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# KING'S

# Theological Review

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# THE RESURRECTION — A NEW ESSAY IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

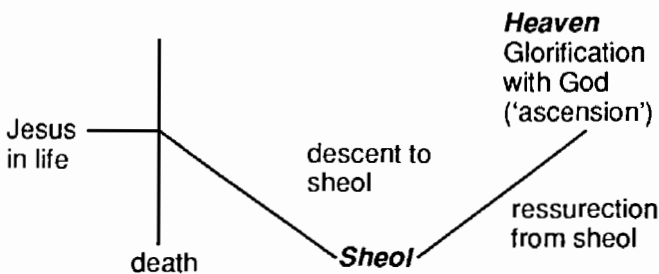
JEREMY MOISER

The following essay hopes to make a contribution to the perennial debate on Jesus' resurrection. Although its scope is narrow, the ideas it proposes illuminate, I believe, many aspects of the problem - exegetical, theological, catechetical, even psychological - and I have not seen them expressed elsewhere. The model is Origen's treatise on first principles<sup>1</sup>.

## I

Palestinians contemporary with the primitive church would generally have conceived of resurrection somewhat along the following lines<sup>2</sup>. When a person died, he or she went down, beyond death, to sheol, there to await resurrection at the last day. Sheol was spatially imagined as lying below the earth. Resurrection would take the form of a restoration to God, either on a renewed earth or in heaven. This lack of definition in 'locating' resurrection is important. For those who anticipated a renewed earth, the doctrine of sheol permitted a pause in the life of the individual before (s)he was brought back from beyond death and restored to this life. For those, on the other hand, who anticipated a heavenly resurrection, sheol was a staging post (rendered necessary by certain beliefs concerning death and cosmology) on the deceased's continued journey, beyond death, to God in his heaven.

Let us now imagine the thoughts of the small group of disciples after Jesus' death. They were in no doubt that Jesus had died, had been buried and so had descended, like all the dead, to sheol. This conviction emerges strongly in all later biblical accounts, implicitly in the earlier emphases on burial (1 Cor 15:4; Mk 15:46f; Ac 2:29) and explicitly in the later mention of the harrowing of hell (1 Pt 3:19; 4:6)<sup>3</sup>. Sheol, however, as they believed, could not hold Jesus, and he was therefore carried thence to sit at God's right hand in glory - still beyond death, of course. We thus have the following scheme:



On this scheme, resurrection is strictly post mortem and inaccessible to history. It cannot be proved or disproved, there can be no evidence one way or the other, it has simply to be believed. The three ideas of descent, resurrection and ascension are linked phases in the one process of glorification. This is a stupendous affirmation of God's approval of Jesus and of man's ultimate salvation from the forces of evil (Satan, sin, death, sheol).

Christians have not really advanced beyond this necessarily limited scheme today, and there is no reason why they should. It is a simple, satisfying and in the circumstances rational understanding of events that lie beyond our experience. Furthermore, it is borne out by the earliest account of belief in

the resurrection, that in 1 Cor 15. As there are serious misunderstandings of this well-worn passage current even in reputable commentaries, a brief survey of it is required here<sup>4</sup>.

## II

The starting point for any fully satisfactory exegesis must be the realisation that the entire discussion of 1 Cor 15 is *ethical*. Chapters 12-14 concern disorderly conduct at Christian meetings, which reflects divisions in the community. Hence the firm statement in 15:50 that since flesh and blood (= man as sinful) cannot benefit from God's kingship, Paul's readers must change their ways. They must put aside behaviour and attitudes characteristic of human philosophy (1:20) and of flesh and blood. The ethical nature of the chapter is clear from the following indications:

1. the chapter follows on from chapters 12-14 (δε in 15:1);
2. Jesus' resurrection means that our faith is not useless and that we are saved *from our sins*, vv 14,17;
3. the Corinthians must come to their right mind and *sin no more*, v.34;
4. they must be steadfast and immovable in the gospel *and its works*, v.58 (cf vv 1f).

The problem confronting Paul (as later in Rm)<sup>5</sup> is how, although we live subject to sin, corruption and death, we may be transformed into other beings with the characteristics of the risen Lord. What agency will rid us of our subjection to the powers of evil (as manifested in death) and make us more like Jesus whom death could not destroy? Simple, exclaims Paul: the divine power! 'We (Christians) shall all be changed' (v.51, divine passive). Apart from vv 20-28, which interrupt the main flow of Paul's argument, only two verbs are in the future up to v.51. From this we may deduce that resurrection is seen as a present reality, begun now, consummated beyond death (vv 51-54).

According to Paul, death (physical and spiritual) was the result of Adam's sin and affects us all (vv 21f), but it has been defeated by Christ (vv 22,26). Christ died and was buried, vv 3f, but he triumphed over death by being raised, vv 4,12,15 etc. Here Paul makes a point crucial to our present purposes: what is true of Christ, he asserts, is true of all Christians. Christ is the first-fruit, vv 20,23; heavenly beings will be exactly like the heavenly Man, v.48. Like Christ Christians must die, but in him they will all be raised. We shall return to this point. If death is a force cutting man off from God, resurrection is the process whereby a Christian passes from a state of mortality to one of immortality. Paul resorts to five images:

1. the seed is sown, and the result is new life, vv 36-38;
2. similarly, life comes from death: the imperishable from the perishable, v.42b, glory from dishonour, v.43a, power from weakness, v.43b, spiritual body from physical body, v.44a. Paul expatiates on this with further metaphors:
3. we take on a change of image, v.49;
4. we are transformed and so inherit the kingdom of God, v.50;
5. we put on a change of clothing, v.53.

Now each of these images balances continuity and discontinuity<sup>6</sup>:

- A. 1) death is the end of a person's earthly existence in all its aspects;

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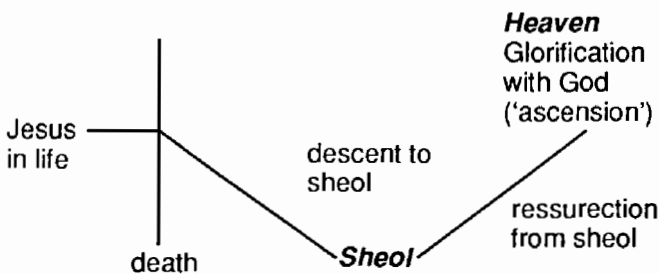
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Now each of these images balances continuity and discontinuity<sup>6</sup>:

- A. 1) death is the end of a person's earthly existence in all its aspects;

2) the heavenly body is utterly different from the physical body.

- B. 1) God provides a new body for the deceased Christian;  
2) it is the same person who lives, dies and puts on immortality.

As well as talking about death and resurrection, Paul also describes the characteristics of the risen life (a more logical progression is followed in Rm). The spiritual person (2:15; 6:11), that is one who has passed through death and achieved the risen life offered him here and now in Christ, is imperishable (vv 42,53f), in glory (v.43a), in power (v.43b), like the Man of heaven (vv 48f), immortal (vv 53f). Where in Rm the exhortation *precedes* the detailed exposition of Christian ethics, in 1 Cor it *succeeds* it.

Paul also looks to the consummation of the transformation initiated here in life. The final change announced in vv51f will occur within the lifetime of some then living ('we shall not all have died', v.51). It will be heralded by a trumpet, and it will usher in the last age (vv 52-57). Paul reiterates the need to prepare for it now in the way we live (vv 49,58).

There are two final features of importance before we draw our conclusions from this chapter. Firstly, Paul's scrupulous distinction between νεκροὶ (used for all the dead) and οἱ νεκροὶ (used for the Christian dead) leads to a division in the chapter: vv 1-28 discuss in the abstract, so to speak, the possibility and promise of ultimate resurrection from sheol; vv 29-38 discuss the need for *Christians* to be transformed if they are to benefit from it. Secondly, J.C. O'Neill's exegesis of the highly controverted v.29 is perfectly borne out: 'Otherwise [ie if Christ's resurrection is untrue], what will those who are baptised for their dying bodies do? If the completely dead are not going to be raised, why be baptised for themselves as corpses?'<sup>7</sup>. Resurrection consists of escape from sheol.

From this broad survey of 1 Cor 15 it emerges that any idea of Christ's *returning to this life* not only is foreign to the context but would in any case be quite useless. Christ is mentioned in the chapter as it were secondarily, as an example for Christians to follow. The example would be meaningless if Christ either bounced back from death or went through death only to reappear in earthly life immediately afterwards. The entire point of Paul's comparison is that just as Christ was not trapped by death (in sheol) but went on to God (in heaven), so Christians can hope for the same if their lives are worthy. Resurrection from the dead is possible, says Paul, meaning that the dead are no longer, since Christ's victory, doomed to an eternity in sheol (vv 1-28); resurrection from the dead will be granted to those whose lives are patterned on Christ's (vv 29-58).

Empty tombs and physical appearances are to that extent not even secondary: they are irrelevant. They can offer Christians nothing for themselves: Christians cannot aspire to leave their graves or appear to their loved ones left behind on earth. What Paul needs to prove in order to make his point is that Christ really did go on to God having emerged unscathed from sheol. As we pointed out earlier, that is not something that *can* be proved: it can only be believed. Paul therefore appeals to the *belief* of the apostles and others<sup>8</sup>. Their conviction, and his, was that death had not done for Christ, since they knew from experience that he was alive and with God. Paul makes no distinction between his own Damascus road experience and the appearance(s) to the apostles.

The difficulty now arises of squaring this explanation with the later accounts of an empty tomb and appearances, seemingly solid and bodily. If our explanation so far is correct, belief in the resurrection of Jesus had no connexion with appearances or an empty tomb. The production of a body would not have altered at all the disciples' conviction that Jesus had risen to God. Various attempts have been made to bridge the gap between the initial religious experience (even though not viewed necessarily from the above perspective) and the later graphic texts. We might mention Strauss's psychological approach<sup>9</sup>, the textual approach of Seidensticker<sup>10</sup>, the exegetical approach of Wijngaards<sup>11</sup>, the theological attempts of Schenke<sup>12</sup> and Gutwenger<sup>13</sup> and the recent views of Lindars<sup>14</sup>. All we need note here is that there are a number of explanations, some more persuasive than others, which might account for the later genesis of the detailed and concrete descriptions to which the early church resorted to express - and buttress - its beliefs. It is not difficult to appreciate that the resurrection as expounded in 1 Cor 15 is too thin and intangible, certainly for Greeks but also for Jews, to have survived long without elaboration. Such is human nature<sup>15</sup>. The psychological process would be aided by belief in the earthly restoration of all things at the last day: Christ could readily be imagined as anticipating the general return to life.

### III

We may take our argument a stage further in another direction by turning to the four gospels (in ascending order of elaboration and perhaps also in chronological order). Interpreted in the light of what we have said so far, these accounts appear slightly less naive and concrete than they are sometimes given credit for. There is evidence that the trappings of empty tomb, annunciatory angels, earthquakes, guards and appearances are not taken too literally even by the authors themselves but serve conscious deliberately theological or apologetical aims. Here we can merely adumbrate a defence of this statement.

**1. Mark.** Recent research<sup>16</sup> has suggested that the gospel is the work of an anonymous Hellenistic Jew resident near Galilee shortly after the fall of Jerusalem. The author's purpose is to launder the oral Jewish traditions of his day concerning Jesus so that they appealed to the Roman mind. This meant on the one hand distancing Jesus from his Jewish background by exaggerating the opposition between him and the Pharisees (E.P. Sanders), inculcating the Sanhedrin for his death and denouncing the Jews for the later persecutions of Christians (chap.13), and on the other easing Roman minds with regard to Jesus' political ambitions. This is where Mark's treatment of the disciples fits in. They are denigrated because they thought Jesus would be a revolutionary. They were mistaken, but they gave a false impression which the Romans had, unfortunately but understandably, believed!

The empty tomb (Mark's only sop to the dramatisation of the resurrection) serves to expose the (women) disciples for what they are. Having failed to stand by Jesus at the cross (15:40), they disobey the young man's command at the tomb and are denied an appearance of Jesus. The young man himself is best understood as a martyr in heavenly vesture who acts as a foil to the women. He is 'a challenge to the follower of Jesus in Mark's day not to flee but to face death if necessary'<sup>17</sup>.

2. **Matthew.** Mt's treatment of Jesus' resurrection is less extended than either Lk's or Jn's. In substance he follows Mk's account of the discovery of the empty tomb. The appearance to the first witnesses is restricted to a simple scene in which they worship Jesus and receive from him the message they had already received from the angel (v.7), and Mt has no account of an ascension or exaltation separate from the resurrection.

Mt adds a number of elements to Mk's narrative which indicate his interests: the great earthquake, the descent of the angel to roll the stone away, the angel's dazzling face (cf 1 En 14.20; 106.5,10; TLev 4.3; 2 En 22.9; ApAd 7.52; ApAb 11.2 etc), the fulfilment of Jesus' own predictions, the repetition of 'he was raised from the dead', joy as the women's reaction (cf 1 En 51.5), and their obedience to the angelic command. If the resurrection of the holy ones and their appearance in Jerusalem had not already alerted the reader to an allusion to Ez 37:1-14 (vision of the valley of dry bones), the earthquake would certainly have done so (Ez 37:7). Mt regards Jesus' resurrection as the fulfilment of the eschatological prophecy of God's revivification of Israel, and its purpose as a return from exile (ie in Mt the formation of a new people rather than the salvation of a remnant). There are several other reminiscences of this passage in Mt's text.

The angel's dazzling face is certainly intended as a pointer to Dn 10:6 (cf TAb 12.5; 16.10; 4 Ezra 10.25), a vision whose purpose is to indicate to the prophet the eschatological moment of deliverance and resurrection (Dn 12:1f). (Mk 16:8 may be intended as an allusion to this vision, v.7.) There are other reminiscences of the Danielic vision in Mt's resurrection text.

The women's joy reminds us of Is 55:12 - 56:1, which is again an eschatological passage.

By his insertion at 27:52f, Mt may intend us to conclude that the resurrection of the holy ones is the necessary prelude to the formation of the new community mentioned in v.54 as a consequence of Jesus' death.

At 16:18 Mt has recorded Jesus' promise that the gates of hell would not prevail over the church (cf ApElij 1:10; 2.2; ApAd 8.14). It is but a short step from there via Is 28:18 to our present pericope. The evil people's pact with hell and death has been broken; the Lord is going to rise on the mountain<sup>18</sup> to do this extraordinary work (Is 28:21). The resurrection is therefore an ecclesiological event which guarantees the validity of Jesus' promise to his church. Coupled with this is Mt's identification of Jesus' risen body with the sanctuary of the new eternal temple (26:61).

We may summarise Mt's view of the resurrection in a few sentences:

1. It ushers in the end-time. It is the decisive salvific event.
2. From one point of view it is the consequence, and from another the substance, of Jesus' salvific death.
3. Jesus foresaw it.
4. It is a work of God (hence the earthquake, the angels, the women's fear).
5. It signals Jesus' exaltation to universal lordship.
6. It marks the birth of the new people of God.
7. It guarantees his enduring presence with the church, against which the forces of hell - sheol! - are powerless.

In other words, Mt deliberately creates a short series of

apocalyptic and eschatological scenes skilfully woven out of traditional material of Jewish and Christian provenance. His intentions are not historical but theological (strictly, ecclesiological).

3. **Luke.** The following are some of the emphases of his account:

1. *The Twelve (strictly Eleven) as witnesses.* They knew Jesus in the flesh and can testify that it is now the same person. The idea of witness is not prominent in Lk except in the context of resurrection.
2. *Jerusalem.* Lk omits Mk 14:28 and 16:7 which might be taken to point to appearances in Galilee. In Lk it is the Galilean disciples who witness the Jerusalem appearances. This coheres with Lk's emphasis on Jerusalem as an important salvific centre.
3. *The fulfilment of scripture,* mentioned at length in both appearances, and the fulfilment of promise (24:6,49).
4. *Jesus' presence with the community,* mediated through the eucharist and the Holy Spirit.

There are Marcan connexions (no appearance to the women, unless Clopas' companion was one) and Johannine connexions (the apostles' refusal to believe; Peter's running to the tomb; the presence of the burial cloths; two angels).

On this background, the emphasis on the palpability of the risen Jesus, which is central to both the Lucan appearances, is seen to be theological and deliberately contrived. Its purpose is to confirm the spiritual reality of Christ in his church. The empty tomb, adopted from Mark, and the appearances of Jesus, adopted either from Paul or from other oral or written tradition, serve merely as useful pegs on which to hang an array of theological convictions. The discrepancy in the times of the ascension (Lk 24:50 and Ac 1:3) indicates where the author's priorities lie. Luke (or his source) is not the only New Testament writer to invent or embroider the truth in order to make a point.

4. **John.** Here I shall refer only to two items by way of illustration. The first is the description of the linen cloths left behind in the tomb (20:6f), an apparently eyewitness detail of compelling veracity. Whatever the author thought of the truth of the tradition he had received, he uses the cloths to reinforce his message that Jesus had broken out of the restricting cloths of Judaism and left them buried in the tomb<sup>19</sup>. The second is the miraculous draught of Jn 21:4-14. M. Oberweis<sup>20</sup> interprets the number of fish (153) on the basis of Jewish gematria as a reference to Cana of Galilee. If there was a Johannine community in that town, they might have felt the need for a 'community-founding tradition' not satisfied in chapters 1-20. The redactor satisfies such a need in two ways. Firstly, Nathaniel, one of Jesus' first disciples, is said to come from there (21:2). Secondly, the catch of 153 fish (which for the initiated means the mission at Cana) is ascribed to a command from the risen Lord. In fact, however, John's whole resurrection account is shot through with symbolism. There is sufficient evidence to doubt the author's belief in the importance of the literal truth of all he says.

#### IV

It is time to draw our conclusions from the gospel testimony, thus briefly outlined, and gather together the threads of our argument as a whole.

Our Origenian methodology has not been formally justified, and it must speak for itself. We have imagined the most likely primitive view of Jesus' resurrection as a process of glorification on the other side of death. It was this view which galvanised the first disciples and attracted converts to the story of Jesus. In time, however, the bare bones had to be fleshed out, as is always the way, and traditions crept in which were known to be 'symbolic and 'metaphorical' but which later Christians, unaware of their origin or from a different conceptual background, took too literally. If our view is correct, the stories surrounding the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Jesus could not be true; they must be 'fabrications', and since in my opinion psychological theories of 'cognitive dissonance'<sup>21</sup> which plot subconscious reactions are neither necessary nor apt in our present case, their authors must have been aware of this. There is evidence in the gospels that the resurrection stories were transparent to their originators of redactors, that their origin in kerygma was acknowledged and appreciated.

Modern Christians need not be dismayed at the apparent dismantling of time-honoured biblical matter. Our suggestions focus attention on the essentials of the resurrection story and render the acceptance of patently false particulars (like the guard on the tomb)<sup>22</sup> otiose. The infancy narratives have undergone a similar process in recent years.

## Notes

1. As H. Crouzel explains (*Origène*, Lethieulleux, Paris 1985, 216ff), this work theologised 'by way of exercise' (γυμναστικῶς): part of Origen's theological enterprise, approved incidentally by Athanasius whom Crouzel also quotes, was to offer hypotheses in areas not already decided δολματικῶς. Such hypotheses could be dismantled if their inadequacy was demonstrated or if a better one was proposed. The same point is made by H. CHADWICK, 'Origenes', in *Alte Kirche* (ed. Greschat), Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1984, I, 140. It should be added that no ecumenical council has ever defined the nature of Jesus' resurrection.
2. Cf P. GRELOT, 'La Resurrection de Jésus et son arrière-plan biblique et juif', in *La Résurrection du Christ et l'Exégèse Moderne* (Lectio Divina, 50), Ed. du Cerf, Paris 1969, 17-53; J. DANIELOU, *La Résurrection*, Ed. du Seuil, Paris 1968, 99-119.
3. C. PERROT, 'La descente du Christ aux enfers dans le NT', *Lum Vie* 87 (1968), 5-29; H. U. VON BALTHASAR, 'Abstieg zur Hölle' *ThQ* 150 (1970), 193-201.
4. Amongst the enormous number of recent studies, the following may be mentioned: G. L. BORCHERT, 'The Resurrection: 1 Corinthians 15', *Review & Expositor* 80 (1983), 401-415; L. DE LORENZI (ed.), *Résurrection du Christ et des chrétiens (1 Cor 15)* (Série monog. de Benedictina, 8), Abbey of St Paul Outside the Walls, Rome 1985; V. GUENEL (ed.), *Le corps et le corps du Christ dans la première Epître aux Corinthiens* (Lectio divina, 114), Ed. du Cerf, Paris 1983, esp. 111-116; V. HASLER, 'Credo und Auferstehung in Korinth. Erwägungen zu 1 Kor 15', *TZ* 40 (1984), 12-33; E. JUCCI, 'Terreno, psichico, pneumatico nel capitolo 15 della prima epistola ai Corinthei', *Henoch* 5 (1983), 323-341; M. PAMMENT, 'Raised a Spiritual Body: Bodily Resurrection according to Paul', *New Blackfriars* 66 (1985), 372-388; C. H. RATSCHOW, 'Von der Auferweckung Jesu. Gedanken zu 1 Korinther 15', in *Von den Wandlungen Gottes*, de Gruyter, New York 1986, 315-335 (art. originally published 1973); G. SELLIN, *Der Streit um die Auferstehung der Toten. Eine religionsgeschichtliche und exegetische Untersuchung von 1 Korinther 15*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1986; H. J. VOGEL, 'Auferstehung. Ein Versuch, 1 Kor 15. zu lesen', in D. Schirmer (ed.), *Die Bibel als politisches Buch* (Urban-Taschenbücher, 655), Kohlhammer, Stuttgart-Berlin-Cologne 1982, 72-82; G. WAGNER, 'If Christians refuse to act, then Christ is not risen. Once more 1 Cor 15', *Irish Bib. Stud* 6 (1984), 27-39. Recent commentaries on 1 Cor include: Conzelmann (1981<sup>a</sup>), Maillot (1978), Murphy-O'Connor (1979), Trenchard (1980), Wolff (completed 1982), Lang (1986<sup>a</sup>), Pesch (1986), Kilgallen (1987). None of these has in my opinion correctly identified Paul's argument. In particular commentators insist on regarding the chapter as doctrinal; they substitute all manner of fancy division for the basic twofold scheme proposed below; and they fail to see that general views of Jesus' resurrection which rely on physical appearances of the Lord after his death are actually incompatible with 1 Cor 15.

5. This not to deny, of course, that Paul has also to cope with those who denied the possibility of resurrection (v. 12).
6. J. GILLMAN, 'Transformation in 1 Cor 15:50-53', *ETL* 58 (1982), 309-333.
7. '1 Corinthians 15:29', *ExT* 91 (1979/80), 310-311.
8. P. SEIDENSTICKER, *Die Auferstehung Jesu in der Botschaft der Evangelisten*, Kath. Bibelwerk, Stuttgart 1967, 1968<sup>a</sup>, 6; and 'Das antiochenische Glaubenserkenntnis 1 Kor 15,3-7 im Lichte seiner Traditionsgeschichte', *ThGL* 57 (1967), 286-323, esp. 310ff. Cf, however, the critique by X. LEON-DUFOUR in *RSR* 57 (1969), 599-602.
9. *Leben Jesu* (1st ed. 1835), III, 140.
10. See under note 8 above.
11. 'Death and Resurrection in Covenantal Context (Hos 6,2)' *VT* 17 (1967), 226-239.
12. *Auferstehungsverkündigung und leeres Grab*, Kath. Bibelwerk, Stuttgart 1968.
13. 'Auferstehung und Auferstehungsleib' *ZKTh* 91 (1969), 32-58.
14. 'Jesus Risen: Bodily Resurrection but No Empty Tomb', *Theology* 89 (1986), 90-96.
15. See W. J. ONG, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*, Methuen, London-New York 1982, esp. chap. 3, 'Some psychodynamics of orality', and chap. 6, 'Oral memory, the story line and characterisation'.
16. For some of the following remarks I am indebted to the late much missed Rev Dr Bernard Holland of Worcester, who gave an extramural course from Birmingham University in the autumn of 1986. Cf also W. H. KELBER, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, Philadelphia 1983, particularly chapters 3 and 5. For the empty tomb pericope in Mk, see eg F. NEIRYNCK, 'Marc 16,1-8. Tradition et Rédaction', *ETL* 56 (1980), 56-88.
17. A. K. JENKINS, 'Young Man or Angel?', *ExT* 94 (1982/3), 237-240, at 239.
18. See T. L. DONALDSON, *Jesus on the Mountain. A Study in Matthaean Theology* (JSNT Suppl. Series 8), JSOT Press, Sheffield 1985, 170-190. Also O. DA SPINETOLI, *Matteo*, Cittadella Editrice, Assisi 1977, 704-727.
19. Thus M. SHORTER, 'The Sign of the Linen Cloths: the Fourth Gospel and the Holy Shroud of Turin', *JSNT* 17 (1983), 90-96. Cf also R. L. STURCH, 'The Alleged Eyewitness Material in the Fourth Gospel', in E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Biblica* 1978, II. Papers on the Gospels, JSNT Suppl., JSOT Press, Sheffield 1980, 313-327.
20. 'Die Bedeutung der neutest. "Rätselzahlen" 666 (Apk 13 18) und 153 (Joh 21 11)', *ZNW* 77 (1986), 226-241.
21. Eg J. G. GAGER, *Kingdom and Community*, Prentice-Hall, New York 1975, 37-49.
22. F. W. BEARE, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Blackwell, Oxford 1981, 538-539. See also P. H. LAI, 'Production du sens par la foi. Matthieu 27,57-28,20', *RSR* 61 (1973), 65-96.