

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## THE RESURRECTION

### IV. THE RISEN CHRIST, LORD AND HEAD OF CREATION

IN THREE PREVIOUS articles, we discussed the historicity of the gospel narratives of the resurrection – or rather of the stories about the risen Christ, for there is no account of the resurrection itself – and the positions taken up by contemporary scholars with regard to them.<sup>1</sup> This article forms a brief investigation into the importance of the resurrection for Paul's view of Christ. It is, in a way, an investigation doomed to frustration, for the resurrection is the crown of Jesus's earthly life which makes sense of all the rest; without it, his earthly life is incoherent. On the other hand, once the resurrection has occurred, the stage is set for the development of Christology (and surely on the basis of pauline theology) down the centuries. Furthermore, to isolate Christology in Paul is an almost impossible task. Christ is so much the centre of Paul's vision that the whole picture can be looked at only in function of Christ; it is the doctrine of Christ which determines Paul's teaching in every other field as well. Here, it will be impossible to do more than pick up the more immediate resonances of the resurrection in a severely restricted part of its range.

Even Paul stands in a christian tradition. He protests both his independence of it and his indebtedness to it. He puts forward as the basic experience of his apostolate the independent revelation of Christ<sup>2</sup> described in the Acts of the Apostles on the road to Damascus;<sup>3</sup> that is, his direct contact with Christ unmediated by human agency. On the other hand, he quotes from tradition which was handed on to him, and which he learnt by heart.<sup>4</sup> In both these ways we can see that the lordship of Christ was central to him.

In the gospels, it is clear that Jesus does not stress his dignity or his super-eminent position. His claims are at best veiled or mysterious. We have the evidence of John's gospel to show that it was only after the resurrection that many of his words and actions were understood. During his lifetime, the actions which in fact constituted claims to divine power (bringing back to life, forgiving sins, walking on the waters) evoked no more recognition than a bewildered awe. It was only when he had been raised from the dead, and the disciples had received the Spirit, that they began to understand the full import of these actions. Similarly with the titles he gave himself: the title 'Messiah' he avoided for its political connotations. His favourite title was

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<sup>1</sup> *The Way*, vol XI (October, 1971), pp 324–330; vol XII (January, 1972), pp 58–67; (April, 1972), pp 142–148.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Gal 1, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Acts 9.

<sup>4</sup> Cf 1 Cor 15, 3.

'Son of Man' with its prophetic overtones; but the implications of universal sovereignty contained in this expression were taken up only after the resurrection. Jesus was indeed addressed by the word usually translated 'Lord' (*Kyrie*); but as a form of address this is little more than a polite title such as 'Sir', and certainly contains no hint of special ruling power. Only once in Mark and Matthew is he called 'the Lord' (or 'the Master'), when the disciples are to fetch the mount for his entry into Jerusalem; and on this occasion other interpretations are possible. Either the 'Lord' could be God rather than Jesus, or the expression could be translated in the more restricted sense 'our Master'.

Paul's use of the title 'Lord' is very different. If we are to trust the account of his conversion in the Acts of the Apostles,<sup>5</sup> he experienced the risen Christ as the Lord from the beginning. In so far as his thought was also formed by the hymns already sung in the christian community, and quoted by him in his letters, he would have imbibed the same ideas. The hymn which lies behind Philippians 2, 6-11 has been convincingly reconstructed by J. Jeremias. It appears that the last stanza read originally

Therefore God raised him high, and gave him the name which is above all other names, so that all beings should bend the knee at the name of Jesus, and every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.<sup>6</sup>

According to this hymn, the resurrection has brought Christ to a position which is hardly reflected by the polite designation of 'Lord' as 'Sir'. Christ is a very real Lord, acclaimed by all creatures. A similar liturgical context is shown by the old phrase retained by Paul in aramaic, *marana tha*.<sup>7</sup> Whatever its exact meaning, it shows that Christ was early addressed in the liturgy as the Lord. Another context for such a confession seems to have been the acknowledgment of Christ as Lord in contrast to Caesar: 1 Corinthians 12,3 suggests that christians were invited to proclaim the frequent formula of loyalty to the emperor, 'Caesar is Lord', coupled with and reinforced by its opposite, 'Christ is cursed'; precisely because their usual formula, 'Christ is

<sup>5</sup> Some hesitations about the exact historicity of this incident are not out of place. In Acts, Luke frequently expresses his theology by such easily imaginable scenes as this (e.g. the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost). In this particular incident, the narrative is formally modelled on the vocation narratives of the Old Testament, and contains clear reminiscences of Old Testament appearances (e.g. Dan 10, 7-8). And in general, Luke's account of Paul's thought and theology are sometimes at variance with Paul's own. Cf Lohfink, G.: *Paulus vor Damaskus* (1965); Haenchen, E.: *Die Apostelgeschichte* (1961); and my own cautious remarks in *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, (London, 1969), 822c, 830a-e.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Jeremias, J.: *Novum Testamentum* 6 (1963), pp 182-188.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek text can be divided differently, as *marana tha* ('Our Lord, come') or *maran atha* ('Our Lord comes'): that is, either as a prayer or as a confession. The former is more likely to have been retained in the original language, partly on the somewhat superstitious grounds that a prayer in the original formula would be more effective, partly because a credal formula should be as intelligible as possible. This is confirmed by the occurrence of the prayer form also in Apoc 22, 20 - this time in greek.

Lord', was felt to impinge upon the loyalty due to the emperor: as indeed it did, since the loyalty due to the emperor was no purely political loyalty; and also perhaps because the exact spheres of political and religious dominance were not as yet worked out, since Christ's rule was thought of in all-embracing terms.

The sense of this title, 'Lord', and hence its implications with regard to the position of Christ due to the resurrection, is still to be defined. In itself, to call Christ 'Lord' does not explain in what degree he is felt to dominate. This is, however, amply shown by the previous use of the word *Kyrios* in the greek-speaking jewish world. It is used by the greek translators of the bible to translate the sacred name Yahweh; so, though in itself it has a fairly neutral sense, in the minds of those who know their Old Testament it immediately suggests the Lord Yahweh. This gives a context to 'the name which is above all other names' in the hymn of Philippians, and shows that when Christ was raised up it is specifically the name of God that he is given. Paul is, of course, well aware of the difference between God and Christ; but he deliberately obscures it, in order to express the new and paradoxical situation – especially for the vehemently monotheistic jew – that Christ is God and yet not the same as God. So he uses frequently of Christ the title which cannot but suggest God; and yet he distinguishes Christ from God in such formulae as, 'there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all'.<sup>8</sup> Further, the lordship of Christ is finite: eventually he will 'hand over the kingdom to God the Father', and 'will be subject in his turn to the One who subjected all things to him'.<sup>9</sup> But it remains that there are many instances of the use of 'Lord' in Paul where it is not clear whether God or Christ is meant. This may be deliberate, or may be merely a sign of how closely Paul associates them, and indeed how he often fails altogether to distinguish them in his thought.

Another epithet which is transferred by Paul from God to the risen Christ is 'saviour'. This has, especially in christian piety, become so common a title for our Lord that we fail to grasp the overtones which it has for the jewish mind. Since the time of deuterio-Isaiah, it was overwhelmingly a divine title for the God who would come and save his people. This classic usage still continues in the *Magnificat*: 'my heart rejoices in God, my Saviour'. So when Christ is called the Saviour he is definitely being given a divine attribute, with overtones which would suggest divine prerogatives to the jewish mind. The expression was used more of the author of salvation than of him through whom it is won (as moderns tend to use it). The widespread use of this title of Christ begins, admittedly, only in the pastoral epistles, which are of doubtful pauline authorship: and this usage may well derive from the influence of greek mystery cults, for which there existed any number of saviours. However, earlier, Paul writes of the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour.<sup>10</sup>

It might have been expected that, having transferred to the risen Christ

<sup>8</sup> Eph 4, 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor 15, 24, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Cf Phil 3, 20.

the two titles 'Lord' and 'Saviour', which had hitherto indicated Yahweh, Paul would go the whole way and clearly call him 'God'; especially as – as has just been pointed out – in many passages the two are associated so closely as to be almost indistinguishable. But to the Jew the title of God seems to have been reserved to God the author and creator; and it is an indication of an embryonic doctrine of the Trinity that Paul is loath to call Christ God. From the way he writes of Christ, putting him parallel with God in his doxologies and so on, it is clear that he thinks of him as divine. But to give him the title 'God' is a different matter. It is as though the actual name is too closely associated with the personal name 'Yahweh'. The distinction between the nature which Father, Son and Spirit share, and the persons who share it, is a piece of philosophizing which is still far from Paul's mind. But the reluctance to give to Christ the name which has hitherto been regarded as the personal name of Israel's God may show an awareness that the distinction between Father and Son had best be described as a personal one. Alternatively, it has been suggested that Paul avoided this usage because he was writing for a gentile, polytheistic milieu, where 'it would have invariably resulted in the proclamation of Jesus as one God among many'.<sup>11</sup>

The aspect, however, of the exaltation of Christ which Paul most dwells on is the extent of his power over the created universe. This is often connected with an explicit or implicit citation of psalm 110:

The Lord said to my Lord:  
Sit at my right hand  
and I will put your enemies  
under your feet.

This serves well as an example of the various ways in which Paul sees the consequences, for the Church and the universe, of Christ the Lord being so raised up. In Romans ('he rose from the dead, and there at God's right hand he pleads for us') the idea is of his protection of his followers and indeed of all men, for whom he died.<sup>12</sup> He is Lord in a religious context. The same circle of ideas appears in Colossians: 'since you have been brought back to true life with Christ, you must look for the things that are in heaven, where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand'.<sup>13</sup> Christ is Lord of the redeemed because they have been lifted up with him; and so their leader's way of life should be theirs too. The two other references to the psalm deal with the extent of Christ's dominion, showing that it is not purely religious but truly cosmic. First Corinthians shows him as Lord of the whole universe, not only the material universe but all the non-material forces, 'every sovereignty, authority and power', and death as well. Finally, in Ephesians, the psalm-verse is the centre of a declaration of Christ's dominion, couched in the most all-embracing terms which can be devised: he is 'ruler of everything', far

<sup>11</sup> Longenecker, R. N.: *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (London, 1970), p 141.

<sup>12</sup> Cf Rom 12, 34. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Col 3, 1.

above the supernatural elements which were supposed to rule the world, and 'not only in this age but also in the age to come', that is, the renewed universe which is the final goal of creation.<sup>14</sup> If Paul were attempting to describe the sovereignty of God, he could use no more exalted terms than these, including as he does material and immaterial and all possible states of the world. All this is thought of as being the result of the raising of Christ from the dead to God's right hand. It is the resurrection which transformed Christ and admitted him to the dignity which is now his.<sup>15</sup>

The other basic datum of Paul's experience as a christian, apart from the experience of Christ's lordship in his conversion, seems to have been the action of the Spirit among christians, their extraordinary life and new powers. Significant in this connection is a passage where he is trying to show the importance of faith as compared to law. He takes it for granted that the Galatians to whom he is writing will have experienced the Spirit and miracles among themselves. He asks them only to consider why this is so: 'Does God give you the Spirit so freely and work miracles among you because you practise the law, or because you believed so freely what was preached to you?'<sup>16</sup> Paul himself worked 'by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the holy Spirit', and regards this as Christ working in him.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the latter half of the first letter to the Corinthians is very largely taken up with the regulation of the manifestations of the activity of the Spirit which occur in the community at Corinth.

In saying that these phenomena are the work of the Spirit, a Jew is automatically saying that they are evidences of new life and of a renewal of the world, for this is what the coming of the Spirit means to one who is bred on the Old Testament, and especially on the prophets. It was in the first place the breath (or spirit, for the word used is the same) of God which gave life to man and made Adam into a living being. In the Book of Judges, when the Spirit of God comes upon a man, it gives him new vigour and heightened powers, to be used for God's people. Later on, the promise of a new Spirit becomes more and more important. The gift of a new Spirit will be the centre of the renewal of the world, which God will accomplish at the time of the Messiah. Most graphic of the many passages is Ezekiel's description of the valley of the dead bones: vast quantities of whitened bones, representing the scattered and arid remains of God's people, miraculously rise to new life as God breathes his Spirit upon them.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cf Eph 1, 20-23.

<sup>15</sup> This is, of course, not to say that the dignity was not his by right before. This is implied, indeed, by such passages as Col 1, 15, where, as 'this image of the unseen God', the qualities attributed to him are those ascribed in the Old Testament to Wisdom. These qualities of divine Wisdom, which is the personification of God acting in the world, are his as 'firstborn of all creation': that is, before all things were created, let alone before the resurrection. But Paul does not dwell on this aspect so much: the centre of his thought is the exaltation of Christ by his resurrection.

<sup>16</sup> Gal 3, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Cf Rom 15, 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> Cf Ezek 37, 1-14.

Now Paul sees that through his resurrection Christ has become the principle of this new life. Because Christ was the first to be raised from the dead, he is the principle of the resurrection for all men. It is no mere temporal priority, but he is as the first-fruits of the harvest: just as they are offered to God, so that the rest of the harvest is sanctified in and through them, in the same way the rest of mankind is raised to life for God through Christ being raised to a new life in God. The burden of Paul's message, in his great chapter about the resurrection of the dead, is that the new life to which we are raised is a totally transformed life. It is no mere 'coming back to life', but a rising to a divinized life, imperishable, glorious, powerful and suffused with the Spirit.<sup>19</sup> By all these characteristics the new life of the resurrection is shown to be a life instinct with qualities which are properly God's alone, and this can only be because it is a life whose principle is God's Spirit. And Christ is not only the first to be raised to this life of the Spirit, but is himself 'a life-giving Spirit'. This is the point of Paul's comparison between Christ and Adam: Adam was thought of at the time as being the progenitor of all men, and thus the source of life to them all. Again, it is not merely a matter of temporal priority, but of a source: not merely that 'we, who have been modelled on the earthly man, will be modelled on the heavenly man',<sup>20</sup> but that 'all men will be brought to life in Christ'.<sup>21</sup> The life which comes from Christ must have the same qualities as his. This is why the life of the christian must be centred on the same goals as that of Christ: 'you must look for the things that are in heaven, where Christ is'.<sup>22</sup> The life-giving Spirit of which Christ is the principle makes such a way of life possible.

But the effect of Christ becoming a life-giving spirit at the resurrection spreads beyond men to the whole creation:

As he is the Beginning  
he was first to be born from the dead  
so that he should be first in every way.<sup>23</sup>

In the first half of this hymn, when Paul was describing Christ's position as first-born of creation, he called him the principle of its life. Here too we may assume that Paul is speaking not merely of dignity or pre-eminence; he is considering Christ, as first-born from the dead, to be in this way, too, a principle of life to all creation. Paul describes the newness as being the reconciliation of all things through him and for him, or the whole *pleroma* dwelling in him. The exact sense of *pleroma* is still disputed by scholars, but basically the word means 'fulness' or 'completion'. There is surely also some connection with the sense of the word commonly current in the popular philosophy of the day, according to which God fills the world and is filled by it. If this is applied to Christ, it means that the promised renewal at the end of time takes place in Christ's resurrection: the renewal was to be a

<sup>19</sup> Cf I Cor 15.

<sup>23</sup> Col 3, 1.

<sup>20</sup> I Cor 15, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Col 1, 18.

<sup>21</sup> I Cor 15, 22.

completion, the fulfilment of God's promises and the ultimate attainment of the goal of creation. Christ can also be said to fill all things in so far as his re-creating influence attains them; and also to be filled by them, in that their coming under his influence is the goal of his lordship and so completes him. In all these ways, then, Christ is seen to be, by his resurrection, the principle of a renewal which affects the whole world, reconciling what was divided by the Fall. He restores to the whole of creation the harmony promised by the prophets at the end of time, and in his own person is the principle of renewal.

There is also a third way in which Christ is a principle of new life, not merely to all men as such, or to the universe as a whole. By his resurrection God has 'made him, as ruler of everything, the head of the Church which is his body'.<sup>24</sup> According to greek medical theories of the time, the head is the source of nourishment and life to the whole body; it is the leading principle to the whole body and the source of all nervous energy.<sup>25</sup>

In the earlier letters, Paul had written of the body of Christ which is the Church as an organism in which each member plays its part, without distinguishing Christ as head.<sup>26</sup> But in the later epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, there is great insistence on Christ's position as head of principalities and powers (in the sense of their lord and superior); and this mode of expression carries over also into the consideration of the relationship between Christ and his body. Here he is called head as source of life and energy. This is clear also from the use of this relationship in the teaching on the care of husband for wife, which is compared to the care of Christ for the Church: 'as Christ is head of the Church and saves the whole body, so is a husband the head of his wife'.<sup>27</sup> Christ sacrificed himself for the Church, feeds it and looks after it, since the two are one flesh, just as husband and wife. To look at it from the other side, the christian grows and is nourished in so far as he draws strength from Christ: 'If we live by truth and in love, we shall grow in all ways into Christ who is the head, by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together, each joint adding its own strength'.<sup>28</sup>

These two aspects of Paul's teaching on Christ in the light of his resurrection are obviously inter-related. The sovereignty of Christ, if it is to be a real authority, must be more than a mere dignity deserving of reverence; for all authority must be a source of life, a focal point of development and growth. This is precisely what Christ is as a source of life to renewed man, to the universe and especially to the Church which is his body. 'He has put all things under his feet and made him, as the ruler of everything, the head of the Church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills the whole creation'.

Henry Wansbrough O.S.B.

<sup>24</sup> Eph 1, 22-23.

<sup>25</sup> Cf Benoit, P.: 'Corps, Tête et Plérôme', in *Exégèse et Théologie* (Paris, 1961), II, pp 132-3.

<sup>26</sup> Cf 1 Cor 12, 12-30.

<sup>27</sup> Eph 5, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Eph 4, 15-16.