

The New Testament View of Life After Death

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[p.47]

We live in days of mounting concern about issues relating to human beginnings: Is the human fetus a person? Are there any circumstances in which the termination of a pregnancy is morally permissible? Is it legitimate to conduct experiments on human embryos before they are viable? While the Bible is not lacking in guidance on these matters, it has much more to say about man's life after death than about his life before birth, about eschatology than about anthropology.

Before we deal with man's state immediately after death (the 'intermediate state') and his state after the return of Christ (the 'final state'), some comments should be made about the nature of death and immortality as depicted in the New Testament.

1. The nature of death

Apart from the passages where death is depicted as a realm where the evil one reigns (Heb. 2:14; 1 Jn. 3:14; Rev. 1:18; 20:13), as a ruler who dominates his subjects (Rom. 5:14, 17) or as a warrior bent on destruction (Acts 2:24; 1 Cor. 15:26; Rev. 6:8; 20:14), there are four senses of the terms 'die' and 'death'.¹ Physical death is a process as well as an event. It may denote the gradual debilitation of physical powers (2 Cor. 4:12, 16), or exposure to danger that could prove fatal (1 Cor. 15:31; 2 Cor. 4:10-11), as well as the actual termination of bodily functions (Rom. 6:23; Heb. 9:27; cf. 2 Sa. 14:14). Spiritual death refers to man's natural alienation from God and hostility to God that express themselves in sin (Mt. 8:22; Jn. 5:24-25; Rom. 6:23; Jas. 5:20; Jude 12). Both physical and spiritual death are portrayed as the consequence and penalty of sin and the common lot of mankind (Rom. 5:12; 6:23; 7:13; Eph. 2:1, 5; Heb. 9:27). The 'second death' describes the permanent separation from God that befalls those whose names are not found written in the book of life (Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14-15; 21:8). Death to sin is that unresponsiveness to the appeal and power of sin that results from dying and rising with Christ and from being alert and responsive to the voice of God (Jn. 5:24; Rom. 6:4, 6, 11, 13). But by far the most common use of 'death' and 'die' is in relation to the end of physical life (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:22).²

¹ See further L. Morris, *The Wages of Sin. An Examination of the New Testament Teaching on Death* (London: Tyndale, 1954); K. Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972); L. R. Bailey, Sr. (ed.), *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

² Medically this would be defined as the irreversible cessation of all spontaneous respiratory, circulatory and cerebral activity.

2. The nature of immortality

Does man possess an immortal soul that guarantees his survival beyond death? Three Greek terms are used in the New Testament to express the idea of immortality: *athanasia*, 'deathlessness' (as in 1 Cor. 15:53-54); *aphtharsia*, 'incorruptibility' (Rom. 2:7); and, 'incorruptible' (Rom. 1:23). It is significant that the terms are never used in association with the word 'soul' (*psyche*),³ and, when used of man himself, always refer to his future destiny, never his present state.⁴ In New Testament usage, where all of the ten uses of the two nouns are Pauline, 'immortality' denotes immunity from decay and death, an immunity that results from having (in the case of God), or sharing (in the case of man), the eternal divine life. Just as God is 'never-dying' (Rom. 1:23; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16) because he is 'ever-living' (Jn. 5:26), so believers are destined to become immune from decay and death because they will participate fully and immediately in God's life (2 Pet. 1:4).

The view of immortality that predominates in Western and Christian thought is Platonic, according to which the term signifies an inherent characteristic of every rational soul that guarantees its persistence after death.⁵ For Paul, however, immortality is a natural attribute of God alone (1 Tim. 6:16) and a future acquisition of the righteous gained by means of a resurrection transformation (Rom. 2:7; 1 Cor. 15:52-54). Immortality is conditional, but only in the sense that there is no eternal life except in Christ. This does not imply that existence beyond death is conditional and that unbelievers will be annihilated.⁶ Because, in New Testament usage, immortality has positive content, being more than mere survival beyond death, its opposite is not non-existence but the 'second death' (Rev. 20:6, 14) which involves exclusion from God's presence (2 Thes. 1:9). All human beings survive beyond death but not all will become immortal in the Pauline sense.

As for the question of man's original state, we may suggest that he was created neither immortal (see Gn. 3:22-24) nor mortal (see Gn. 2:17) but with the potentiality to become either, depending on his obedience or disobedience to God.⁷ While not created with immortality, he was certainly

³ Note, in contrast, the conjunction of *athanatos* ('immortal') and *psyche* ('soul') in 4 Macc. 14:6; 18:23.

⁴ Rom. 2:7; 1 Cor. 15:42, 50, 52, 53 (twice), 54 (twice).

⁵ On Plato's view, see R. L. Patterson, *Plato on Immortality* (University of Pennsylvania: University Park, Pennsylvania, 1965); on ancient views of immortality in general, see E. Rohde, *Psyche. The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks* (Kegan: London, 1925, 8th edn); A. S. Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of Immortality* (Clarendon: Oxford, 1922); C. H. Moore, *Ancient Beliefs in the Immortality of the Soul* (Harrap: London, 1931).

⁶ For a defence of annihilationism, see E. W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* (Verdict Publications: Fallbrook, California, 1982); against annihilationism, see H. Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Presbyterian and Reformed: Philadelphia, 1957; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957).

⁷ To express this in the classical distinctions, man was not created unable to die (*non posse mori*), but able not to die (*posse non mori*), although after the Fall he was unable not to die (*non posse non mori*). L. Morris tentatively proposes that scientific and theological considerations can be harmonized if we regard death in its biological aspect as being 'at one and the same time ... completely natural and completely unnatural'. We must take seriously 'man's original constitution as being in a special relation both to God and to nature. Is it too much to imagine that this closeness to God and this primacy over nature found expression in forces of a spiritual character which kept the natural tendency to bodily decay in check? The entrance of sin so radically altered the situation that fleshly dissolution could no longer be held at bay, and thus death became inevitable' (*Wages*, p. 12).

created for immortality. Potentially immortal by nature, man actually becomes immortal through grace.⁸

3. The intermediate state

This expression is not found in Scripture, but in Christian theology it traditionally refers either to the condition of all mankind between death and resurrection or to the period of time that elapses (from an earthly viewpoint) between the death of the individual and the consummation of history. This condition or period is called 'intermediate' because it lies between two fixed points; death and resurrection, and because it is temporary, ultimately being eclipsed by the 'final state' of mankind.

Are the departed conscious and active as they await the End? Although the parable of the rich man and Lazarus

[p.48]

(Lk. 16:19-31) was told to illustrate the danger of wealth (Lk. 6:24) and the necessity of repentance (Lk. 16:28-30), not to satisfy our natural curiosity about man's anthropological condition after death, it is not illegitimate to deduce from the setting of the story the basic characteristics of the post mortem state of believers and unbelievers.⁹ Both groups are conscious of surroundings: Lazarus is in Abraham's bosom and comforted (vv. 22-23, 25), the rich man is in Hades and tormented (vv. 23-25, 28). There is memory of the past: the rich man is instructed to 'remember' earlier circumstances (v. 25), and he can recall his family and their attitude to 'Moses and the prophets' (vv. 27-30). Moreover the whole dialogue with Abraham suggests that the departed have not only retained their capacity to reason (v. 30) but also gained an acuteness of perception (vv. 27-28). Significantly, the same three characteristics (consciousness, memory, rationality) may be deduced from the plea for vindication uttered by the martyrs who rest under the altar in God's presence (Rev. 6:9-10): 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' (v. 10). Or again, it would have been incongruous for Paul to express a preference (2 Cor. 5:8) or a desire (Phil. 1:23) to leave the securities of earthly existence and reside with the Lord unless that post mortem state involved fellowship with Christ that was even more profound than his experience of Christ on earth. Not only are departed believers safe in God's hands (Lk. 23:46; cf. Acts 7:59) as they 'rest' from their labours in joyful satisfaction (Heb. 4:10; Rev. 14:13); they 'live for God's glory' (Lk. 20:38, *autō zō sin*) and 'live spiritually, as God does' (1 Pet. 4:6, *zosi ... kata theon pneumati*).

⁸ On all the issues in this section, see M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal. Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott: London, 1983; Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1985), pp. 189-205, 237-240, 273-275.

⁹ The destinies of the rich man and Lazarus are fixed and irreversible (Lk. 16:23, 25-26), yet it is the intermediate, not the final, state that is being depicted, for life on earth continues (vv. 27-29) and resurrection and judgment lie in the future (vv. 27-31).

But what of the verb 'sleep' (*koimasthai*), used some fifteen times in reference to persons who are deceased? Does it not imply that in the interval between death and resurrection the believer's soul or 'inner man' is in a state of suspended animation, although secure in Christ's presence and possession? This view, known as psychopannychism (the doctrine of 'soul sleep'), has found notable advocates at various stages of church history, most recently O. Cullmann in his celebrated essay *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*¹⁰

This verb *koimasthai* was a common euphemism for the act of dying. In its nine Pauline uses the sense is basically, if not exclusively, punctiliar ('fall asleep') rather than linear ('be asleep'), while elsewhere in the New Testament it is only where the present tense of the verb is used, in reference to physical sleep, that a linear sense must be given (*viz.* in Mt. 28:13; Lk. 22:45; Acts 12:6).¹¹ Christians who die 'fall asleep' in that they are no longer active in or conscious of the earthly world of time and space, although they are fully alert to their new environment. Since Paul applies the verb only to Christians (men in general simply 'die', *apothnēskēin*), it may possibly allude to the peaceful manner of the Christian's dying, whatever the mode of death (*cf.* Acts 7:60, of Stephen's death under a hail of stones), or to the certainty of awakening to life through resurrection.

We have already mentioned passages that demonstrate that the dead are not unconscious (*viz.* Lk. 16:19-31; 20:38; 1 Pet. 4:6). It is also clear that immediately after death the believer is 'with' the Lord. When Jesus said to the penitent robber, 'I solemnly assure you, today you shall be with me [*met' emou*] in paradise' (Lk. 23:43), he was not promising a king's welcome when the gates of paradise were opened at the end of the age but his personal companionship in God's presence immediately after death: 'today, with me'. Nor can there be doubt that in 2 Corinthians 5:8 Paul is depicting the location and state of the Christian after death. 'We prefer to depart from this form of embodiment and take up residence with the Lord [*pros ton kyrion*].' A temporal distinction can hardly be drawn between the destruction of the earthly house (2 Cor. 5:1) and departure from the mortal body (2 Cor. 5:8). As soon as residence in physical embodiment ceases, so too does absence from the Lord (*cf.* 2 Cor. 5:6). Similarly, when Paul expresses his desire 'to depart and be with Christ [*syn Christo*]' (Phil. 1:23), the word 'and' (*kai*) is explicative: to depart from this life is to be immediately with Christ. This being or dwelling with the Lord (*meta, pros, syn*) involves more than incorporation in Christ or union with Christ, for although such incorporation and union are as real after death as before,¹² each passage implies that the post mortem state of the believer is qualitatively superior to his spiritual life on earth. Nor can these three prepositions refer merely to an impassive spatial juxtaposition to Christ, as a table may be said to be 'with' a

¹⁰ Epworth: London, 1958, pp. 48-57, especially p. 51 n. 6.

¹¹ For a discussion of the data, see Harris, *Raised Immortal*, p. 260 n. 35. See further D. E. H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1964), pp. 262-269; and especially P. Hoffmann, *Die Toten in Christus* (Aschendorff: Münster, 1969, 2nd edn), pp. 186-206, 321, who concludes that Paul shows no special interest in the word *koimasthai* and that his view of death and of the post mortem state cannot be derived from the imagery of death as sleep.

¹² The phrase *hoi nekroi en Christō* (1 Thes. 4:16) means 'the dead who are in Christ' (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:18), not 'the dead who died in Christ'. Death does not remove the Christian from his incorporation 'in Christ' (Rom. 8:38-39). The difference between 'the dead in Christ' and Christians who are alive is not in their status (both groups are equally 'in Christ') but in the quality of their fellowship with Christ and the degree of their proximity to Christ ('being with Christ').

chair in a room, for they depict a relationship between persons. Rather, just as the expression 'live in', as used of the Spirit's indwelling of the believer, 'denotes a settled permanent penetrative influence',¹³ so the expression 'be with', as used of the believer's dwelling with the Lord, suggests a settled permanent mutual fellowship. The concepts of active communion with Christ and of sleep are not incompatible if we remember that Paul regarded death as a 'falling asleep' to this world rather than as a 'residing in unconsciousness' in the presence of Jesus.¹⁴

Is the intermediate state one of disembodiment? The traditional view regarding departed believers is that they await the second advent of Christ and the resurrection of the body as incorporeal spirits; only at the Parousia is the integrity of the personality reconstituted, with the reunion of a preserved soul and a transformed body. So it is that J. N. Sevenster distinguishes between a preliminary 'being with Christ' (Phil. 1:23) in a disembodied state immediately after death and the ultimate 'being with the Lord' (1 Thes. 4:17) in an embodied state after the return of Christ.¹⁵ Alternatively, many hold that death is the moment when believers acquire their heavenly embodiment, so that the interim state is not an interval of incorporeal existence but a period of fellowship between resurrected disciple and risen Lord in anticipation of the corporate consummation of the church.¹⁶

What is uniformly stressed throughout the New Testament is that the twofold basis of God's judgment by Christ of the living and the dead is a person's relationship to Christ (e.g. Mk. 8:38; Jn. 3:36; Rom. 5:9) and his people (Mt. 25:31-46), and works performed during his or her lifetime (Rom. 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rev. 20:12-13). So far from being a probationary period during which dross is purged from the character of the believer and a further opportunity for repentance is afforded to the unbeliever,¹⁷ the intermediate state is marked by a 'parting of the ways' after a preliminary divine judgment at death that anticipates the final judgment at the End (Heb. 9:27). The righteous attain to such heavenly bliss (cf. Rev. 14:13) as may be experienced by disembodied human spirits or by resurrected individuals before Christ's building of his church is complete and the new heavens and

¹³ W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1902, 5th edn), p. 196.

¹⁴ Even if the Christian dead are thought of as in some sense 'sleeping', the two concepts of sleep and communion are not mutually exclusive, for one could argue that where a predominantly corporate eschatology finds expression (as in 1 Thes. 4 and 1 Cor. 15) Paul views the whole company of departed Christians as 'sleeping' in Christ as they await the Consummation, while in passages (such as 2 Cor. 5 and Phil. 1) which embody essentially individual eschatology he describes the individual believer as enjoying communion with Christ during the interim state.

¹⁵ 'Some remarks on the GYMNOS in 2 Cor. 5:3', in *Studia Paulina in honorem Johannis de Zwaan* (Bohn: Haarlem, 1953), p. 207.

¹⁶ Arguments in favour of this view are summarized in Harris, *Raised Immortal*, pp. 98-101. Paul's twofold use of 'naked' (*gymnos*) in 1 Cor. 15:37 and 2 Cor. 5:3 is inconclusive evidence in the discussion. In the former passage the adjective describes the seed without the clothing of the blade and the ear or, at most, mortal man without the spiritual body. In the latter it probably denotes the idea of disembodiment espoused by certain gnosticizing Corinthians and rejected by Paul, not an intermediate state of physical disembodiment feared by him.

¹⁷ The doctrine of purgatory is generally derived from such passages as Lk. 12:59; 1 Cor. 3:15; 5:5; 15:29, and the view that the post mortem state affords unbelievers an opportunity to embrace the gospel is usually based on 1 Pet. 3:18-19; 4:6 as well as allegedly universalistic passages in Paul. For a balanced discussion of the passages cited above, see K. Hanhart, *The Intermediate State in the New Testament* (Wever: Gronigen, 1966), pp. 185-190, 213-224, 235-236).

[p.49]

the new earth are ushered in. The unrighteous experience intense and unalleviated spiritual anguish and torment in Hades (Lk. 16:23-25, 28; *cf.* Jude 7) as they await resurrection and the Great Assize (Jn. 5:28-29; 2 Pet. 2:9).¹⁸

4. The final state

Quite unequivocally John 5:28-29 distinguishes two types of future resurrection. 'Those who have done good' will emerge from their tombs 'to a resurrection that leads to life', while 'those who have practised evil' will experience 'a resurrection that leads to judgment'. Not only in the Fourth Gospel but throughout the New Testament, a resurrection to immortality (which is the future aspect of eternal life) is depicted as a privilege reserved for those who are in a right relationship with God through faith in Christ.¹⁹

The only other explicit reference to a resurrection of unbelievers is Acts 24:15, where Paul speaks of his hope in God 'that there will certainly be a resurrection including both [*te kai*] the righteous and the unrighteous'. This doctrine of a resurrection of the wicked as a prelude to their condemnation is clearly implied in Matthew 5:29-30; 10:28; Revelation 20:5, 11-15, and may possibly be inferred from Matthew 12:41-42; 25:31-46; Luke 14:14; 20:35. Also, since 'resurrection' occasionally denotes no more than reanimation (Heb. 11:35; *cf.* Rev. 20:5), a universal judgment may be said to imply a universal 'resurrection'. The unrighteous dead will 'rise up' and appear before God in the integrity of personal life, either as disembodied spirits or in some undisclosed bodily form, will have their relationship to Christ and their works assessed, and will receive a verdict of condemnation (*krisis*, Jn. 5:29). Although the New Testament emphasizes the benefits of believing rather than the dire consequences of rejecting the gospel, its testimony is uniform that such condemnation involves permanent banishment from the divine presence (Mt. 7:23; 25:41; Lk. 13:25-28) and eternal retribution (Mt. 25:46; Rom. 2:8; Heb. 6:2; 10:29). These two motifs of deprivation and recompense, frightening in their implications, are associated and perhaps identified in 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, where the retribution inflicted on 'those who refuse to know God and on those who refuse to obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus' (v. 8) is described as 'the punishment of eternal ruin and exclusion from the presence of the Lord' (v. 9).

As well as referring to a judicial verdict involving consignment to perdition, the term judgment' has the neutral sense of a judicial investigation that may lead to either a positive or a negative verdict. In this neutral sense all persons, including Christians, are 'judged'. 2 Corinthians 5:10 indicates that in Christ's judgment of believers a verdict of 'bad' (*phaulon*) as well as 'good'

¹⁸ From the viewpoint of the living who witnessed the burial of the dead, all the dead are resting in the grave (Jn. 5:28-29; 1 Thes. 4:16-17) or are resident in Hades (Acts 2:27, 31), the invisible realm in the heart of the earth (Mt. 12:40). But from the viewpoint of God and in reality, the unrighteous are in Hades (here conceived of as an interim state of woe) and the righteous are in heaven (Jn. 12:26; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23; and compare the equivalent expressions in Lk. 16:9, 23; 23:43; Jn. 14:2; Rev. 6:9).

¹⁹ *E.g.* Mt. 19:29; Mk.10:17, 21; Lk.14:14; 20:35-36; 1 Cor.15:23, 52; 1 Pet. 1:3-9; Rev. 20:5-6.

(*agathon*) may be passed on specific deeds or on action regarded in its totality. But the purpose of this assessment by Christ is not to decide the Christian's destiny but to assess his or her works and determine the appropriate reward. Whatever else may be involved in the believer's reward, the principal element is God's personal commendation (1 Cor. 4:5; *cf.* Rom. 2:10; 2 Con 5:9) expressed in such words as 'Well done, good and faithful servant' (*cf.* Mt. 25:21, 23), commendation which may be given or may be withheld (= 'suffering loss', 1 Cor. 3:15, the forfeiture of reward), and which will be given in varying measure (1 Cor. 3:8; 4:5; *cf.* Lk. 19:12-19).

We can conveniently summarize the essential ingredients of New Testament teaching about the believer's final state in six adjectives.

(i) *Embodied*. In Orphic and Gnostic thought the *summum bonum* consisted of emancipation from the defilement caused by embodiment. *Sōma sēma*, 'the body is a tomb'. It is, of course, incontestable that incorporeal conscious existence is possible (God exists as pure spirit), but in Pauline as in Jewish thought true existence for human beings or a full life either on earth or beyond the grave was inconceivable apart from embodiment. Somatic resurrection was the prerequisite for the resumption of true life after the intervention of death. Paul makes it clear that the object of the Christian's desire is 'the redemption of the body' from its bondage to decay and sin, through its transformation (Rom. 8:23, where *tou sōmatos* is an objective genitive, not a genitive of separation). When he spoke of the 'spiritual body' (1 Cor. 15:44), a body animated and guided by the redeemed human spirit and revitalized by the divine Spirit, he was implicitly rejecting not merely a materialistic view of resurrection (it was a spiritual body) but also a spiritualistic view of immortality (it was a spiritual body).

Details of the anatomy and physiology of the spiritual body were of no more consequence to New Testament writers than was celestial topography. But its basic properties in addition to 'spirituality' are clear. It is of divine origin (1 Cor. 15:38), with God as its architect and builder (2 Cor. 5:1-2). It is imperishable, free from any form of decay; glorious, of radiant and unsurpassed beauty; powerful, with limitless energy and perfect health (1 Cor. 15:42-43, 50, 52-54). It is angel-like, not because it is sexless (sexual identity, an essential element in personality, is retained in the resurrection) but because it is deathless (Lk. 20:36) and without sexual passions or procreative powers (Mt. 22:30; Mk. 12:25; *cf.* 1 Cor. 6:13-14).²⁰ It is heavenly, perfectly adapted to its natural habitat, heaven (2 Cor. 5:1-2). According to Paul, these were also characteristics of the resurrected body of Jesus,²¹ so that Christ now is what redeemed believers will be; the risen Christ is the firstfruits of perfected humanity.

For some believers the transition to spiritual corporeality will be by way of death and resurrection, but for others by means of a resurrection-type transformation. The distinction is between those who die before the Parousia of Christ and those who are alive at the Parousia. 1

²⁰ The error of the Sadducees was in imagining that the resurrection state was merely the perpetuation of present earthly relationships in a new locality.

²¹ The body of the risen Jesus was spiritual (1 Cor. 15:45), from God (Rom. 8:11), imperishable and immortal (Rom. 6:9), glorious (2 Cor. 4:6; Phil. 3:21a; *cf.* Acts 22:6, 11), powerful (Phil. 3:10, 216), and heavenly (1 Cor. 15:44; 1 Thes. 4:16; *cf.* Acts 26:13, 19).

Corinthians 15:51-54 deals with the latter category of Christians (who may, with the population explosion of the twentieth century and the expansion of Christianity, in fact outnumber the sum total of believers under the old and the new covenant who experience death!). Paul recognizes in the case of Christians who live to witness the Parousia an exception to his rule that death is a prerequisite for resurrection (1 Cor. 15:36). By special revelation (1 Cor. 15:51a) he knew that those who did not, by a pre-Parousia death, qualify for the transformation that was necessary for the inheritance of the kingdom (1 Cor. 15:50) would nevertheless all undergo the required transformation at the Parousia (1 Cor. 15:51-52). Both the dead and the living will be transformed, but only the dead are also raised. And for both groups the outcome of the transformation is identical: possession of a spiritual body comparable to Christ's 'glorious body' (Phil. 3:21).

[p.50]

(ii) *Localized*. We have seen that heaven is the natural habitat of, the resurrection body, its normal sphere of operation. Although heaven is a condition, that of knowing and serving God, it is also and always a place, the locality where God's presence is most perfectly expressed and felt. P. Badham rightly insists that the concept of a resurrected body and the notion of a non-spatial heaven are irreconcilable. In reality the options are a resurrected body in a place or an immortal soul existing without location, for 'a body is spatial and a soul is non-spatial'.²²

An ever-present danger in the discussion of eschatology is an exclusive concentration on the spiritual relation of the individual to God, so that scriptural teaching about the destiny of the material universe is ignored. In fact the destinies of man and the non-rational material order are interlocked. As at the Fall, so in the Rebirth (Mt. 19:28; *cf.* Acts 3:21): what affects one affects the other. Just as the entire material universe shared in the consequences of human sin, so it will share the destiny of Christ's people (Rom. 8:18-25; Phil. 3:20-21). Creation will be emancipated from its frustrating imperfection and slavery to decay (Rom. 8:20-21) in the same way that man will be set free from sin and mortality. The 'new heavens and new earth in which righteousness will have its permanent home' (2 Pet. 3:13) correspond to man's new resurrection body. Whether this 'newness' of creation comes about by annihilation or by transformation (both concepts find expression in Rev. 21:1, 5), the result will be that God is 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28) and the whole material order will unswervingly serve the purposes of spirit.²³

Related to this matter of localization is the doctrine of the millennium. According to Revelation 20:1-10 (*cf.* 5:10) the people of God share the messianic reign of Christ for a period of 1,000 years between the binding and release of Satan and between the first and the second resurrections. There are three schools of interpretation concerning the millennium which may be sketched in broad terms as follows, although there are numerous variations within each of the systems.

²² *Christian Beliefs about Life after Death* (Macmillan: London, 1976), pp. 90-94 (the citation is from p. 91).

²³ On the theme of this paragraph, see G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1972), pp. 211-234.

Post-millennialism regards the millennium as the period of Christ's spiritual rule in and through the church on earth during the present era. The second coming of Christ occurs after (thus post-) the millennium. A-millennialism interprets the millennium symbolically as the perfect and glorious reign of Christ and believers 'in heavenly places' during the present age, and denies (hence a-millennialism) that there is any actual rule of Christ on earth for 1,000 years either before or after his second coming. As in the post-millennialist view, 'the first resurrection' mentioned in Revelation 20:5b-6 is generally taken to represent the new birth of believers or their sharing in the spiritual benefits of Christ's resurrection, while the (implied) second resurrection of Revelation 20:5a is the general resurrection at the return of Christ. According to pre-millennialism the millennium is the period between the resurrection of believers at Christ's Parousia (= 'the first resurrection') and the resurrection of unbelievers (= the second resurrection, involving 'the rest of the dead', Rev. 20:5a). Christ's second advent takes place before (thus pre-) the millennium. During this future thousand-year period Christ will administer a universal theocracy of peace and righteousness on earth.²⁴

Most proponents of post-millennialism and amillennialism envisage the millennium as occurring during the present era, either on earth or 'in heavenly places'. But on a pre-millennial view - a view which perhaps generates fewer exegetical problems than either of the other interpretations of Revelation 20—the material world itself, the 'first earth' (Rev. 21:1b), becomes the scene of the vindication of Christ's cause within human history. This vindication takes place during a specific future period, the millennium, which forms the first stage of the eternal kingdom and is distinguishable from the final state of restoration when the redeemed will inhabit the 'new earth' (Rev. 21:1a).²⁵

(iii) *Personal*. The Christian doctrine of resurrection is a safeguard against an impersonal view of immortality. Although the identity between the physical body and the spiritual body is neither material nor substantial, there is real continuity in that the same historically identifiable *ego* finds expression in two successive but different types of body. When the physical body is transformed into or replaced by the spiritual body, personal identity is preserved. 'God will raise us up' (1 Cor. 6:14). Belief in God's power to restore dead persons to life and to impress them with the image of Christ without in any way compromising their individuality leaves no room for a pantheistic immortality in which the Many are absorbed into the One, or a racial immortality in which a person survives solely in his posterity. From first to last God treats us as distinctive individuals.

(iv) *Active*. There is a sense in which the dead permanently 'rest from their labours' (Rev. 14:13), but relief from toil does not amount to perpetual inactivity. There is no reason to think that Jesus is passively awaiting the End simply because he is 'sitting' at God's right hand. On the contrary, he is permanently active, for he upholds the universe, exercises his reign over his church and kingdom, builds his church, affords support to those in temptation, advocates the cause of the repentant sinner, and engages in high-priestly intercession for his people. There is ceaseless

²⁴ See further R. G. Clouse (ed.), *The Meaning of the Millennium* (IVP: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1977); and more briefly, R. Ludwigson, *A Survey of Bible Prophecy* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1973), pp. 92-131.

²⁵ On the possibility that in 1 Cor. 15:20-28 Paul alludes to this millennial reign of Christ, see the discussion of I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (Macmillan: London, 1919; Baker: Grand Rapids, 1967 reprint), pp. 95-100.

work, but without exertion or failure. Similarly, the final state of believers will be one of joyful activity as they 'follow the Lamb wherever he goes' (Rev. 14:4; *cf.* 7:17). 'For ever and ever' they will share Christ's universal reign (Rev. 3:21; 5:10; 20:6; 22:5). Free from the taint of sin and from the frustrations of spiritual powerlessness, they will worship and serve God and the Lamb enthusiastically and acceptably (Rev. 7:9-11; 19:9; 22:3-4).²⁶

(v) *Corporate*. The life of the Age to Come is not marked by an exclusively individual enjoyment of the beatific vision of God so that myriads of individuals live in fellowship with God but in isolation from other worshippers. Unmediated inter-personal communion between the individual believer and his Lord there certainly will be, but only in the corporate context of the City of God, the capital of the consummated kingdom or new commonwealth and the centre of the 'new heaven and new earth'. In the classic description of this City (Rev. 21:1 - 22:5; *cf.* Heb. 11:10, 16; 12:22-24) attention is focused not only on its superlative beauty and its inviolate holiness but on its inhabitants among whom God will dwell in a perfect society.

(vi) *Permanent*. 'We know that if our earthly tent-dwelling is dismantled, we have a permanent heavenly building provided by God and not constructed by human hands'

[p.51]

(2 Cor. 5:1). 'They shall reign for ever and ever' (Rev. 22:5). Just as the resurrection body will be permanently durable, not susceptible to decay or dissolution (1 Cor. 15:42, 53-54), so too believers' corporate and individual life with God will be unending. When the son of the widow of Nain or Lazarus were restored to life, they resumed physical lives that were identical with their former lives and therefore not free from ultimate death. But when believers are resurrected from the dead, they will assume an immortality which guarantees the permanency of their resurrection state. Resurrected believers, like the risen Christ (Rom. 6:9; 2 Cor. 13:4), 'will never die again' because they 'live by the power of God'. Once a person experiences a resurrection transformation, he or she will know perennial rejuvenation and so be equipped for the worship and service of God 'for ever and ever'.²⁷

5. Concluding observations

Several general remarks about New Testament eschatology need to be made to ensure that our subject is seen in proper perspective.

First, the main object of Christian hope is a Person rather than an event or a series of events or life after death. Christians certainly 'wait for ... the coming of the day of God' and for 'new

²⁶ *Cf.* J. Baillie, *And The Life Everlasting* (London: OUP, 1934), pp. 228-237 (who speaks of 'development in fruition', p. 234); U. Simon, *Heaven in the Christian Tradition* (Rockcliff: London, 1958), pp. 227-236; and especially B. H. Streeter, 'The Life of the World to Come', in *Immortality* by B. H. Streeter *et al.* (Macmillan: London, 1917), pp. 131-166.

²⁷ For a discussion of Intertestamental Jewish views on life after death, see Hoffmann, *Toten*, pp. 81-155; G. W. E. Nickelsburg, Jr., *Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (OUP: London, 1972); H. C. C. Cavallin, *Life After Death. Part I* (Gleerup: Lund, 1974).

heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pet. 3:12-13) and 'seek for ... immortality' (Rom. 2:7), but in the final analysis they simply 'await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ' (Phil. 3:20) who will himself set in motion and superintend that series of events which will herald the arrival of the consummated kingdom of God. New Testament eschatology focuses on the Last One rather than the last things; on the Father and the Son, both of whom are given the title of Omega in the Apocalypse.²⁸

Secondly, all New Testament writers share the conviction that what a person believes about human destiny influences his present attitudes and conduct.²⁹ For example, the most detailed discussion of death, resurrection and immortality found in Scripture concludes with an exhortation to consistent and enthusiastic service: 'Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm, let nothing move you, always devote yourselves fully to the Lord's work in the knowledge that your labour in the Lord is not futile' (1 Cor. 15:58). Eschatology and ethics are inextricably linked. The glimpses of the future afforded by the New Testament are designed not to satisfy our curiosity about the unknown but to stimulate holiness of life.

Thirdly, in their teaching about life after death New Testament authors focus their attention not on the fate of the unbeliever but on the destiny of the believer, and not on the penultimate 'intermediate state' of the righteous dead but on the final destiny of resurrected saints: permanent residence in God's immediate presence, worshipping and serving him and the Lamb for ever, in spiritual bodies perfectly adapted to the ecology of heaven and totally responsive to the dictates of the Spirit.

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²⁸ Rev. 1:8; 21:6 (of the Father); 1:17; 2:8; 22:13 (of the Son).

²⁹ E.g. Mt. 24:45-51; Mk. 13:32-37; Lk. 16:9; Jn. 14:1-3; 2 Cor. 5:8-10; Heb. 11:9-10; Jas. 5:8; 1 Pet. 1:13, 17; 2 Pet. 3:10-14; 1 Jn. 3:2-3; Jude 17-23; Rev. 2:7, 11.