Death After Life or Life After Death?

Differing Early Christian Views on Death and the Afterlife

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Summary

The early Church Fathers accepted the notion of an intermediate state, the existence of the soul following death until its reunification with the body at the time of the final resurrection. This view is common in the modern Christian world, but it has been challenged as being unbiblical. This study reflects upon this question. Does the New Testament speak exclusively of death after life, complete lifelessness until the day of resurrection, or does it also contain the notion of life after life or immediate post-mortem existence? It will be argued that, while the doctrine of future resurrection is the most common Christian view, it was not the only one present in the Christian canon. There are hints, especially in the Gospel of Luke and the Revelation of John, that people do indeed live again immediately after death, although the doctrine of resurrection is also present. These two ideas are never coherently related to one another in the New Testament and it was the Church Fathers who first sought to systematise them.

Keywords

death – afterlife – intermediate state – post-mortem existence – resurrection

1 Introduction

I want to begin this study by referring to an event that many people have experienced, a Christian funeral. What is interesting about the language and imagery of Christian funerals is that there appears to be some confusion over the immediate fate of the deceased. It is often said that the deceased is now with

God, which suggests that the person involved is still alive in some form and is in the presence of God. But at other points in the service, there are inevitable references to the universal resurrection of the dead, and the point is made that at the time of the general resurrection the deceased will be raised to life to share in the blessings in heaven that the universal resurrection brings. The common mantra of “Rest in Peace” presumes that the body lies lifeless in the ground awaiting a later restoration to life. There appears to be, at least on the surface, a tension here concerning the post-mortem state of the deceased. Are they already in heaven enjoying their heavenly rewards, or are they lying lifeless in the ground awaiting renewed life and blessings at the time of the resurrection?

For many Christians of course there is no tension or contradiction. Both propositions are true. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, for example, holds that “The New Testament speaks of judgement primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in his second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith” (Art. 12 1021). Later in this section the doctrine of the general resurrection is explicated in more detail: “The resurrection of the dead, of both the just and the unjust, will precede the Last Judgement” (Art. 12 1038). The mixture of the elements of the soul’s immortality and the final resurrection comes still later: “We believe that the souls of all who die in Christ’s grace [...] are the people of God beyond death. On the day of resurrection, death will definitively be conquered, when these souls will be reunited with their bodies” (Art. 12 1051). This belief in immediate life after death, known also as the intermediate state, underlies much Catholic doctrine and dogma, including the notion of purgatory and the practice of praying to the saints on behalf of the dead.¹

The view of the intermediate state, involving both the immortality of the soul and the future resurrection of the body, has a long history in Christianity. Many of the Church Fathers, learned as they were in Greek philosophy and the Christian scriptures, tried to marry the Greek concept of the immortal soul with the Jewish/Christian notion of the resurrection of the body, and in fact viewed these ideas as integrally connected. The Fathers believed that the soul of Jesus remained alive after his physical death, and was rejoined to his body at the time of his resurrection three days later. In similar fashion the souls of those who have died in Christ partake now of their heavenly rewards, and at

1 For a comprehensive discussion of the modern Catholic understanding of the afterlife, the intermediate state and the general resurrection, see J. Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. 9: *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, Washington, DC, 1988.

the end of time their souls and bodies will be rejoined at the general resurrection when they receive their rewards in full measure for eternity. Of course there are differences in detail between the schemes of the various Fathers, but we can say in general terms that many of them who referred to the fate of the dead did so in terms of the intermediate state.²

This marriage of these concepts, needless to say, involved a radical reinterpretation of the traditional Greek understanding of the soul's immortality to make it palatable and consistent in its new Judeo-Christian context. The traditional Platonic view that the soul was immortal in and of itself (cf. Plato, *Phaedo*, 78–81) seriously conflicted with the Jewish and Christian view that only God is immortal. Thus Justin Martyr, for example, expresses the view that the soul is immortal only in so far as God has decreed it thus; God can also destroy what he has created (*Dial. Cum Tryph.*, 5). Other Church Fathers took a similar view.³ As for the concept of resurrection, the Fathers saw little within the Greek philosophical tradition to support their views. A number of them contend that the Greeks deny even the possibility of bodily resurrection (cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catcheses* 18.1; Augustine, *Ennar. in Psalm*, 88.5), so they defaulted to the writings of Christian authors. Speaking generally, the Fathers were of the view that the resurrected body would be very similar to the earthly body prior to its death (cf. Tatian, *Orat. De Graec.*, 6; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 33.5; Tertullian, *De Resur. Carn.* 60, 63; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catacheses*, 18; and Augustine, *De Civ. Dei*, 22.17; *Enchiridion*, 91).⁴

The writings and views of the Church Fathers are clearly interesting and important, but in this study I wish to focus on an even earlier phase of the Christian tradition, the time of the first century when the texts of the New Testament were written. The specific question I wish to ask is this: How did the earliest Christians envisage the post-mortem existence of the deceased? Do we find in their texts the concept of the intermediate state, the survival of the soul immediately after death and a more complete form of existence following the general resurrection, which we find in the Catholic Catechism and the writings of the Church Fathers, or do we find other schemas? This issue came to major prominence in New Testament scholarship when Oscar Cullmann delivered the Ingersoll Lecture at Harvard University in 1955. Cullman argued that the early Christians and the New Testament texts had no concept of an immortal

2 See H.A. Wolfson, "Immortality and Resurrection in the Philosophy of the Church Fathers," in: *Immortality and Resurrection: Death in the Western World. Two Conflicting Currents of Thought*, ed. by K. Stendahl, New York, 1965, pp. 54–96 (55–56).

3 For references to later Fathers, see Wolfson, "Immortality and Resurrection," p. 57.

4 Wolfson, "Immortality and Resurrection," pp. 69–70.

soul but referred exclusively to the notion of the resurrection of the dead. In Cullmann's analysis, there is no life after life or an intermediate state in the early Christian tradition. The importation of Greek ideas concerning the soul and its marriage with the Jewish doctrine of bodily resurrection were later developments.⁵ As Cullmann concedes, his hypothesis was motivated by the then current Christian view that favoured immortality of the soul over the resurrection of the dead, so his intention was to turn the tide and return to the Biblical view.⁶ When it was published, Cullmann's short study caused much controversy and was widely criticised as too dogmatic.⁷

The judgement of history since the publication of Cullmann's work has been generally sympathetic. While few scholars today would agree with his central conviction that the early Christians had no notion of an intermediate state,⁸ it is generally conceded that the doctrine of a future resurrection is by far the dominant model of post-mortem existence in the earliest Christian texts. The debate continues as to how often we find references to the intermediate state, and as to their importance within the eschatological horizons of the New Testament authors. In this short study I wish to revisit this topic. It will be argued that the doctrine of death after life, a state of lifelessness after death and the provision of renewed life at the time of the final resurrection, does form the backdrop to most New Testament texts that refer to this issue, but it will also be maintained that there are a number of important references to the intermediate state where deceased people enjoy their heavenly rewards or suffer their punishments immediately after death. These references should not be

- 5 O. Cullmann, "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead: The Witness of the New Testament," in: *Immortality and Resurrection: Death in the Western World. Two Conflicting Currents of Thought*, ed. by K. Stendahl, New York, 1965, pp. 9–53.
- 6 Cullman, "Immortality of the Soul," p. 9. It is interesting to note that modern Jews also tend to favour the concept of the soul's immortality in preference to the notion of bodily resurrection, though the motivation here seems to be an attempt to separate the Jewish view of the afterlife from the Christian notion of resurrection, which is of course based upon the Christian claim of the resurrection of Jesus. See J.D. Levenson, *Resurrection and The Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life*, New Haven, 2006, pp. 1–22.
- 7 See Cullmann, "Immortality of the Soul," pp. 47–53 where the author recounts the distress and opposition caused by his study.
- 8 For a critique of Cullmann's narrow choice of Jewish texts that form the background to the early Christian view, see G.W.E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism*, Cambridge, 1972, pp. 177–80. The major exception to the scholarly revision of Cullmann's work is S. Bacchiocchi. See his *Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study on Human Nature and Destiny*, Berrien Springs, 2001. Bacchiocchi concurs with Cullmann that neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament had any notion of the intermediate state.

overlooked or downplayed but must be recognised as evidence that the early Christians accepted a variety of traditions concerning the fate of people who had physically died. These different traditions sometimes appear in works by the same author, but there was never any attempt to reconcile them. This left a significant gap in the emerging Christian theology that the later Church Fathers tried to reconcile.

2 The Post-Mortem Existence of Jesus

Let me begin this section with the point I made above. It can be accepted at the outset that the early Christians focused on the concept of resurrection much more so than on the eternal nature of the soul and any post-mortem life that the soul might experience. The reason for this emphasis is not difficult to determine. At the very heart of the Christian message was the proclamation that Christ had been crucified and then raised from the dead to life. In the Pauline literature, the central element of Christian belief is integrally tied to Jesus' resurrection. A few texts will suffice to prove this point. In 1 Cor 15:3–4 Paul reminds the Corinthians of the tradition he received that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and a few verses later in 15:17 the apostle writes; "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile (cf. 1 Cor 15:14)." Even more pointed is the statement that appears in Rom 10:9; "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (cf. Rom 4:25–25).⁹ The four Gospels all focus on the death of Jesus and his resurrection on the third day. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus predicts his passion and resurrection three times (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33 and par.) and all Gospels describe in great detail the related events of Jesus' death and vindication by resurrection.¹⁰

There are of course discrepancies between our sources as to the exact nature of Jesus' resurrection body. While the empty tomb tradition suggests that the earthly body of Jesus had regained its former life, there is little agreement as to whether it was a physical or spiritual entity. Paul seems to accept that the body of Jesus has been transformed spiritually at the resurrection. In his account of the resurrection appearances in 1 Cor 15:4–9, Paul simply states that

9 For further discussion, see J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul the Apostle*, Grand Rapids, 1998, pp. 235–237.

10 For discussion of how the resurrection motif dominates the narratives of all four Gospels, see N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Minneapolis, 2003, pp. 402–449.

Jesus appeared and was seen (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1; Gal 1:16) and he is careful not to provide any details about Jesus' bodily appearance. Later in the same epistle Paul speaks about the resurrection body compared to its earthly counterpart, and says explicitly that 'It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body' (1 Cor 15:44). To reinforce this point the apostle states a few verses later that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 15:50). Paul's view of a resurrected spiritual body can be contrasted with the resurrection appearance stories in the Gospels, which have a much more physical element to them. In these texts Jesus can be touched (Matt 28:9), he shows the disciples his crucifixion wounds (Luke 24:36–40; John 20:20; 26–27), and he eats with them (Luke 24:30–31, 41–43; John 21:10–14). But even here there is a strong non-physical aspect to the resurrected body of Jesus. He can appear in locked rooms (John 20:19, 26) and disappear at will (Luke 24:31).¹¹

But while the differences in the resurrection body of Jesus are interesting, it is not what I wish to focus on here. Of more importance for our purposes is another question. What did the early Christians believe about the immediate post-mortem existence of Jesus? After his death, did he lie lifeless in the tomb until the third day when he was raised from the dead, or did he experience an interim spiritual existence before his soul was reunited with his body on the third day? There is no easy answer to this question. The language of resurrection, raising a person *from the dead*, seems to suggest that the individual is completely lifeless prior to that miraculous action. The traditions that we find in the Gospels and Acts about other raisings of dead people also assumes a state of no consciousness and real death prior to their raising. In short they presuppose death after life. These stories are the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1–44), the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:22–24, 35–43); the raising of the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11–17), the raising of Tabitha (Acts 9:36–41) and the raising of Eutychus (Acts 20:9–12). After their restoration to life none of these people speak of any experiences that occurred between their death and their resuscitation by Jesus and his followers.¹² Of course there is an ontological world of difference between the raisings from the dead by Jesus and the apostles and the resurrection of Jesus himself. Those raised in the Gospels and Acts will indeed die again while the resurrected Jesus has conquered death and now has eternal life. But this important distinction does not affect the point I am making. If these people remained lifeless until they were miraculously raised from the dead, then the same should perhaps be applied to Jesus as well.

11 J. Muddiman, "I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body," in: *Resurrection: Essays in Honour of Leslie Houlden*, ed. by S. Barton, G. Stanton, London, 1994, pp. 128–138 (132).

12 Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection?*, p. 143.

Certainly this notion of life, death and a future life after resurrection suits the Jewish context of the Jesus tradition. In the Hebrew Bible the concept of resurrection is a comparatively late one, and finds its most detailed description in the Book of Daniel, which was written at the height of the Maccabean crisis (c. 165 BCE). The Book of Daniel, despite its late date and its comparatively short length, was one of the most influential Jewish texts on the early Christians.¹³ In 12:3 Daniel is told, “And many who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” In this text there is no indication at all that the dead have any post-mortem life experience.¹⁴ They sleep in the dust awaiting their awakening at the last judgement. It is reasonable to assume that the early Christians, as well versed as they were in this particular Jewish text, also considered the death of Jesus as complete lifelessness until his resurrection on the third day.

But if is the case, then what are we to make of Luke 23:43? In this passage the criminal who is crucified with Jesus asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom, and Jesus reassures him that *today* he will be with Jesus in paradise. If this is the correct understanding of this passage, then this promise Jesus makes seems to suggest that both he and the condemned believer will experience immediate post-mortem existence: today both of them will be in paradise. While this is the majority understanding of this text, a minority of scholars contend that it can and should be understood differently. S. Bacchiocchi, for example, maintains that the wording should be translated as “Truly I say to you today that you will be with me in paradise,” in which case Jesus tells the penitent criminal on the day of their deaths that he will in the future be with Jesus in heaven. On this view there is no suggestion of an intermediate state.¹⁵ Most scholars, however, accept the traditional translation and interpretation but they differ over the issue of emphasis. While some appeal to this passage as definite and irrefutable evidence that Luke accepted that Jesus

13 See A.Y. Collins, “The Influence of Daniel on the New Testament,” in: J.J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Minneapolis, 1993, pp. 90–123, and C.A. Evans, “Daniel in the New Testament,” in: *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception. Volume 1*, ed. J.J. Collins, P.W. Flint, Leiden, 2001, pp. 490–527.

14 The literature on this passage is enormous. See, for example, Collins, *Daniel*, pp. 390–398; Wright, *Resurrection*, pp. 109–15; Levenson, *Resurrection*, pp. 181–191; Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life*, pp. 11–27, and J.B. Doukhan, “From Dust to Stars: The Vision(s) of Resurrection in Daniel 12:1–13 and its Resonance in the Book of Daniel,” in: *Resurrection of the Dead: Biblical Traditions in Dialogue*, ed. G. Van Ouyen, T. Shepherd, Leuven, 2012, pp. 85–98.

15 Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection?*, p. 177.

existed in an intermediate state prior to his resurrection,¹⁶ others concede that this text can be read in such a way but that not much can be built upon it.¹⁷ All scholars, whether they emphasise or downplay the importance of this text, tend to avoid any terminology that conjures up the notion of the immortality of the soul. Yet, had Luke considered matters in this way, it would not be so surprising. As we shall see shortly, the idea of immediate life after death appears elsewhere in this Gospel, and of all the New Testament authors Luke is perhaps the most highly educated in terms of Graeco-Roman culture and traditions, so any hint that he accepted an intermediate state would not in itself be problematic.¹⁸ But even if we accept that Luke had some belief in the eternal soul of Jesus, and that is not certain, it is still true that in the later appearance narratives all the emphasis falls on the resurrection event. The disciples on the road to Emmaus are informed that Jesus has been raised from the dead and has appeared to Peter (Luke 24:33–34). In the very next passage (24:36–49) Jesus appears among the disciples and demonstrates his resurrected body by showing the wounds of his crucifixion and then reminding them that the Christ should suffer and be raised from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus rather than any intermediate state is still the most pressing concern for Luke.

The only other possible New Testament text that could potentially refer to Jesus' intermediate spiritual state between his death and resurrection is 1 Pet 3:18–22. It states that Jesus

was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which he [...] made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah [...] in which a few... were saved through water. Baptism...now saves you [...] through the resurrection of Christ, who has gone to heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers subject to him.

The theme of preaching to the dead occurs a few verses later in 4:6; "For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God." This text influenced the later

16 This reading is accepted by, amongst others, Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 124; J. Osei-Bonsu, "The Intermediate State in the New Testament," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 44 (1991), pp. 169–194 (175–177); J. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids, 1997, pp. 822–823, and O. Lehtipuu, *The Afterlife Imagery in Luke's Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus*, Leiden, 2007, pp. 254–255.

17 So Wright, *Resurrection*, 438, n. 114, and A.F. Segal, *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, New York, 2004, p. 467.

18 Lehtipuu, *Afterlife Imagery*, p. 300.

Apostles' Creed which refers to Jesus' death, burial, descent into hell, and then his resurrection and ascension. In accordance with the common patristic belief that Jesus' soul survived the crucifixion, the Creed credits the spirit of Jesus with descending into hell before his resurrection from the dead. It is not clear, however, whether the earlier Petrine text is as clear as this.

The whole passage in 1 Pet 3:18–4:6 is quite difficult. It contains many linguistic and exegetical problems, and a good number of its constituent elements can be interpreted in a variety of ways.¹⁹ Does the reference to Jesus' being made alive in the spirit refer to his immortal soul that survived death or does it relate to his spiritual resurrection? Who are those in prison to whom Christ proclaimed? Are they the contemporaries of Noah or are they wicked angels? And where are these prisoners? The text makes no reference to any descent of Christ, though it does refer to his post-resurrection ascension. It might well be the case that rather than a descent into hell, the text refers to the ascension of Jesus where he proclaimed his message to those imprisoned in the lower levels of the heavenly realm. In terms of 4:6, there are similar unclear elements. Who proclaims the gospel? Is it Jesus or his Christian followers? Who precisely are the dead? Is there any connection between 1 Pet 4:6 and 1 Pet 3:18–22 and, if so, what is the connection? The extensive analysis by W.J. Dalton cautions us that we should not read this text through the prism of the later Creeds. Taken on its own terms the text does not refer to the descent of Jesus' soul to the nether regions to proclaim the gospel; rather it more likely applies to the resurrected Lord announcing his message of salvation during his ascent to the heavens.²⁰ In sum one is hard pressed to find in 1 Peter an allusion to the intermediate state of Jesus in the period between his death and resurrection.

3 The Post-mortem Existence of Others

We may leave the question of the status of Jesus' post-mortem existence, and examine the fate of other people after death. The apostle Paul provides most

19 The definitive study of this text is W.J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18–4:6*, Rome, 1989. See too the more recent study by J. Clark-Soles, *Death and the Afterlife in the New Testament*, London, 2006, pp. 194–210. Of interest as well is the work of D.G. Horrell, *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, London, 2013, pp. 73–99, which focuses mostly on 1 Pet 4:6.

20 Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, pp. 140, 215–218. Dalton's conclusions are widely accepted. In agreement are Clark-Soles, *Death and the Afterlife*, pp. 209–210; Horrell *Becoming Christian*, pp. 73–75; M. Williams, *The Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter*, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 188–205, and K.B. Liebengood, *The Eschatology of 1 Peter: Considering the Influence of Zechariah 9–14*, Cambridge, 2014, pp. 193–194.

information about this theme, and it is arguable whether his views are consistent. The apostle's major statements on this topic clearly presuppose the death after life model, according to which the dead will remain lifeless until the general resurrection of the dead which Paul associates with the second coming of Jesus at the end of time. We shall begin with these. In the letter to the Thessalonians (c. 50 CE), perhaps his earliest epistle, the apostle is confronted with the problem of deaths of Christians in the Thessalonian community. It is clear that Paul had proclaimed to the Thessalonians that Christ would return soon, but when some of the congregation there had died the Christians in Thessalonica were understandably worried that the departed would miss out on their eternal rewards because they would not be alive to witness the return of Jesus in glory. In 4:13–18 Paul offers comfort to the Thessalonians by assuring them that their deceased loved ones will indeed receive their due reward, and he uses the model of Jesus to demonstrate this point. Just as Jesus died and rose again, so too will God bring with him those who have fallen asleep (v. 14). So important are these dead Christians that Paul predicts that when Jesus returns in glory at the end of the age, those who are dead in Christ will rise first, and then they will float towards heaven to meet the returning Jesus. Only after this will those who are alive at the end be transported towards the heavens where they too will meet Jesus and those who have been raised (vv. 16–17). In offering these words of comfort to the Thessalonians, Paul strongly suggests that the dead currently have no life at all until they are resurrected.²¹ Had he accepted the notion of the intermediate state where the souls of the Christian dead now enjoy to some extent their rewards in paradise, then presumably he would have said so and that would have provided the necessary comfort sought by the Thessalonians.²² It is important to note that like Daniel, Paul uses the euphemism “sleeping” to describe the current status of the dead. This does not suggest any post-mortem existence, but indicates that their lifelessness now is temporary and akin to the state of sleep.²³

Precisely the same notion underlies the apostle's famous passage on the resurrection of Jesus and Christian believers in 1 Corinthians 15.²⁴ Some Corinthians were doubting the reality of resurrection (v. 12) and Paul spends a considerable amount of time refuting this claim. At one point he states that if Christ has not been raised, then those who have fallen asleep have indeed

21 See the analysis of this text in Wright, *Resurrection*, pp. 215–219.

22 So correctly Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection?*, p. 144.

23 Wright, *Resurrection*, p. 216. For discussion of the Biblical use of sleep as a metaphor of death, see Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection?*, pp. 140–147.

24 For discussion of this text, see the major commentaries. Cf. too the detailed analysis in Wright, *Resurrection*, pp. 312–361.

perished (v. 18). This claim too is difficult to reconcile with the idea of an intermediate state where the dead would presently be enjoying their reward in heaven.²⁵ Paul quickly dispels that death is their final fate by reinforcing that Christ has been raised from the dead and is in fact the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (v. 20). The Christian dead will be raised to life when Jesus returns (v. 23). The apostle then turns to another area of concern for the Corinthians, the process of resurrection and the nature of the resurrected body. Here Paul describes in detail that the resurrected body is vastly different from the physical body that died. It is not an entirely new entity but is a transformation of the physical body into a spiritual body which is powerful and eternal (vv. 35–50).²⁶ After spelling out that those who are still alive at the second coming will also be transformed from a physical to a spiritual being (vv. 51–53), Paul then launches into a typical rhetorical flourish, taking his cue from Hos 13:14, with the twin questions, “O death, where is thy victory?; O death, where is thy sting?” (v. 55). Death will be defeated at the time of Christ’s return (cf. 1 Cor 15:26), but it prevails in the here and now. The dead have perished and they are now lifeless, but they will be given a new, eternal and transformed body when Jesus returns in glory. As in 1 Thessalonians, it is the experience of Jesus that provides the working model for this view of the afterlife.²⁷

But some scholars have argued that Paul is not entirely consistent on this issue. They contend that at other points in his epistles, the apostle seems to embrace the notion of the intermediate state, where the deceased experience life again immediately after their passing. Two small Pauline passages are usually produced to support this argument. In Phil 1:23–24 Paul expresses his wish that he desires to be with Christ, but it is more necessary that he remains in the flesh to continue his work. The implication here is that if Paul is not living in the flesh, then he will be with Christ. Death here does not mean a lifeless existence awaiting the resurrection but immediate existence in the presence of the Lord.²⁸ A similar notion is found in 2 Cor 5:6–8. Here Paul seemingly

25 A similar point is made by Wright, *Resurrection*, p. 315.

26 See the excellent discussion of Paul’s view of the relationship between the physical and spiritual bodies in J. Ware, “Paul’s Understanding of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:36–54,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 133 (2014), pp. 809–835.

27 Wright, *Resurrection*, pp. 360–361.

28 See Osei-Bonsu, “Intermediate State,” pp. 187–188 and Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 126, both of whom argue that there is no inconsistency in Paul’s thought because the future resurrection of the body and the idea of the intermediate state are not contradictory. See too Clark-Soles, *Death and the Afterlife*, pp. 99–101, who concedes that in this passage Paul implies “a disembodied intermediate state”. In agreement is D.E. Aune, “Human Nature and Ethics in Hellenistic Philosophical Traditions and Paul: Some Issues and Problems,” in: *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, ed. T. Engberg-Pederson, Minneapolis,

juxtaposes two states of existence, at home in the body and away from the Lord, and away from the body and at home in the Lord. Again it is argued that since there is no indication that death involves a period of lifelessness before life is renewed at the resurrection the apostle once more emphasises the intermediate state.²⁹

Other scholars read these texts differently, and do so largely on the basis of the Thessalonian and Corinthian texts discussed above, which both seem to deny the prospect of an intermediate existence after death. In terms of the Philippians passage, it has been maintained that the dominant idea here is not a post-mortem life in the presence of Christ but rather that once death has come and the body lies lifeless with no perception of time, then death does fulfil the desire to be with Christ. Following death the next thing experienced by the believer is union with Christ on the day of resurrection.³⁰ As for 2 Cor 5:6–8, a notoriously difficult passage to interpret,³¹ scholars contend that once again the intermediate state is more read into this text than out of it. The precise meanings of the terms ‘home in the body’ and ‘home in the Lord’ are not immediately clear, but it is difficult to accept that Paul is referring to two types of existence. In v. 9 the apostle makes the point that whether one is at home or away, what is of importance is that one pleases Christ. The final emphasis in this section falls on the judgement, where Paul states that all must appear before the judgement seat of Christ where each person will be judged according to what he or she has done in the body (v. 10). If there is any reference to the intermediate state in 2 Cor 5:6–8, and that is questionable, then it is completely overshadowed by the notion of the future resurrection and its accompanying judgement.³²

1995, pp. 291–312 (303). Aune makes the point that Paul here does not describe the element that exists with Christ as the soul. Cf. also G.D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, Grand Rapids, 1995, pp. 148–149, and J. Reumann, *Philippians*, New Haven, 2008, pp. 249–251. Even N.T. Wright, who is mostly disparaging of the concept of the intermediate state in Pauline theology, seems to concede that this text does assume some sort of post-mortem personal relationship between Paul and Jesus, though he does not expand much on this concession. See Wright, *Resurrection*, p. 226.

29 Osei-Bonsu, “Intermediate State”, pp. 183–187; Aune, “Human Nature and Ethics,” pp. 302–303; and M. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Edinburgh, 1994, pp. 389–392.

30 So Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection?*, pp. 179–180; and Cullman, “Immortality of the Soul,” p. 42.

31 This is acknowledged by Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Theology*, pp. 127–129, who contends that this passage is too difficult to build any view of an intermediate state.

32 For discussions of this text that deny the inclusion of the intermediate state, see Cullmann, “Immortality of the Soul,” pp. 40–45; Bacchiocchi, *Immortality of Resurrection?*,

Our discussion of Paul can be summarised quickly. In his major considerations of post-mortem existence, Paul adopts the death after life model. The dead lie inactive or “sleeping” in the ground until they are brought to life again when Jesus returns as the final judge. Upon the return of Jesus, their raised physical bodies will be miraculously transformed into eternal spiritual bodies, in much the same manner as the resurrection of Jesus. The two short Pauline texts which some scholars have argued demonstrate that Paul also accepted life after life or an intermediate state of existence between death and the final resurrection, cannot carry the weight assigned to them. Neither clearly delineates that the apostle held such a belief, and that he did is unlikely in the light of its absence from 1 Thess 4:13–18.

We may leave the Pauline literature and turn to other texts that have been offered as definitive evidence of the intermediate state in the New Testament literature. The most important example of the life after life scenario is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31. In this unparalleled text the poor beggar Lazarus dies and goes immediately to heaven and resides with Abraham, while the rich man dies and goes to Hades where he is tormented. The rich man asks Abraham if Lazarus can be sent to his five brothers to warn them of the fate they face. Abraham declines this request because the brothers already have Moses and the prophets, and should know what to do. But the rich man persists and says that if they are visited by someone who has died they will repent. In the final verse the point is made that if they have not heeded Moses and the prophets, then they will not be convinced if someone should rise from the dead. Even this brief summary of the story suffices to show that it presumes the life after life scenario. Lazarus and the rich man find themselves alive after their deaths and residing respectively in paradise and in Hades. That they experience their fates before the final judgement is clear from the fact that the rich man pleads to have his brothers on earth saved so that they do not suffer the same fate as him. This much is clear. But there is widespread scholarly dissension concerning whether or not Luke himself accepted this afterlife scenario. For many scholars this text above all others provides irrefutable evidence that, in transmitting this tradition, Luke accepted the notion of an intermediate state, which accords with the story of Jesus and the thief that was discussed above.³³

pp. 181–187; Wright, *Resurrection*, 369–370, and Clark-Soles, *Death and the Afterlife*, pp. 95–97.

33 So Lehtipuu, *Afterlife Imagery*, pp. 4–8, 265–294, 299–300; Osei-Bonsu, “Intermediate State”, pp. 173–175, and Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 124.

Those scholars opposed to this view try to explain it away. Perhaps the most dominant objection is that this story of the afterlife appears in the form of a parable, and it should not be taken literally in any sense. The point Luke is making in this parable is not to describe the afterlife conditions of the poor and the rich, but rather to highlight the future dangers that the careless rich face.³⁴ But as widespread as this argument is, it is in the final analysis unconvincing. While it is doubtless true that parables are not to be taken as concrete descriptions of actual events, they do take features of everyday life or commonly held beliefs and use them to make an unexpected point. The fact that this parable uses immediate rewards and punishment after death to set the scene for the moral point of the story probably suggests that Luke's readers or hearers were well acquainted with this concept.³⁵

The Book of Revelation seems to know of the intermediate state as well as a complex notion of the resurrection. In 6:9–11 John refers to the souls of those who had been killed for the word of God and who reside under the heavenly altar. They cry to God to avenge them but are told they must wait a little longer. These people are mentioned again in 7:9–17, when the seer witnesses a great multitude in heaven clothed in white robes, and is told that they are the martyrs of the great tribulation. These people are clearly in heaven now and are not sleeping in the earth awaiting their resurrection from the dead. At the end of the document where the end times are narrated, John refers to a first resurrection when the righteous rule with Christ for 1,000 years (20:4–6). After this period, Satan will be released from prison but after his final defeat there will be a second resurrection when all the wicked will be thrown into the eternal fire (20:11–15). Revelation's unique eschatological schema cannot be discussed here in detail, but its importance lies in the fact that martyrs at least seem to experience their eternal rewards before the two resurrection events. There is, at least for some, life after life or an intermediate state.³⁶

Attempts to explain away or to deny the intermediate state in these texts are not entirely convincing. S. Bacchiocchi suggests that the author of the Apoca-

34 Wright, *Resurrection*, pp. 437–438, and Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection?*, pp. 173–176.

35 Lehtipuu, *Afterlife Imagery*, pp. 4–8.

36 So, with varying nuances, Osei-Bonsu, "Intermediate State," pp. 191–192; Segal, *Life After Death*, pp. 485–486; M. Labahn, "The Resurrection of the Followers of the Lamb: Between Heavenly 'Reality' and Hope for the Future. The Concept of Resurrection Within the Imagery of Life and Death in the Book of Revelation," in: *Resurrection of the Dead: Biblical Traditions in Dialogue*, ed. G. Van Ouyen, T. Shepherd, Leuven, 2012, pp. 319–342 (327–334); D.E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, Dallas, 1998, pp. 403–413, and C.R. Koester, *Revelation*, New Haven, 2014, pp. 409–411.

lypse was merely providing a symbolic representation for those facing martyrdom that they would ultimately be vindicated by God.³⁷ N.T. Wright also struggles with this text, and argues that it means no more than that the martyrs will be raised in the future at the resurrection but are not yet raised. Yet, Wright also concedes that this passage does involve a temporary abode for the righteous and martyred dead.³⁸ If this is so, then surely this text in Revelation implies some notion of life after life, even if it is not spelt out in any detail. Wright is correct, however, that the emphasis in the Christian Apocalypse still falls on the final two resurrections when the righteous will reign with Christ and the wicked will be thrown to the eternal fire. The intermediate state of the martyrs cannot be denied but it is hardly the dominant theme in Revelation's eschatology.

Our survey of the more important themes and texts on the early Christian views of the afterlife supports the work of Cullmann in the sense that the model of death after life, inactivity after death until a restoration to life at the final resurrection, is the dominant view in the New Testament literature. Yet Cullmann was mistaken in his judgement that the concept of life after life, an intermediate of existence state bridging death and the day of resurrection, was absent from the Christian canon. While it is difficult to prove that Paul held fast to this notion, there is little doubt that it does appear quite clearly in both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Revelation. But it is also true that both the evangelist and the seer do not emphasise this element at the expense of the final and universal resurrection of the dead. The intermediate state therefore crops up here and there in primitive Christian eschatology, but in the grand scheme of things it plays a small and secondary role. The earliest Christians were therefore much more focused on the events when Jesus returned at the end of the age when the dead would be raised to glory or to punishment than on their fate immediately after death.

That we find both schemes in the New Testament should occasion no real surprise. The Judaism from which the Christian tradition emerged also contained both concepts and variations within them, which were never presented in any systematic or organised fashion.³⁹ I have already referred to the impor-

37 Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection?*, pp. 187–189;

38 Wright, *Resurrection*, p. 471.

39 See the old but still valuable survey of all the relevant texts and authors in H.C.C. Cavallin, *Life after Death: Paul's Argument for the Resurrection of the Dead in 1 Cor 15. Part 1: An Enquiry into the Jewish Background*, Lund, 1974. Cavallin provides a valuable summary of the data and emphasises its great diversity (pp. 199–205). Cf. too Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life*. For an important discussion of the Jewish inscriptional evidence, which again highlights the lack of systematic thought on the fate of the

tance of Daniel in terms of the resurrection belief, and there are many other texts that express the same idea (cf. e.g. 2 Macc 7:9, 14; 12:44; *T.Ben* 10:6–8; *1 En* 25:4–7; 51:1–4; 62:15; 67:8–9; 108:11–15; *Sib. Or.* 4:179–92; *4 Ezra* 7:32, 37; *2 Bar* 30:1–2, 42:8; 50:1–3; 51:1–6).⁴⁰ But there are other documents and passages that seem to refer to immediate life after death, in heaven for the righteous and in hell for the wicked (e.g. *Wis* 3:1–4; *1 En* 103:3–8; *4 Ezra* 7:75, 78–80, 88, 95; *4 Macc* 3:18; 6:7; 10:4; 13:13–17).⁴¹ This particular belief underlies the “heavenly journeys” in the apocalyptic literature where a noted figure in Judaism is transported to heaven where he witnesses the post-mortem (but not post-resurrection) fate of the good and the wicked.⁴² The most extreme case in Judaism of the life after life model is found in the writings of Philo. As one trained in Greek philosophy, Philo had no truck at all with the notion of resurrection. Rather, he accepts completely and solely the Greek concept of the immortality of the soul (*Quaes Gen.* 3:11), and downplays and even allegorises the references to resurrection found in his own Jewish tradition.⁴³ But it must be said that Philo’s very clear views on the immortality of the soul and the denial of a future bodily resurrection places him well outside the contemporary Jewish mainstream.⁴⁴

4 Conclusions

By way of concluding this study, let me return to the event of the Christian funeral. The different ways of understanding the state of the deceased, as living now with God and as anticipating the general resurrection at the time of Jesus’ return, finds full support in the Catholic Catechism and in the teachings of the Church Fathers. Whether it can be said to be a Biblical teaching is much less sure. The New Testament texts mostly refer to the doctrine of resurrection, which is understandable given the importance of the resurrection of Jesus. Those who have died in Christ are stone dead and lifeless, euphemistically referred to as sleeping, but they will be raised to a new spiritual existence when Jesus returns in glory. But despite the confidence of many scholars that this is the only valid Biblical teaching on post-mortem existence, the reality is

deceased, see J.S. Park, *Conceptions of Afterlife in Jewish Inscriptions with Special Reference to Pauline Literature*, Tübingen, 2009.

40 For discussion of these and other texts, see Wright, *Resurrection*, pp. 150–162

41 See Wright, *Resurrection*, pp. 140–144;

42 S.P. Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, New York, 2009, pp. 84–102.

43 See Segal, *Life After Death*, pp. 368–375.

44 Wright, *Resurrection*, pp. 144–145.

somewhat different. The texts of the New Testament show small glimpses here and there that there were alternatives or perhaps additional views, and one of these was that the dead would receive their just deserts immediately after death, which must involve in some way the concept of the immortality of the soul. This is certainly the case in the Gospel of Luke and the Christian Apocalypse. But in neither of these texts do we find any attempt to systematise these divergent views. They are never placed together and never discussed together in a systematic fashion. That task in the Christian tradition fell to the later Church Fathers. Those critics of the Fathers who argue that they diluted or even infected the Biblical teaching on resurrection by introducing the Greek concept of the immortal soul have overstated their case. If Greek religion and philosophy has entered the Christian tradition, then it happened long before the time of the Fathers.