

“FOR ALL LIVE TO HIM”:
THE THEOLOGY OF LUKE 20:37-38
IN ANTE-NICENE SOURCES

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Although Christ defends the eschatological expectation of physical resurrection (Matt 22:23-33 || Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-38), he does not explicitly discuss the intermediate state of man. Nevertheless, each of the passages cited above (especially the Lukan reading) may indirectly address that issue according to ancient Christian sources. Luke 20:27-38 begins by recording the initial challenge issued by the Sadducees:

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, ‘Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.’ (20:27-33)

The Sadducees attempt to refute the resurrection of the dead (or any post-mortem existence for that matter) by citing a certain state of life that would be impossible to restore/preserve after death: namely, marriage to a previous husband. Christ’s response begins with a clarification that excludes the force of their argument:

Jesus said to them, ‘Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. (20:34-36)

The Sadducees mistakenly assumed that earthly conditions persist into the coming Age (Marshall 742). Christ dismisses their objection by revealing the radical transfiguration of human existence awaiting “the children of the resurrection.”

Having disarmed the objection, Christ proceeds to issue a counter-argument as positive evidence of the resurrection of the dead:

But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the burning bush, where he calls the Lord **THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB**. Now He is not the God of the dead but of the living; for all live to Him. (20:37-38, NASB)

Christ's argument exploits the present-tense construction of a familiar covenant greeting in the Pentateuch: "I am the God of [Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob]" (Ex 3:6; cf. Gen 28:13; Ex 3:15-16; 4:5). He submits the verb form as evidence that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in some respect "live" to God (though not to men). Implicit in his assertion is the idea that God cannot relate to the dead. He is, properly, the God of existence, as one cannot experience covenantal friendship with non-existence. An undefined mode of "life" preserves the relationship between Yahweh and humans.

Certainly, this mode of life anticipates physical resurrection, the plausibility of which remains the central issue in Luke 20:27-38. Many interpreters, citing this context, choose to read the verse as a prolepsis: the patriarchs "live" to God inasmuch as He will raise them (future). This view, while possible, is not preferable due to the present-tense force (and form) of the enigmatic claim "all live/are living to Him," corresponding to the same form observed in the Mosaic text. Apparently, Christ intends to communicate that the patriarchs currently "exist."

This emphasis on their existence as a present reality hardly obscures the passage's discussion of a future, physical resurrection; in fact, it presupposes it. By asserting that the patriarchs exist even now, Christ secures the possibility that their bodies can (and will) be restored to this world in the resurrection. The Sadducees challenged the *plausibility* of resurrection; by contrast, Christ asserts the same.

Unfortunately, the discussion ends without any further explication of the nature of that present existence. Nevertheless, ancient Christian readings of the verse in the Ante-Nicene era (c. 100-325 CE) unanimously interpret it as a reference to the intermediate state, in which the souls of men continue to exist as they await their resurrection. This reading follows the thought of Matt 10:28, in which Christ speaks of the survival of the soul at death. There, as here, He intimates that one does not truly die in physical death—some aspect of human nature continues to exist in anticipation of a resurrection.

Early Christian Citations

One contemporary Jewish text includes intriguing parallels to Luke 20:38, leading some scholars to suggest these points of contact are instead early Christian interpolations. 4 Maccabees is dated to between 63 BCE

and 70 CE in view of its adoption by early Christian communities, as well as its apparent use of 2 Maccabees. (Anderson-Charlesworth) A beautiful piece praising the Maccabean martyrs who submitted their lives to the demands of “devout reason,” it also cites other figures from the Old Testament that displayed similar fidelity. All martyrs, though they die to this world, “live to God”—immediately translated to the presence of the victors of ages past. Below are several relevant passages:

As many as attend to religion with a whole heart, these alone are able to control the passions of the flesh, since they believe that they, like our patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, do not die to God, but live to God. (7:18-19)

[Seven sons] constituted a holy chorus of religion and encouraged one another, saying, “Brothers, let us die like brothers for the sake of the law; let us imitate the three youths in Assyria who despised the same ordeal of the furnace.... Let us not fear him who thinks he is killing us, for great is the struggle of the soul and the danger of eternal torment lying before those who transgress the commandment of God. Therefore let us put on the full armor of self-control, which is divine reason. For if we so die, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob will welcome us, and all the fathers will praise us (13:8-9,14-17)

The mother of the seven encouraged and persuaded each of her sons to die rather than violate God's commandment. They knew also that those who die for the sake of God live to God, as do Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the patriarchs. (16:24-25)

Two additional passages explicitly state their post-mortem condition:

Take courage, therefore, O holy-minded mother, maintaining firm an enduring hope in God. The moon in heaven, with the stars, does not stand so august as you, who, after lighting the way of your star-like seven sons to piety, stand in honor before God and are firmly set in heaven with them. For your children were true descendants of father Abraham. (17:2-6)

For these crimes divine justice pursued and will pursue the accursed tyrant. But the sons of Abraham with their victorious mother are gathered together into the chorus of the fathers, and have received pure and immortal souls from God, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (18:22-24)

In the thought of the writer (or perhaps, Christian interpolator) of 4 Maccabees, physical death does not mean that one “dies to God” (as he

already has to men); rather, he continues to “live to God.” The martyr is immediately translated into the immortal company of the patriarchs who “stand in honor before God and are firmly set in heaven.” Although the writer does not explicitly mention a future resurrection, the anticipation of such is intimated by his reference to Ezekiel 37:3, set within citations of other texts that speak of God’s command of life and death:

Therefore those who gave over their bodies in suffering for the sake of religion were not only admired by mortals, but also were deemed worthy to share in a divine inheritance.... The mother of seven sons expressed also these principles to her children: “While [my husband] was still with you, he taught you the law and the prophets.... He reminded you of the scripture of Isaiah, which says, ‘Even though you go through the fire, the flame shall not consume you.’ He sang to you songs of the psalmist David, who said, ‘Many are the afflictions of the righteous.’ He recounted to you Solomon’s proverb, ‘There is a tree of life for those who do his will.’ He confirmed the query of Ezekiel, ‘Shall these dry bones live?’ For he did not forget to teach you the song that Moses taught, which says, ‘I kill and I make alive: this is your life and the length of your days.’” (18:3,6,9,14-19)

The seven sons are urged to martyrdom, knowing that God can breathe new life into dry bones (physical resurrection).

Luke 20:38 (or its parallels) is also referred to in the writings of the Ante-Nicene fathers. Irenaeus is the earliest of these to comment on this verse, writing c. 180:

For if He be not the God of the dead, but of the living, yet was called the God of the fathers who were sleeping, they do indubitably live to God, and have not passed out of existence, since they are children of the resurrection. (IV:5:2)

In two other sections of the same 5-volume work he provides further detail regarding the “existence” currently experienced by the dead:

[Citing Luke 16] By these things, then, it is plainly declared that souls continue to exist... and that each class of souls receives a habitation such as it has deserved, even before the judgment. (II:34:1)

The souls of His disciples also, upon whose account the Lord underwent these things, shall go away into the invisible place allotted to them by God, and there remain until the resurrection, awaiting that event. Then receiving their bodies, and rising in their entirety, that is bodily, just as the Lord arose, they shall come thus into the presence of God. (V:31:2)

Novatian (d.258) also commented on this verse, writing in his *Concerning the Trinity*:

Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, who, it is admitted, were only men, are manifested to be alive—for all they says He, “live unto God;” and death in them does not destroy the soul, although it dissolves the bodies themselves. For it could exercise its power on the bodies, it did not avail to exercise it on the souls: for the one in them was mortal, and therefore died; the other in them was immortal, and therefore is understood not to have been extinguished: for which reason they are affirmed and said to live unto God. (XXV)

Similarly, the Apostolic Constitutions (a collection of canons and liturgical texts dating into the Ante-Nicene period) includes the following prayer for the departed:

And let the bishop say:

O Thou who art by nature immortal, and hast no end of Thy being, from whom every creature, whether immortal or mortal, is derived; who didst make man a rational creature, the citizen of this world, in his constitution mortal, and didst add the promise of a resurrection; who didst not suffer Enoch and Elijah to taste of death: "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," who art the God of them, not as of dead, but as of living persons: for the souls of all men live with Thee, and the spirits of the righteous are in Thy hand, which no torment can touch; for they are all sanctified under Thy hand: do Thou now also look upon this Thy servant, whom Thou hast selected and received into another state, and forgive him if voluntarily or involuntarily he has sinned, and afford him merciful angels, and place him in the bosom of the patriarchs, and prophets, and apostles, and of all those that have pleased Thee from the beginning of the world, where there is no grief, sorrow, nor lamentation; but the peaceable region of the godly, and the undisturbed land of the upright, and of those that therein see the glory of Thy Christ; by who glory, honour, and worship, thanksgiving, and adoration be to Thee, in the Holy Spirit, for ever. Amen. (VIII:XLI)

Ante-Nicene sources consistently observe an indirect reference to the intermediate state in Luke 20:38, testifying to an established interpretive tradition in the early Church. This interpretation remains viable even today, satisfying the text’s emphasis on the present reality of the patriarch’s existence. Christians would do well to reflect upon the weight of patristic evidence in favor of this reading.