

# ‘They are as Angels in Heaven’: Jesus’ Alleged Riposte to the Sadducees

(Mark 12: 18–27; par. Mt 22:23–33, Lk 20:27–40)

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I have long been puzzled by the Gospel prediction that at the resurrection I shall become like an angel in heaven. What does it mean, and did Jesus really say it? What follows is an attempt to settle the matter. I shall be arguing that the passage in its original form envisaged a non-corporeal existence (contrary to the view of some recent writers), but that it does not go back to Jesus.

After routing the Pharisees and Herodians and turning on the scribes, Mark’s Jesus in 12:18–27 slaps down the Sadducees. The Sadducees, who disbelieve in the doctrine of a resurrection, argue that Moses would never have prescribed levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–10) if he had believed in an afterlife, because of the confusion it would cause in extreme cases, such as that of a woman who married seven brothers in succession.<sup>1</sup> Jesus defends the doctrine with the hard saying, ‘They are as angels in heaven’ (12:25), and goes on to argue for the doctrine of the resurrection on the strength of what to the present-day reader is very tendentious exegesis of an Old Testament passage: the fact that God calls himself ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’ in Exodus proves that the dead rise.

My prime purpose here is, as I have said, to examine the meaning of the words ‘They are as angels in heaven’ and to see whether it is likely that they go back to Jesus. It will be necessary, however, to look at the passage as a whole. The words attributed to Jesus in Mk 12:24–27 are:

(24) This is surely why you are deceived—because you do not know the scriptures or the power of God. (25) For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as angels in heaven. (26) As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in [*the passage known as*] the Bush, how God spoke to him saying, “I am the God of Abraham and [*the*] God of Isaac and [*the*] God of Jacob”?’ (27) He is God not of the dead but of the living. Therefore you are much deceived.

## Exegesis

The passage has a clear, chiasmic, structure. Jesus says that the Sadducees (a) show ignorance of the scriptures and (b) limit the power of God; they (b) limit God’s power by the thinking they reveal in the hypothetical case they quote, and they (a) show their ignorance of scripture by overlooking

the fact that Exod 3 proves their stance on the afterlife wrong.

Scholars are uncertain, however, whether the two parts of the passage originally belonged together. Some<sup>2</sup> think the passage was not originally a unity: vv26–27 (the scriptural ‘proof’) mark a new beginning and have been added. The story in vv18–25 may go back to Jesus, or it may have arisen from Christian disputes with Sadducees; 26–27 is a church-creation, born out of Christian disputes with Sadducees. R.H.Gundry, however, contends that Jesus is just as likely to have found himself arguing with the Sadducees as the early Christians were. Moreover he thinks the passage’s structural unity shows it to be dominical. But is not such a chiasmic structure at least as likely to be due to Mark or earlier redaction as it is to Jesus? The original unity of the passage seems, therefore, uncertain. Both parts of the argument are obscure. Let us examine them in more detail.

### *Verses 12:24–25*

These verses have been interpreted in (at least) three ways. Let us take a couple of fairly recent ones first.

Ben Witherington III<sup>3</sup> says that the argument is that there will be no new marriages, because people will be immortal, like angels (cf the expansion in Lk 20:36 *they cannot die any more for they are equal to angels*). The text leaves it uncertain, he says, whether existing marriages will or will not persist. Jesus will have been attacking levirate marriage as a patriarchal ordinance concerned to propagate and maintain a family name, a provision which will not exist in the new age. Witherington thinks that the seven brothers may all have been levirate-husbands to the woman; the story may not deal at all with her original husband (an eighth brother!) The levirate law did not require the brothers of the dead man, once they had produced a son for him, to treat the widow in the same way as they would treat their own wife. Jesus may, then, be implying that after the resurrection she will live as the wife of her original husband.

It seems more natural, however, to suppose that the first of the seven is the original husband. Furthermore, angels by common consent do not have spouses, so if the woman is thought of as retaining her marital relationship with her original husband, the comparison with angels is misleading.

Ched Myers<sup>4</sup> follows Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza<sup>5</sup> in again identifying the real purpose to be the subversion of the patriarchal ideology of the Sadducees, who reduce the woman to a thing (‘to whom will she *belong?*’) and reduce marriage to a social contract. Jesus is not speaking of a world without sexuality and sexual intercourse (or, they seem to imply, a world without new marriages being contracted; which is surely problematic in the light of 12:25 *they neither marry nor are given in marriage*); he is only saying that reproduction will not be necessary, because people will—like the angels—not die, and the patriarchal structures of marriage will be

replaced. The Sadducees do not *realise the power of God* (12:24) to transform marriage in this way.

Gundry<sup>6</sup> is unconvinced and so am I: angels are never associated with non-patriarchal marriage; they do not marry at all. If Mark were thinking as suggested, he would have written only 'are not given in marriage' without 'do not marry'. Also, this outlook would not cope with the Sadducees' question. If the woman had been married seven times, and if marriage-bonds persist, whose wife *will* she be? The Sadducees' argument will have gone unaddressed.

According to a third, more traditional, interpretation, the issue is not marriage so much as resurrection. Jesus answers the hypothetical case raised by the Sadducees by arguing that such extreme cases are beside the point, since there will be no marital relations or bonds in the Kingdom but an angelic existence.<sup>7</sup> Mark's Jesus will have viewed the risen state in similar terms to rabbi Rab (3rd century AD):

'The world to come is not like this world. In the world to come there is no eating or drinking or begetting or bargaining or envy or hate or strife; but the righteous sit with crowns on their heads and are satisfied with the glory of God's presence.'  
(*b.Berak.1 7a*)

Not all Jewish sources regard angels as non-physical, as is testified by texts saying that they consist of fire and snow/water (e.g. Song R. 3:11) or that they have a size equal to a third of the world (e.g. Gen R. 68:12). But Raphael in Tobit 12:19 merely appears to eat and drink, which suggests that he is purely spiritual in nature. The conception of angels as initially non-corporeal is found in 1 Enoch 15:6–12 (early pre-Maccabean), which says that angels were originally purely spiritual and immortal, with their dwelling in heaven. When, however, some slept with human women and had offspring (how, we may wonder, did they do this, if they were incorporeal), they were relegated to earth. 1 Enoch 104:2–4 (end of 2nd century BC) says that the righteous will shine like the heavenly luminaries and will resemble angels in that they will rejoice. In an earlier part of Enoch, the Dreams sequence (c.165–161 BC), we find the idea that Noah and Moses were changed from human to angelic beings (1 Enoch 89:1,36).<sup>8</sup> 2 Baruch (early 2nd century AD) 51:5,10 says of the righteous: 'They will be raised and glorified, and transformed to the splendour of angels...They shall be made like angels and equal to the stars, and they shall be changed into every form that they desire.' It is not certain here that the angels are thought of as incorporeal, but the language is so close to that of the Enoch passage as to make it likely. Another example of this thinking is to be found in Philo, who says that after his death Abraham inherited incorruption and became like angels.<sup>9</sup>

It seems to me that this last is the strongest interpretation, since it alone

really tackles the case of the much widowed woman, though it does not readily explain the reference to the power of God, unless the idea is that God will show his power by preserving bodily existence but abolishing sexuality and dissolving matrimonial bonds contracted in this world.<sup>10</sup> There is, perhaps, little comfort here for those mourning a lost spouse. But can the story and its disturbing implication be traced back to Jesus? To this question we shall turn shortly, after considering verses 26–27.

### **Verses 26–27**

Here Jesus argues on the basis of Exod 3 against a Sadducean denial of the afterlife.

The use of Scripture in 12:26–27 is, by our standards, bizarre, though again not without parallel: Gamaliel argued that since God's promise of the land to the patriarchs, Deut 11 :21, is still to be fulfilled, they will have to be raised up: *b.Sanh.* 90b.<sup>11</sup> Here Jesus seemingly argues that the doctrine of the Resurrection is implied by the fact that God described himself to Moses at Exod 3 as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; therefore they must still exist (or at least, must have done so at the time of Moses).<sup>12</sup> Even if the argument proved that the patriarchs survived death, it could not establish that in the future they would be raised. At best it might prove immortality, not resurrection.

If these verses originally had a separate origin from verses 18–25, they may indeed have been intended as a proof of immortality rather than of resurrection. The phrase 'as for the dead being raised' (12:26a) may be redactional. In which case, we may have here two ways of dealing with the question of the afterlife, by saying that the resurrected are incorporeal, and by arguing that Exod 3 shows that the patriarchs survived death. These two approaches may have originated separately from each other, the one positing angelic resurrection-life, the other immortality.

E.Schüssler Fiorenza takes 'as for the dead being raised' (12:26a) as a community creation, but interprets the use of Exod 3 differently. In his reference to Exod 3, Jesus was not seeking to prove the resurrection (or immortality) but to say that the text shows God to be a God of living persons, not the God of the dead, as is implied in the patriarchal marriage system.

There is no good reason, however, to suppose that 12:26a is post-Markan. Mark therefore thought that vv.26–27 were a proof of the resurrection. He may, of course, have been mistaken.

### **Historicity/Provenance**

Most scholars accept that the reported encounter of Jesus with the Sadducees is historical, though some, as we have seen, regard vv.26–27 as secondary. But the virtual consensus should perhaps be challenged. That

Jesus and the Sadducees may have had words on occasions (presumably during one or more of Jesus' visits to Jerusalem; there will have been few if any Sadducees in Galilee) is certainly probable enough. But that the Sadducees should have tackled Jesus on his views of the afterlife seems somewhat improbable: the Gospels do not represent this as being a major part of his teaching. It is the Pharisees who made much of this. Furthermore, there is nothing elsewhere in the Gospels to show that Jesus taught that the life of the resurrected would be angelic. Indeed, if, as Mk 10:6–9 suggests, Jesus 'grounded marriages in an indissoluble union and in the creation order plan,'<sup>13</sup> he is perhaps more likely than not to have taught that the differentiation and mutuality of the sexes would persist after the resurrection. The saying therefore, 'they shall be as angels in heaven' was perhaps a community creation. The story could have been generated because some Christians asked whose wife a remarried woman would be at the resurrection. The early Christians perhaps borrowed Pharisaic thinking in order to cope with this question; or perhaps the Christians responsible for it may themselves have been Pharisees. (Acts 15:5 tells us that some Pharisees became believers.) If they were Pharisees, however, the story may have arisen not as a result of questions asked by church members but in the course of debates with Sadducees. The angelic view of resurrection life is found, as noted above, in the repository of Pharisaic Judaism, the Talmud (among other Jewish sources—including 1 Enoch and 2 Baruch). Further, the argument from Exodus could well have been a stock Pharisaic proof: cf the reference above to Gamaliel, and 4 Macc. (1st century BC or AD) 7:19; 16:25: the patriarchs are not dead but 'live unto God.'<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Pharisees seem, if Josephus' testimony<sup>15</sup> is to be trusted, to have confused the ideas of immortality and resurrection, as in this passage.

Witherington says, 'It seems most unlikely that a Church-formulated debate on resurrection would have used as its starting and focal point a discussion of levirate marriage which even in Jesus' day was falling into disuse.' (p.33) If, however, we posit a debate between Christian Pharisees and Sadducees as the setting, it becomes very credible. Admittedly, as Witherington (following Pesch) argues (p.32-33), this will have been the only example in the Gospels, apart from Matthaean reworking of earlier tradition, of a pericope created by the community representing Jesus as debating with Sadducees, but the scenario of Christian debates with Sadducees is very plausible in the light of several texts in Acts (4: 1; 5:17; 23:6–8) which speak of the Sadducees being incensed by talk of Jesus' resurrection. It is surely more likely that Sadducees took up the cudgels against the early Christians because, in claiming that Jesus had been raised, they denied a basic tenet of the Sadducees' creed than that Jesus himself had been tackled for his beliefs about the afterlife, which formed no prominent part of his message.

Kee<sup>16</sup> thinks it is strange that Mark does not use the LXX text of Exod 3, which has 'I am the God...' but the Hebrew, which lacks the verb: 'I [am] the God': the verb in the present tense would have helped the argument. Gundry thinks otherwise: without the verb the statement can be taken, and is being taken, as true for the future as well as for the past and the present. Whatever may be the case about this, the use of the Hebrew rather than the Greek OT tends to show that the passage originated in a Palestinian setting. The rabbinic-type scriptural 'proof', whether it originally belonged with the saying about the angels or had a separate existence, certainly looks Palestinian. Like the other saying, we may well owe it to Christian Pharisees, or at least to Christians influenced by Pharisaism. Both would be likely to be located in Palestine.

It seems to me, therefore, likely that the passage before us is not dominical. It comes from the early Palestinian church as it attempted to grapple, partly in debate with Sadducees who attacked it for preaching the resurrection of Jesus, with the problem of the afterlife. It may have been a two-pronged defence of resurrection, or two separate arguments, one for resurrection, the other for immortality. The conception of resurrection entertained was non-corporeal.

### **Significance of the Story for the Evangelists**

Why did Mark elect to include the material? Perhaps firstly because he knew no other Jesus-traditions which addressed the question of the afterlife, one which we know from Paul (1 Thess 4:13,15; 1 Cor 11:30, 15:18) to have become a pressing one for Christians already fifteen years before Mark wrote, because so many Christians had already died. Also, however, I suspect that, radical Christian as he was (believing, among other things, that Sabbath-observance and the dietary laws had been abolished: 2:27–28; 7:19), he found in the words suggestions of the radical Jesus that Ched Myers, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and others have also found there, a Jesus who challenged traditional Jewish ideas that women belonged to men and that God was more concerned with past history than with living people.

Matthew took over the passage virtually word for word from Mark, but Luke rewrote it.<sup>17</sup> In particular he made a significant change by interpreting the resemblance to angels to consist in immortality: *they cannot die any more for they are equal to angels* (20:36). We may guess that he was not completely happy with the suggestion of a totally incorporeal resurrection existence, so he changed the tradition, at the cost of weakening the riposte to the Sadducean position. Luke's Jesus would have lost the argument, for if (as Luke perhaps implies) the difference that the resurrection will make is only that there will be no new marriages, the Sadducees' conundrum retains its force.

Mark swallowed the transcendental eschatology of the passage, with its

conception of an asexual angelic existence (in Kee's phrase<sup>18</sup>), for the sake of its socio-political potential. Luke did his best to mitigate the transcendence. Some of us at least will prefer to think that Mark and Luke were closer to Jesus' thinking and to the heart of the Christian message than the person or persons who originally created the passage.<sup>19</sup> Those who find unattractive and unconvincing the idea of a purely angelic future can, therefore, breathe again.

- 1 The hypothetical story constructed by the Sadducees may be based on the case of Tobias' wife Sarah, who had lost seven husbands (Tobit 3:8,15; 6:14; 7:11), and/or of that of the seven Maccabean brothers of 2 Macc 7.
- 2 Among them, R. Bultmann, D. Nineham, M. D. Hooker, and E. Schüssler Fiorenza.
- 3 B. Witherington, III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*. (SNTSMS 51) Cambridge, UP, 1984, pp.33–35.
- 4 C. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man. A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. 5th printing. Maryknoll, New York, Orbis, 1992, pp.314–17.
- 5 E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. London, SCM, 1983, pp.143–45.
- 6 R. H. Gundry, *Mark. A Commentary on his Apology for the Cross*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1993, pp.706–07.
- 7 Sadducees do not believe in angels (Acts 23:8), which is why they are said to be much deceived (12:27): they deny two tenets of faith.
- 8 What the book actually says (using coded language) is that they began as an ox and a sheep respectively and became human. See further J. H. Charlesworth, 'The Portrayal of the Righteous as an Angel', in J. J. Collins & G. W. E. Nickelsburg (eds), *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism. Profiles and Paradigms* (SBL Septuagint and Cognate Studies series, 12), Chico, Scholars press, 1980, pp.135–47. See also M. Barker, *The Older Testament*, London, SPCK, 1987, p.29. Mrs Barker finds evidence of a pervasive Enochic belief that just as angels through pride became human, so can human beings through wisdom and humility become angels. Among texts which she quotes which may express a similar conception are Dan 12:4 (the wise will shine like the stars forever); *Ass Mos.* 10:9 (Israel will approach the heaven of the stars); and 4 Ezra 7:97, 125 (the righteous will shine, or will outshine, the stars, being incorruptible). See also Ps Philo *Ant. Bibl.* (shortly after 70 AD) 33:5 (after death one's likeness is like the stars of heaven). Pre-Christian Jewish texts about the afterlife are studied systematically in G. W. E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (HTS 26), Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1972 and H. C. C. Cavallin, *Life after Death. Paul's Argument for the Resurrection of the Dead* in 1 Cor 15. (ConBNT 7:1), Lund, Gleerup, 1974.
- 9 *isos angelois*: Philo *De Sacrif. Abelis et Caini*, 5.
- 10 It is possible that the argument is that the Sadducees are limiting the power of God to raise the dead. But if so, the argument is not very strong, for it is unlikely that any Sadducees will have doubted the truth of the doctrine on that ground. (In the Elijah and Elisha stories we have miracles of the dead being raised, but if the Sadducees, like the Samaritans, accepted only the Pentateuch—which is uncertain—they would not be impressed by this fact.)
- 11 The Talmud passage mentions other Pentateuchal texts too which Gamaliel was reputed to have quoted to prove the resurrection: Deut 4:4 and 31:16.
- 12 Some, less naturally to my mind, construe the argument rather differently. Thus V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 2nd ed., London, Macmillan, 1966, p.484, finds here an argument based on the idea of a fellowship with God which gives one

assurance of survival (cf Pss 16:8–11, 73:23–24). W.L.Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1974, pp.429–30 (following F. Dreyfus), argues that the phrase ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’ in Jewish prayers of Jesus’ day invoked the idea of God’s covenant loyalty and protection, an idea ‘completely in harmony with the literal sense of Ex.3:6’ and one which implies that the divine protection, to be of much value, must have afforded the patriarchs immunity from extinction.

13 Witherington, p 34

14 Luke’s version of the story manifestly draws upon 4 Maccabees:

**4 Maccabees**

**Luke**

*Believing that they do not die to God, just as our patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob do not, but they live to God (7: 19)*

*... for all live to him (20:38b)*

*They were found worthy of a divine portion (18:3)*

*those found worthy of that age (20:35a)*

Luke continues the confusion between resurrection and immortality; he imports into the passage the phrase *sons of the resurrection* (20:36), but it looks as if it is really immortality that he believes in: 16:25; 23:43.

15 See E.P.Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, 1992, pp.299–303. The confusion is, however, evident in others too, such as Philo.

16 H .C.Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel*. Philadelphia, Westminster, 1977, p.157.

17 Probably he was relying on a variant tradition that he found more congenial, for the phrase *sons of the resurrection* (20:36) is too much of a Semitism to be likely to be his handiwork.

18 Kee, p.156

19 What sort of resurrection is implied by Paul? It is hard to be sure. In 1 Cor 15 and 2 Cor 5, he sometimes seems to represent the resurrection as the transformation of the perishable to an imperishable body:

e.g. *It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body* (1 Cor 15:44a). What does it mean here? If Paul is being logical, it should imply continuity.

Sometimes, however, he seems to be thinking rather of substitution of one for the other:

e.g. *If there is a physical body, there is a spiritual body.* (1 Cor 15:44b)

*Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.* (1 Cor 15:50)

*We know that if this earthy tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.* (2 Cor 5:1)

One text seems to combine the two ideas:

*We wish not to be naked but to have a further layer of clothing; so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.* (2 Cor 5:4)

It is better, Paul perhaps means, to be alive at the Parousia than dead and disembodied, so that our bodies can be transformed, rather than that we should have to be issued with new ones. We can perhaps deduce from these texts, unclear as they are, at least that Paul saw both continuity and discontinuity between present and risen existence; he will scarcely have thought of the resurrected as either marrying or having sexual relations (since they are not flesh and blood), but he does use the word ‘body’ on occasion of the risen, so Paul, unlike the tradition preserved in Mk 12, does implicitly leave room for familial bonds to persist.