TIME OF RECEIPT OF THE RESURRECTION BODY—
A PAULINE INCONSISTENCY?

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I am delighted to have been invited to contribute to this book of essays for Dr. Margaret Thrall. I had the privilege of having Margaret as my PhD supervisor in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as being taught by her while I was doing a BA in Biblical Studies at the University College of North Wales (as it was called then), Bangor. I found her to be an inspirational teacher while an undergraduate, and students recognised her thorough scholarship and attention to detail. She was also someone who laid great emphasis on the importance of good exegesis. I recall her saying something like ‘You should feel free to disagree with commentators, whoever they are, if you think, on the basis of good exegesis, that they are wrong’. As a student, I benefited from her wise comments on numerous occasions, as she gave freely of her time and guided me through all the rigours of research. Her two volumes on 2 Corinthians in the ICC series are models of precise, discerning exegesis, and evidence of the sort of detailed, conscientious work that characterised her teaching and supervisions. She is a notable scholar and a Festschrift is a fitting tribute to her life as an academic teacher and writer.

1. Introduction

When did the apostle Paul believe that a Christian believer would receive their resurrection body? Two passages which appear to give information on this question are said by some scholars to be inconsistent. Thus it seems clear from 1 Cor. 15 that the believer does not receive the resurrection body until the Parousia—see verse 22-26 (the order for the resurrection of the dead taking place is first Christ, then at his coming, ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ, those who belong to Christ, v.23), 50-52 (it is at the last trumpet, at the coming of Christ, that the resurrection body will be given). From v.50 in particular, it would seem that the material elements of the two bodies
are not identical; therefore the passage from one to the next requires that special act of God which is associated with the Parousia. According to this argument, Christians who die before the Parousia have not yet been resurrected, and in this chapter this resurrection of all believers takes place at the same moment, at the Parousia. Compare also 1 Thess. 4:15-17—it is at the Parousia that the dead in Christ will rise and then would take place the transformation of the living.

However in 2 Corinthians 5 there seems to be a different answer to this question.1 Verse 1 is said to show that it is at the moment of death that the heavenly body is received—there is no gap between death and the Parousia during which the believer is disembodied—when the believer’s earthly tent is destroyed, and one has (note the present tense—ἐχομεν) a building from God. It is only by receiving the resurrection body at death that this state of nakedness will be avoided (v.3). The believer longs to receive this clothing so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life without any interval of being unclothed (v.4). So the ‘clothing upon’ (ἐπενδύσασθαι) with ‘our heavenly habitation’ (v.2, το οἰκηπήριον ἡμῶν το ε ὁφαντο) is something that follows immediately upon the dissolution of ‘the earthly house of our tabernacle’ (v.1 ἤ ἐπίγειος ἡμῶν οἰκία τοῦ σκῆνου). So for individual believers, it is at death that they will receive the building that God has provided as soon as their present physical body is destroyed. On this understanding, there is no interval between death and resurrection, as there appears to be in 1 Cor. 15.

Thus Paul appears to give quite different answers to the question: When does the believer receive their resurrection body? According to 1 Cor. 15 no believers receive their resurrection body until the Parousia. Individual Christians dying at different times do not each experience resurrection as soon as they die. But in 2 Cor. 5:1, the believer is clothed with the resurrection body, ‘the building that God has provided’, οἰκοδομήν ἐκ θεοῦ, as soon as the ‘earthly frame’ in which they are now ‘housed’, that is, their present physical body, is

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