G. M. M. Pelser: Resurrection and eschatology in Paul's letters.

**ABSTRACT**
When considering Paul's eschatology as reflected by his dealing with the subject of the resurrection of the dead, it becomes clear from the evidence available that there is no unitary picture. Unless it is to be assumed that Paul conceived of the notion of an intermediate state, which seems totally unacceptable, only two possible explanations for this diversity remain. Either Paul is inconsistent in his dealing with the subject, or a development took place in his eschatology. Of these two, the latter should be considered as the more probable.

0. The main purpose of this paper is to try and detect the nature of Paul's eschatology as expressed through his dealing with the subject of the resurrection of the dead. Time and space, however, will not allow detailed investigation of the texts concerned. Consequently I shall limit myself to some key passages only, and to the most crucial issues.

1. A SYSTEM OF THOUGHT?
A preliminary survey of the material already reveals how relatively seldom Paul deals with the theme of the resurrection (cf. Marxsen 1969:28; Baumgarten 1975:125). When and where he does so, Paul in most cases is responding to an issue having cropped up in a specific community regarding the notion of resurrection. As a result, his dealing with the subject is sporadic, situation-orientated and, I Corinthians 15 excluded, not extensive. Hence the difficulty and, in the opinion of many scholars, the impossibility to harmonize Paul's thoughts into a single coherent system. As more or less representative in this regard, can be seen Baumgarten's remark, "Paulus bringt seine Zukunft-Erwartung stets konkret und - je nach Situation und Intention - differenziert sowie ohne Bemühung um systematische Einheitlichkeit zur Sprache" (1975:225; cf. also Conzelmann 1968; Klein 1973:262).

An important factor responsible for this difficulty in constructing a system, is the impression of a dissimilarity or even a contradiction mainly between I Thessalonians 4:13-18; I Corinthians 15:51-2 on the one hand, and 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; Philippians 1:23 on the other. Are these passages only seemingly dissimilar or is it indeed so, and is the dissimilarity of a serious nature?

2. DEVELOPMENT IN PAUL'S ESCHATOLOGY?
It is fairly general knowledge that since the second half of the previous century, this diversity in Pauline thought has given rise to the conviction among quite a number of scholars that a development took place in Paul's eschatology. As a result several attempts have been made to reconstruct this so-called development (cf. among others, Hoffmann 1978:4ff. for a discussion of some of these). It should be worthwhile to take a cursory look at one of the latest (re)constructions of this kind, that of Mearns (1984). His reconstruction basically comprises the following: Earliest Christian belief about the general resurrection would probably have been that it was already largely accomplished through adult believers' conversion-baptism, which we may infer was the belief among the
Corinthians. This was the main obstacle to the reception of teaching about a future, final resurrection. The notion of a future resurrection was taken from later Jewish apocalyptic and adopted in a Christian futurist sense by Paul and others after its earlier radical reinterpretation in a present baptismal sense. Paul's new apocalyptic programme was the product of his creative response to several pressures (desire to include growing numbers of deceased believers, the countering of over-enthusiasm, etc.). The answer to these pressures was to present the hope of a final resurrection in the future. This Paul did in 1 Thessalonians 4 and in his "previous" letter to the Corinthians; he reinforced it with his teaching in 1 Corinthians 15 (Mearns 1984:20; cf. also 1981).

Is this notion of development adequately supported by the evidence? We can naturally answer this question only by examining the data at our disposal. As indicated above, attention will be focussed mainly on 1 Corinthians 15:51-2; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; Philippians 1:23 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

2.1 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-2
These two passages, although each having its own setting, are nevertheless in accordance with each other in that they undoubtedly depict the resurrection of the dead as an event occurring at the parousia of Jesus Christ. Does this however mean that they are saying the same thing eschatologically? This we shall have to establish by examining them separately and by comparing the results.

As far as 1 Thessalonians 4:13ff. is concerned, the crucial question is: What was the nature of the Thessalonians' anxiety (grief) about their deceased fellow believers? a) Were the deceased regarded as only at a relative disadvantage in that they would be excluded from participating in the joys of the parousia event, and consequently from the intermediate rule (Zwischenreich) of Christ inaugurated by the parousia – only to be resurrected at the end of this period? (Hoffmann 1978:232; Best 1972:181; Staab 1969:32). b) Or were they believed to be at an absolute disadvantage in that they would not share in salvation at all? (Mearns 1981:139ff.; Bornkamm 1970:228; Marxsen 1969:26; Von Dobschütz 1974:189; Oepke 1962:179). c) Or was there actually no grief among the Thessalonians about their deceased, but rather a new attitude among some members regarding the destiny of the deceased – a gnostic disposition, as in Corinth, in which the deceased were no longer regarded as part of the realized gnostic-spiritualistic resurrection? (Schmithals 1965:116ff.; Harnisch 1973:25ff.). d) Or is here still another possibility, namely that the cause of the grief was "... not connected with the absence of the apostle's teaching of the resurrection of the dead, but rather with a misunderstanding of his unique depiction of the faithful's sharing in the glorious parousia through their assumption"? (Plevnik 1984:282).

An answer to these questions depends to a great extent on the question whether Paul informed the Thessalonians about the resurrection or not. Many scholars (among others Harnisch 1973:22; Baumgarten 1975:126; Best 1972:181; Staab 1969:33; Gnilka 1968:83; Von Dobschütz 1974:189) reject outright the notion that Paul, being a Jew and especially a Pharisee, have remained silent about such a central component of his gospel. However true this may be, it is also true that the resurrection hope was not the only Jewish way of conceiving the future salvation of the just (cf. Cavallin 1974:197, 205; Wilckens 1970:409) and that Paul maintained an imminent expectation of the parousia (cf. Lohse 1974:110; Conzelmann 1968:208), which doesn't necessarily imply the notion of resurrec-
tion. That Paul maintained the expectation of an imminent parousia throughout his life, cannot, however, be proved beyond doubt. Apart from 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 no absolute eschatological time-limit is set by Paul, not even in Romans 13:11 (thus rightly so, Klein 1973:257f. cf. Keck 1984:240), and between these two texts there is a marked difference. In 1 Thessalonians 4 the death of believers is regarded as an exception and the staying alive until the parousia as the rule (cf. Baumgarten 1975:114; Klein 1973:250), whereas in 1 Corinthians 15 the staying alive is not regarded as a feature of the present generation and death is considered a normality (Klein 1973:251,256). In 1 Thessalonians 4 it actually seems that no further deaths are foreseen (ἡμείς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περὶ ἐπιτύμβων, v. 15).

Plevnik (1984:282), furthermore, has recently pointed out that 1 Thessalonians 4:16 indicates that the resurrection of the deceased will be a return to this life and that Paul is not thinking here directly about the glorious transformation, as he does in 1 Corinthians 15 and elsewhere (2 Cor. 5:1-10; Phlp. 3:20-1; Rm. 8:23). According to 1 Corinthians 15:52 (53) on the other hand, the dead will be raised into an entirely new (cf. 15:34ff.) and immortal state. One should, however, bear in mind that, owing to the fact that Paul is in 1 Corinthians countering the denial of a future resurrection by the Corinthian enthusiasts, he had to emphasize not only the factuality of the resurrection, but also the transformation to an entirely new mode of existence.

If these observations about the differences between the two passages are well-founded, they naturally imply that, even if only slightly, Paul had to make some concessions or adjustments regarding his expectation of the parousia and the way in which he visualized the accompanying events. What could have been the reason for this? There is ample evidence in the New Testament that the early church had to contend with the problem of the delayed parousia (cf. Bornkamm 1968:46-55). Was it already a problem during Paul's lifetime? Doughty has no doubt in his mind that this was indeed the case. He consequently states, “In both Thessalonica and Corinth the question concerning the fate of those who had died arose directly from the problem created by the delay of the parousia” (1975:82).

Even if it should be conceded that the belief in the resurrection of the dead had been part and parcel of Paul's Jewish anthropology prior to his coming to faith in Jesus Christ, does this necessarily imply that he maintained this view after becoming a Christian, and irrespective of his Naherwartung? As Marxsen (1969:27) asks in connection with the Thessalonian issue, “Mußte Paulus von der Auferstehung der Toten reden?” In other words, did the belief in the resurrection have any role to play for faith?

Normally one would react to such a point of view with the argument that right from the outset, in Paul's understanding, the resurrection of the faithful was so unseparably connected with and proleptically so completely included in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that it should be regarded as totally unacceptable that the concept of the resurrection could ever be absent from Paul's proclaiming of the salvation in Christ (cf. Rm. 6:1ff.; 8:11, 32; cf. 10:9-10; 1 Cor 6:14; 15:12-13, 16, 20-3; 2 Cor 4:14; 13:4; 1 Th. 4:14; 5:10; cf. Sellin 1983:227ff.; Sloan 1985:75ff.; Harnisch 1973:22; Baumgarten 1975:126).

One should indeed not minimize or tone down the central importance ascribed by Paul to the close connection between Christ's resurrection and the new life/resurrection of the believer (thus rightly so, Harnisch 1973:22). It is, however, interesting to note that in this regard the notion of resurrection is explicitly mentioned only in 1 Thessalonians and in the Corinthian correspondence. In all the other cases different terminology is used to give ex-
pression to the soteriological consequence of Christ's resurrection. The reason for this seems to be the fact that it was precisely in Thessalonica and Corinth that the concept of resurrection caused a problem, although a different one in each case. That it is impossible to assume that Paul had at any point in time even the slightest doubt that God will raise the dead, needs no argumentation (cf. Rm. 4:17). The question, nevertheless, remains whether Paul from the outset regarded the resurrection of the believer, and not rather his assumption at the parousia, as the normal way through which eternal life would be attained.

If this had been the case, it is quite acceptable that owing to his very imminent expectation of the parousia, Paul did not focus on the notion of resurrection during the first stages of his missionary activity (cf. Oepke 1962:170). This would explain the grief of the Thessalonians, because there is really no satisfactory explanation other than that they were not duly informed about the resurrection. The phrase о̂̂ο θελομεν δε υμαζ ρανοσιν (1 Th. 4:13, litotes for θελο υμαζ ειδενα) hints probably not only at important information, but also at some new teaching. This information is given in verse 14 by way of an appeal: if the Thessalonians believed that Jesus died and rose again, which they obviously did, they should also have believed that God would take the deceased back with Jesus. The whole point of the passage is that the Thessalonians did not yet believe the second point, not because they rejected it, but because they were not able to draw such a conclusion from the first point. As Ellingworth and Nida (1975:96) put it in connection with Paul's argument in this verse, "Paul is rather relating one act of God, which the Thessalonians already know about, to another, the consequence of the first, about which they have not been taught" (cf. also Marxsen 1979:65).

Whatever the situation at Thessalonica could have been, it seems obvious as far as Paul's eschatology regarding the resurrection is concerned, that a certain shift took place. His expectation of the parousia when writing 1 Thessalonians was more imminent than was the case when he wrote 1 Corinthians.

What is, nevertheless, clear from both these instances, is that the resurrection of the dead is conceived of as an event at the ultimate eschatological moment in the history of mankind, in which all the deceased faithful will be raised simultaneously. Here Paul is representing the Jewish apocalyptic (and Pharisaic) tradition whereby the resurrection of the dead has been conceived of as the launching of an end-time scenario (cf. Keck 1984:236; Baumgarten 1975:116,126; Froitzheim 1982:148). What is, however, not so clear is whether Paul's conception of the parousia was from the outset linked with the notion of a general resurrection of the dead, and not rather with a general assumption/rapture of the living.

2.2 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; Philippians 1:23

The question to be dealt with here in terms of our investigation is: How do these passages relate eschatologically to 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15? These passages, and especially 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, have in the past been subjected to many divergent interpretations, and have more than once been used as proof of a change in Paul's eschatology from a Jewish apocalyptic to a Hellenistic spiritualistic one (cf. Hoffmann 1978: 254ff. for a discussion of a number of these view-points).

As everyone who has ventured an exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 came to realize in due course, the crux interpretum of this passage concerns the point in time referred to by
καταλυθή (v.1) and ἐπενδύσασθαι (v.2) respectively. Does καταλυθή refer to the moment of the believer’s death (Windisch 1970:158ff.; Schlatter 1969:540ff.; Hoffmann 1978:263; Lohse 1974:110) or to the ultimate destruction of the body at the parousia? (Wendland 1968:194; Lietzmann 1969:117ff.; Bultmann 1947:9ff.; 1976:140; Baumgarten 1975:86). If καταλυθή refers to the moment of death, when does the ἐπενδύσασθαι occur? Immediately after death or at the parousia? Furthermore, in the event of ἐπενδύσασθαι occurring immediately after death, will it be the ultimate consummation of eternal life or just a transition to some intermediate state (of the soul) between death and resurrection at the parousia (thus for instance Ridderbos 1971:565; Lindars 1985:777ff.)?

One cannot deny the fact that the passage is vague as far as time reference is concerned. The only exception is verse 10 which has a marked eschatological perspective: the appearance of all the faithful before the judgement seat of Christ. In two preceding instances (1:9; 4:14) Paul explicitly asserts his belief that God will raise the dead. These passages, however, do not contain definite reference to any point in time either, except for the hint in παραστήμεν (4:14) that it will be at the parousia. If verse 10 should be seen as the culmination of the line of argument from verse 1 onwards, one would be obliged to consider the purport of the pericope as entirely eschatological.

As is perfectly clear from verses 1-5, the passage is characterized by a fervent desire (στεναχρῆμεν) to acquire the eternal home from heaven. This desire not only pertains to the mere acquiring of this new existence, but also to the wish to become covered by the heavenly home over this earthly dwelling. The composite ἐπενδύσασθαι should be read in this way, as was the case in Hellenistic Greek (thus rightly so, Windisch 1970:161; Lietzmann 1969:120; Kümmel 1969:203; Hoffman 1978:273; pace Bultmann 1947:11; 1976:136). Then only the phrase οὐκ ἐπανοθήκη τὸ θνητὸν ὑπὸ τὴς ζωῆς (v. 4) becomes intelligible. For only when the earthly dwelling is covered over by the home from heaven before the καταλυθή or ἐπενδύσασθαι can take place, the possible danger of becoming naked (v. 3) can be prevented.

Against this background only two interpretations of the phrase ἑκάστιον ὑπὸ ὑπὸ τῆς ἐπενδύσασθαι are possible. Either Paul wished the parousia and thus the transformation to the new existence to take place before the eventual untimely death of the believer (Lietzmann 1969:121; cf. also Hoffmann 1978:278), or he wishes the transformation to occur immediately after, and in fact even already prior to the eventual untimely death of the believer (Windisch 1970:161; cf. Lohse 1974:110). Although it should be conceded that in the entire pericope there is no explicit reference to the moment after death as the point in time of this transformation, the same applies, save verse 10, to the parousia, especially as far as verses 1-5 are concerned (Windisch 1970:163; Conzelmann 1967:209). It should furthermore not be overlooked that, with the exception of verse 10 and (ἐπ-) ἐνδύμαται (cf. 1 Cor. 15:53-4), the language and the conceptual character of this pericope deviate remarkably from the (apocalyptic) eschatological representation of events in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 (cf. Ernst 1974:58). Bultmann’s (1947:3ff.) and Schmithals’s (1969:246ff.; supported by Hoffmann 1978:268ff.) contention that Paul is in this pericope, as in 1 Corinthians 15, countering a gnostic-spiritualistic doctrine, has against it the unpolemical nature of the passage (thus, rightly so, Wilckens 1970:409). Moreover, this hypothesis, even if viable, does not as such necessarily favour the parousia as moment of transformation.

What should we conclude from our observations up to this point? I would like to assert
that to assume that Paul cherished the hope of transformation immediately after death, is as valid as to give preference to the *parousia* as the point in time thereof. It seems undeniable "... daß die Erfahrung des Todes die eschatologische Erwartung der Christen in zunehmendem Maße beeinflußt hat" (Ernst 1974:58). Our pericope may be the illustration of an effort to cope with this problem. Naturally if Paul is here looking forward to a transformation immediately after death, it would imply a change in his eschatology since the time he wrote 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians. Although I am inclined to favour this approach to the passage, I am fully aware of the exegetical difficulties attached to such a view. Perhaps the safest answer to the question regarding the eschatology of this passage should be a *non liquet*. As a last question one may however ask: If Paul wanted his readers to know that he was talking of a transformation at the *parousia*, why didn’t he say so in the same terms as those used in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15?

What should nevertheless be ruled out, is the assumption that Paul is here advocating the notion of an intermediate state (thus, rightly so, Hoffmann 1978:285). This assumption has deservedly found only limited support among competent exegetes. If the notion of an intermediate state had indeed been a component of Paul’s anthropology, it should be considered as completely inexplicable why he failed entirely to propagate this viewpoint at the most favourable opportunity he ever had, namely in 1 Thessalonians 4 (cf. Ernst 1974:60). What could have been a better solution for the Thessalonians’ problem than for them to be comforted by the doctrine of an intermediate state?

Whereas there exists a considerable degree of uncertainty regarding the nature of the eschatology of 2 Corinthians 5, the case is entirely different in Philippians 1:23. In expressing his desire to leave this life and be with Christ, Paul leaves no doubt that he expects this state or event of *σὺν χριστῷ εἶναι* to commence immediately after his death. No mention is made of resurrection or change at the future *parousia* of the Lord (cf. Kümmel 1969:212). This is syntactically apparent from the close connection between *ἀναλύει* and *σὺν χριστῷ εἶναι* as well as the fact that *καί* should be read as explicative (thus, rightly so, Hoffmann 1978:289; cf. also Wendland 1968:198). That is, death results in being with Christ.

But what exactly is meant by *σὺν χριστῷ εἶναι*? Lohmeyer’s (1964:64) contention that Paul is making an exception of himself because he expects to die a martyr’s death, is not supported anywhere in the context (cf. Wendland 1968:199; Conzelmann 1968:209; Hoffmann 1978:290). The notion of being with Christ is expressed without limitation and without any special attention being paid to the death of Paul. The impression one is left with is that he is expressing a mutual belief. If this observation is valid, we are confronted with the question as to the nature of this state of *σὺν χριστῷ εἶναι*. Does it refer to the ultimate realization of eternal life or rather to an intermediate state? Although the notion of an intermediate state has had its proponents until this day (among others Cullmann 1962:214; Ridderbos 1971:557; Beare 1969:64; Gnolka 1968:76ff.; Hoffmann 1978:313f.), it is hard to believe that *σὺν χριστῷ εἶναι* in this context can mean anything different or less than *σὺν κυρίῳ εἶναι* in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In 1 Thessalonians 4:17 the state of *σὺν κυρίῳ εἶναι* is undoubtedly nothing less than ultimate salvation, being the culmination of the eschatological events set off by the *parousia* of Christ. The conclusion is unavoidable: in Philippians 1:23 the death of the individual has replaced the *parousia* as the *terminus a quo* of full communion with Christ (Ernst 1974:54).

But if Paul is actually conceiving of this as full realization of eternal life, isn’t he a little later, in 3:11, 20-1, contradicting himself? Not necessarily, because 3:11 need not refer to
the *parousia* and contains a different expectation than 1:23, and in 3:20-1 Paul is maintaining his expectation to experience the *parousia* while still alive (cf. 4:5). He is in this context not reflecting on the eventuality of his death any longer and the notion of resurrection is not raised. Either 3:11, 20-1 is not contradictory to 1:23 or Paul is guilty of inconsistency in one and the same letter, unless of course we endorse the notion of an intermediate state in 1:23. Another possible solution could be the hypothesis of scholars like Schmithals (1965:57f.); Gnklka (1968:10) and Marxsen (1964:59) according to which 1:23 and 3:11, 20-1 respectively belong to different letters. As yet this hypothesis has not found wide support, for it cannot be established with certainty whether Philippians is a literary unity or not (cf. Conzelmann & Lindemann 1980:204).

### 3. CONCLUSION

The assumption that Paul's eschatology underwent a process of change or development has met with fierce opposition from many scholars. Though not questioning scholarly integrity, one cannot avoid the suspicion that in the case of many a scholar the endeavour to harmonize Paul's thoughts on eschatology, is motivated by a disinclination to accept the possibility of inconsistency or even diversity in Paul's thinking. In defending the consistency or systematic unity of Paul's eschatology, much is usually made, among other arguments, of the chronology of his letters. It stands to reason that if one gives preference to the sequence 1 Thessalonians - Philippians - 1 & 2 Corinthians (Hoffmann 1978:327; Conzelmann & Lindemann 1980; Marxsen 1964) the notion of a development will be very difficult if not impossible to maintain. On the other hand, if one prefers the sequence 1 Thessalonians - 1 & 2 Corinthians - Philippians (Kümml 1973; Lohse 1972; Perrin 1974), chronology as such no longer poses a problem.

Kümml's (1969:212) objection that Paul's *Naherwartung* in Romans is ever so imminent as in his earlier letters and that this fact rules out the notion of a development, stands on firm ground only with regard to Romans 8:18ff. (cf. page 38 supra). We cannot deny that there are several indications in this text of a reasonably imminent expectation of some eschatological event. There is, however, nowhere in the passage any indication as to the degree of imminence or that Paul believed himself to be still alive when all this was going to happen. It should also be noticed that the passage is in a sense unique in Pauline literature due to an extraordinary number of *hapax legomena* and due to its peculiar phraseology (cf. Balz 1971:126). Add to this the cosmic dimensions resulting from the incorporation of the whole of creation into the eschatological perspective.

Let me finally venture a conclusion. It seems quite probable that Paul's earliest conception of the imminence of the *parousia* left little or no room for the eventuality of believers' death. Consequently the notion of a general resurrection of the dead wasn't part of his anthropological or eschatological repertoire. This is reasonably clear from the Thessalonian issue. According to 1 Thessalonians 1:10 the outstanding feature of the Thessalonians' faith was that they were waiting for Christ to come from heaven. As time went by the delay of the *parousia* and the occurrence of deaths in the Pauline communities forced Paul to a reconsideration. This he did with regard to the Thessalonians' problem by informing them that the dead will rise. He, however, still maintained the conviction that he, together with those who were still alive, would definitely experience the *parousia*. Though reacting to a different problem in 1 Corinthians 15, he deals in this instance with the notion of the resurrection of the dead as if death were normal among believers. But here also
he is still maintaining his hope to be alive at the *parousia*. Probably in 2 Corinthians 5 but definitely in Philippians 1:23, he envisages (for the believer involved) death and not the *parousia* as the *terminus a quo* of the ultimate realization of eternal salvation. This state of affairs, if my observation is correct, represents at least some development in Paul’s eschatology. If, on the other hand, a conclusion like this should be deemed unacceptable, only two alternatives remain: either Paul was inconsistent in his eschatology or he championed the notion of an intermediate state.

Two final comments should be made. Firstly, the assumption that Paul initially didn’t put forward the notion of the resurrection of the dead as an integral part of his eschatology, does not imply that he ever had any reservation about God’s power to raise the dead. Secondly, even though he came to believe that ultimate salvation will be attained immediately after death, he also maintained, probably to the end, an imminent expectation of the *parousia*.

### WORKS CONSULTED


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