can be treated as if they had human flesh, why would human beings—who are of flesh—not be able to partake in heavenly life, “being, under their angelic clothing, no more tied to the usages of the flesh than the angels then, under human clothing, were tied to the usages of the spirit?”³¹

In another writing aimed against Marcion’s understanding of the resurrection of Christ, however, Tertullian gives a different reading of the Genesis passage. Marcion, who claimed that the visible world was created by a lower God, did not accept the physical resurrection of Christ but maintained rather that the disciples saw the spirit of the resurrected Christ and that his fleshly form was only apparent.³² This was similar to the appearance of the angels to Abraham and Lot. Tertullian rejects this interpretation and affirms that the angels were of “veritable and complete human substance.”³³ He adds ironically that perhaps Marcion’s God, who has never produced any flesh, would not have been able to provide the angels with a fleshly body. In contrast, “my God who reshaped into the quality we know, that flesh which he had taken up out of clay . . . was no less able out of any material whatsoever to construct flesh for angels as well.”³⁴ Tertullian even refers to Jesus’ debate with the Sadducees but without countering Marcion’s interpretation of it: “And truly, if your god promises to humans some time the true substance of angels—They will, he says, be as the angels—why should not my God too have granted to angels the true human substance, from wheresoever he may have taken it?”³⁵

Debates over the meaning of Jesus’ words to the Sadducees continued in later centuries. An early fourth-century example is offered in the

29. *Ibid.*, 62.

30. Genesis 18; cf. n23 above.

31. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection* 62.3.

32. Cf. Luke 24:39.

33. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.9.2. Translation here and elsewhere by Evans (with slight modifications).

34. *Ibid.*, 3.9.3.

35. *Ibid.*, 3.9.4.

Discourse on the Resurrection by Methodius, the bishop of Olympos. The text is cast into a dialogue with a certain Aglaophon, but it is directed against the alleged views of Origen. The text has survived only in parts, preserved in later writings.³⁶ Methodius' reasoning follows along lines similar to his predecessors but he develops them further. He draws arguments in favor of the resurrection of the flesh from the heavenly hierarchy, from the goodness of creation, and from the metaphorical nature of Jesus' words.

Methodius shares Tertullian's viewpoint and explains that Jesus speaks of the resurrected ones as being like angels but he does not identify them with angels.³⁷ Angels are only one class of immortals; in addition to them, there are rulers (ἀρχοντες) and powers (ἐξουσίαι) and all of them have "different species, bodies and varieties." A creature of one class cannot be changed into another kind; angels cannot become powers for each class of beings has its own place and order. Thus, human nature will not be changed into an angelic one but only resemble it. When God created humans He intended them to be humans, not angels. Proposing that humans become angels at the resurrection implies that the creation of humans was a mistake. Either God had originally wished to make an angel but was too weak to accomplish it, or his creation was bad and he repented of it. Both ideas would be blasphemous.

In Methodius' view, being like angels at the resurrection does not denote resurrection without flesh but life without marriage. Resurrection life will be angelic life in the sense that it will resemble life in paradise in honor and glory. Instead of marriage-feasts and other festivities, the resurrected ones will be in the presence of Christ and praise him with the angels. Yet there is gradation between the "children of the resurrection" and angels. Just as it is possible to say of the moon on a bright night that it "shines like the sun" without meaning that it is the sun, it can similarly be said of the resurrected ones that they are like angels even though they are not transformed into angels. Lastly, Methodius makes a terminological point. Raising up cannot mean the resurrection of the soul only, because only the one that has fallen can be raised up. It is the body that dies and is laid down into the grave, while the soul remains immortal. Thus, those who say that there is no resurrection of the flesh, deny any kind of resurrection. Jesus talked about the raising of the dead which cannot be anything other than raising their flesh into a new life.

36. A largish portion is preserved in Epiphanius's *Panarion* 64.12–62, and another fragment in Photius's *Bibliotheca* 234.

37. Cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 64.41.3–43.8.

Jerome, another ardent opponent of Origen, writing at the end of the fourth century, agrees; human beings also remain human at the resurrection. In his letter to Theodora which he wrote to console her after the death of her husband, Jerome explains that the words “they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven” do not mean that the “natural and real” body would be taken away. Instead, it indicates what kind of a glory is awaiting. The resurrected ones will not cease to be human and the difference of sex will also remain. “The apostle Paul will still be Paul, Mary will still be Mary.”³⁸ The physical differences between sexes, however, do not necessitate marriage. Jerome refers to the marriage of Theodora and her late husband as a sister/brother relationship where they voluntarily abstained from sexual intercourse. If this was possible in the corruptible world, how much more in the incorruptible one!³⁹

In another of his letters, written to Eustochium to console her after the death of her mother Paula, Jerome comes back to the question of the resurrection of the flesh and sexual distinction. He recalls an event when Paula was encountered by a teacher who opposed the belief in the resurrection of the flesh and who tried to prove his point by questions such as whether in the next world there will be a distinction of sexes. If yes, will there not also be marriage and procreation? If no, will the bodies not be transformed into something other than what they are in this world? Jerome’s answer to this dilemma is that the bodies will remain the same, which includes sexual distinction. “If the woman shall not rise again as a woman nor the man as a man, there will be no resurrection of the body for the body is made up of sex and members.”⁴⁰ As a proof of this Jerome refers to Jesus’ controversy with the Sadducees. Their whole discussion is about marriage. This implies that both parties knew that the distinction of sex will remain in resurrection. “For no one says of things which have no capacity for marriage such as a stick or a stone that they neither marry nor are given in marriage; but this may well be said of those who while they can marry yet abstain from doing so by their own virtue and by the grace of Christ.” Abstaining from sex means participation in the life of angels and in their bliss. Already in this world all holy men and virgins lead an angelic life when they stay continent. Yet, their human nature is not changed, not on earth and not in heaven, for what the Lord promises is a likeness to the angels, not becoming them.

As these examples show, Jesus’ comparison of resurrectional to angelic life compelled the defenders of the resurrection of the flesh to walk a thin

38. Jerome, *Letter 75 (To Theodora)* 2.

39. Cf. 1 Cor 15:53.

40. Jerome, *Letter 108 (To Eustochium)* 23 (trans. Freemantle).

line in order to reconcile their belief with Jesus' words. A popular way of doing this was to allow for the theoretical possibility of marriage and children in the future world but to emphasize the voluntary abstinence from them in an angelic manner. Many writers appealed to the example of virgins and others who chose celibacy in this world. For some, celibacy became a sign of the future life, an ideal way of life that would lead into eternal life and bliss.

Virgins Are Already Beginning to Be Angels

One of the central characteristics of early Christian way of life was the ideal of ascetic renunciation.⁴¹ Several influential authors produced exhortations to virginity,⁴² addressed primarily to women.⁴³ Not infrequently they linked virginity with resurrection by referring to Jesus' debate with the Sadducees. The link between celibacy and resurrection took several forms. First, those who led a life of an ascetic were seen to be already partaking in the angelic life of resurrection. Second, future resurrection and judgment served as reminders of the importance of the modest ascetic lifestyle. Third, those who strove to maintain their virginity were promised the better rewards in the future resurrection life.

An illuminating example of this is offered by Cyprian of Carthage in his treatise, *On the Dress of Virgins*, written in the first half of the third century. In his instructions to virgins about chastity and a modest life he often refers to resurrection. He promises to those who hold fast to virginity that chastity brings an immense advantage both for this life and especially for the future life.⁴⁴ First, virgins will not experience any sorrows and pain associated with child bearing and they do not have to submit to their husbands.⁴⁵ Second, since they do not marry or are given to marriage they are counted worthy of resurrection. Jesus' words, "they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection,"⁴⁶ mean participation in the future life already in this life:

41. Brown, *Body and Society*, 33–64; Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 14–42; Lehtipuu, "Example of Thecla," 361–69.

42. E.g., Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins*; Novatian, *In Praise of Purity*; Methodius, *Symposium (on Virginity)*; John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*; Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*.

43. Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality," 76–86.

44. Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins* 22.

45. Both were common *topoi* in early Christian discourses on virginity; Lehtipuu, "Example of Thecla," 361–62.

46. Cyprian seems to quote the Lukan passage by heart and writes: "they are equal to the angels of God, being children of the resurrection" (*On the Dress of Virgins* 22).

What we shall be, already you have begun to be. The glory of the resurrection you already have in this world; you pass through the world without the pollution of the world; while you remain chaste and virgins, you are equal to the angels of God.⁴⁷

According to Cyprian, virgins are already participating in the process of becoming angels. This requires perseverance in modesty, not seeking “necklaces and clothing as adornments, but right conduct” and setting one’s mind on God and heaven, instead of the “lust of the flesh” and earth. Cyprian warns those who are tempted by the flesh and want to adorn themselves outwardly. Using cosmetics or otherwise altering outward appearance may mean that God will not recognize His image at judgment:

Are you not afraid . . . that when the day of resurrection comes, your Maker may not recognize you again, and may turn you away when you come to His rewards and promises, and may exclude you . . . and say: This is not my work, nor is this our image. You have defiled [the] skin with a lying cosmetics, you have changed [the] hair with an adulterous color, your face is violently taken possession of by a lie, your figure is corrupted, your countenance is another’s. You cannot see God, since your eyes are not those which God made but which the devil has infected. Him you have followed; the red and painted eyes of the serpent have you imitated; adorned like your enemy, with him you shall likewise burn.⁴⁸

Even though the virginal life is already participation in the angelic life, temptations lurk and succumbing to them means an absolute fall. For those who endure, however, Cyprian promises the best rewards: “But when He says that in His Father’s house there are many mansions,⁴⁹ He points to the homes of a better habitation. Those better dwellings you are seeking; by cutting away the desires of the flesh you are obtaining the reward of a greater grace in heaven.”⁵⁰ All who have been sanctified by baptism, have put off the old nature⁵¹ and will be saved, but “the greater sanctity and truth of the second birth belong to you who no longer have any desires of the flesh and of the body.”

Several other thinkers linked virginity, participation in the resurrection, and special rewards in the afterlife in a manner similar to Cyprian.

47. Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins* 22. Translation here and elsewhere by Keenan.

48. *Ibid.* 17.

49. Cf. John 14:2.

50. Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins* 23.

51. Cf. Eph 4:22.

Gregory of Nyssa, writing in the late fourth-century Cappadocia viewed sexuality as a secondary means of survival, which only appeared after Adam's fall. Marriage and childbirth did not belong to God's original plan but became necessary to enable humankind to produce offspring and thus to conquer death.⁵² In his treatise *On the Making of Humanity*, Gregory reasons that the resurrection means the restoration of humankind to its original, paradisiacal state where there will be no marriage and procreation. Life before the fall resembled the life of angels and Jesus' words to the Sadducees reveal that the final condition of humans will again be angelic.⁵³ Gregory also penned a treatise *On Virginity* where he claims that a peculiar characteristic of angelic nature is that angels are free of marriage (*ἀπηλλάχθαι τοῦ γάμου*). Being angel-like requires that one imitates the purity of angels by renouncing marriage here and now and thus takes part of the blessings of the future life.⁵⁴

Another prolific late fourth-century writer, John Chrysostom, thinks along similar lines in his treatise *On Virginity*. According to him, virgins come as close to being angels as is possible for humans who, by nature, are inferior to heavenly beings. Virgins resemble angels in two respects. First, like angels they "neither marry nor are given in marriage" and, second, they continuously stand before God and serve him.⁵⁵ Living in this world, virgins are unable to ascend to heaven as angels do, since their flesh holds them back. However, they already receive heavenly consolation and magnificent blessing knowing what awaits them.

For these writers, sexual abstinence means participating in the heavenly life already on earth. Resurrection becomes a process that starts in this life and that finds its fulfillment in heaven where the best places are reserved for those who voluntarily give up the pleasures of this world. In the rhetoric of the promoters of virginity, purity of body and soul which is seen in the renouncing of sexual intercourse and in modest behavior makes virgins almost equal to angels. Novatian, the third-century writer who was known for his rigorist ideas and whose followers called themselves the pure ones (*καθαροί*), went even further. He claimed that virgins will actually be superior to angels for they, unlike angels, have flesh against which they must struggle to gain mastery. "What is virginity, if not a magnificent contemplation of the afterlife?" he exclaims.⁵⁶

52. Brown, *Body and Society*, 294–97.

53. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Humanity* 17.2.

54. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 14.4.

55. John Chrysostom, *On Virginity* 11.1.

56. Novatian, *On Praise of Purity* 7.3 (trans. DeSimon).

Monogamy as a Happy Medium between Excessive Asceticism and Immorality

The “higher calling” of virginity, although praised by many early theologians, was not an option for all. Most Christians did get married and raised children—a new Christian generation.⁵⁷ Moreover, celibacy was not always an individual choice; especially with the development of monasticism it was often the parents who decided which one(s) of their children would become an ascetic.⁵⁸ The sources describing the life of early ascetics are mostly confined to exceptional individuals, such as Anthony of Egypt, and, especially in the case of women, to elite point-of-view. What was possible for upper class ladies such as Macrina or Olympias, was not necessarily an option for women of lower classes.⁵⁹ Many ascetically inclined early Christian writers also valued marriage as a proper way of life for “ordinary” Christians. However, for those who wanted to strive for perfection, sexual abstinence remained the standard ideal.

Clement of Alexandria is one of the writers who values marriage and procreation. He wants to strike a happy medium between two extremes, both of which he finds unreasonable. On the one hand, he disapproves of rigorous sexual asceticism; on the other hand, he condemns all promiscuous behavior.⁶⁰ In his view, both “celibacy and marriage have their distinctive services of the Lord”⁶¹ and although he does not refuse voluntary celibacy, he regards monogamous marriage as the better choice.⁶² This conviction guides his reading of the Sadducean controversy, too. Jesus’ answer does not mean rejection of marriage as such but it confirms that after the resurrection, there will be no physical desire.⁶³ In another passage, Clement points out that the words “they do not marry and are not given in marriage” only refer to life after resurrection.⁶⁴ Marriage is part of human life on earth, just like eating is. He appeals to the words of the Apostle Paul who declared, “Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will put an end

57. Osiek and MacDonald, *Woman’s Place*, 4–6; Brown, *Body and Society*, 138.

58. Vuolanto, “Choosing Asceticism,” 288–91.

59. Cf. Brown, *Body and Society*, 6. “Only the privileged or the eccentric few could enjoy the freedom to do what they pleased with their sexual drives.”

60. Buell, “Ambiguous Legacy,” 46–47.

61. *Stromateis* 3.12.79.5.

62. Brown, *Body and Society*, 122–39. Clement reinforces his argument by maintaining that even Paul was married, *Stromateis* 3.6.53.1.

63. *Stromateis* 3.12.87.1–2.

64. *Ibid.*, 3.6.47.3.

to both.⁶⁵ Even though it is true that in the world to come, there will be no sex and no food, both of them belong to this life. Those who think that they have already attained the state of resurrection and for this reason repudiate marriage should consequently also stop eating and drinking.⁶⁶

Clement particularly attacks those Christians who abolish marriage altogether and who claim that marriage, established by the devil, is fornication.⁶⁷ They justify their claim by appealing to the example of the Lord who did not marry. Such reasoning is, from Clement's viewpoint, pure arrogance and he complains that these deniers of marriage boast that their understanding of the gospel is profounder than anyone else's. Clement counters their argument by maintaining that Christ was a special case who cannot be imitated. First, he had his own bride, the church. Second, he was not an ordinary man who needed a partner; as God's son he was immortal and thus had no obligation to produce children. Third, in several passages Christ speaks about marriage as belonging to normal human life.⁶⁸ In another context, becoming equal to angels is for Clement also the ideal goal of a believer. However, it is the spiritually advanced Christian, the true "gnostic" (γνωστικός) who has proceeded along the path of perfection from faith to gnosis.⁶⁹ This ideal Christian lifestyle did include adhering to certain moral values but renouncing marriage was not one of them.⁷⁰

Another writer whose texts both contain approval of celibacy and monogamous marriage is Clement's contemporary Tertullian. On the one hand, he praises those who have "preferred to be wedded to God" and to stay celibate. By so doing, they have done away with their covetous desire and have declared themselves as "children of that age" and made themselves fit to enter Paradise.⁷¹ On the other hand, a total abolition of marriage is heretical. Tertullian approves of monogamy as the moderate stance between immorality and extreme abstinence.⁷² He particularly fights against second

65. 1 Cor 6:13.

66. *Stromateis* 3.6.48.1.

67. *Ibid.*, 3.6.49.1–6.

68. Clement appeals to such passages as Matt 19:6 ("Let no one separate what God has joined together"); Luke 17:26–28 ("Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were . . . marrying and being given in marriage . . . just as it was in the days of Lot: they were . . . planting and building"); and Luke 21:23 ("There will be great distress for those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days!").

69. *Stromateis* 7.10.58.4–5.

70. Brown, *Body and Society*, 133–38.

71. Tertullian, *On Exhortation to Chastity* 13.4.

72. Tertullian, *On Monogamy* 1.1.

marriage which he deems to be fornication. Believers need to commit themselves to their only spouse even after his or her death since at the resurrection they will be raised together and are liable for one another to account for their actions.⁷³ Tertullian hastens to refute a possible counterargument; if in the age to come “they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are equal to angels,” does this not mean that the spouses will not be bound to each other at the resurrection? No, says Tertullian. Even though there will not be any conjugal relations in the “better condition” (*in meliorem statum*), the spiritual relationship will remain. If we did not recognize ourselves or our near ones and did not remember our life on earth, how could we praise God to all eternity?⁷⁴

Conclusion: Angelic Life, Resurrection, and Sexual Abstinence

Luke’s version of Jesus’ controversy with the Sadducees over resurrection combines the ideas of resurrection, likeness to the angels, and celibacy in a unique way which made it one of the favorite proof-texts of many later ascetics, as Turid Karlsen Seim herself has noticed.⁷⁵ She refers to an article of Sebastian Brock who has analyzed how the passage was read among early Syrian Christians.⁷⁶ In this essay, I have illustrated that the ascetic understanding of the story was popular also among Greek and Latin writers. Participation in the resurrection was deemed possible already in this life for those who “neither marry nor are given in marriage” and, thus, lead an angel-like existence.

The passage was also one of the favorite proof-texts of those Christians who understood resurrection in spiritual terms as not including the earthly flesh. In their view, Jesus’ words proved that the resurrected ones will be transformed into an angel-like state which was qualified by characteristics not possible for beings of flesh and blood. Moreover, they maintained that the abolition of marriage in the life to come denoted that the earthly body with all its members, including sexual organs, would not be raised. What

73. *Ibid.*, 10.7–8.

74. Cf. Tertullian’s other treatise, *To His Wife* 1.1.4–5, where he similarly refers to Jesus’ debate with the Sadducees and claims that, after resurrection, there will be no returning to marriage and, thus, no “carnal jealousy” (*de carnis zelo*) because believers will be transferred to an angelic quality and holiness. This, however, does not mean that they are allowed to remarry after the death of their spouses.

75. Seim, *Double Message*, 214.

76. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” 1–19.

need would there be for all body parts when the life of angels would not involve sex or food?

Neither reading—the one denying the resurrection of the flesh and the other promoting total sexual abstinence—went unchallenged. Those who accepted marriage interpreted Jesus' words to mean that the conjugal relationship belonged to this life and would cease after resurrection. They brought forth other passages to strengthen their case where Jesus speaks about marriage approvingly. Similarly, those who believed in the resurrection of the flesh built elaborate exegeses of the passage to counter the ideas they were opposing. They remarked that Jesus speaks of being like angels but he does not identify the resurrected ones with angels.

To all these Christians, it was important to show that they had scriptural proof for their views. Thus, in their meaning making of biblical texts they used reading strategies that did not challenge their beliefs but validated them. They were not ready for compromises—there might have been several ways to understand a text but only one of them was genuine. To the present-day reader, their interpretations at times appear far-fetched and fanciful. To the early Christian commentators, however, they—and only they—remained faithful to the apostolic tradition.

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