# Life, Resurrection and Judgement: the Hope of the Believing Community John 5:19-30 – An Exegesis

#### **PREFACE**

This exegesis was originally written in the Spring of 1974. While I have updated the body of the paper somewhat before posting to the Internet, I have not expanded the Bibliography. There are many later resources that might shed further light on the topic. But I have not attempted to evaluate current literature.

-- OBJ, Johannesburg, October 2007

#### INTRODUCTION

This passage has as its main point life and resurrection. The basis of our study is an inquiry into the two apparently different emphases concerning the resurrection, centering in verses 25 and 28. The former emphasizes a resurrection now, while the latter refers to a futuristic opening of the tombs. Involved in this are other concepts, primarily Sonship and Judgment. We will explore the meaning of the passage by examining the context in which it occurs, the possibilities as to sources of the material of the passage, and the relationship among the concepts involved.

# John 5:25-28

I tell you the truth. The time is coming and is already here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. And those who hear will have life. Life comes from the Father himself. So the Father has allowed the Son to give life. And the Father has given the Son the power to judge because he is the Son of Man. Don't be surprised at this. A time is coming when all who are dead and in their graves will hear his voice.\*

# **SETTING AND CONTEXT**

In Jerusalem on a Sabbath, Jesus healed a crippled man. This event set the stage for an encounter with a group the evangelist calls the *Jews*, and the discourse found in John 5:19-30.

"The Jews" are upset because of what Jesus did. It is not clear whether they saw the offense as the command to the man to carry his pallet or the healing. They first tell the man he cannot carry his pallet because it is the Sabbath. But upon finding out that someone told him to carry it, they attempt to find that someone (Jesus).

The followup seems to focus on the healing as the event that broke the Sabbath, not the carrying of the pallet. At any rate, they finally charge Jesus with breaking the Sabbath, and his explanation really caused a problem: My father is still working, and (so) I am working (John 5:17).

This then led to only one conclusion. Jesus was 'making himself God's equal (verse 18).<sup>1</sup> This is interpreted as a claim to divinity, punishable by death. Bultmann comments, "They can only conceive equality with God as independence from God, whereas for Jesus it meant the very opposite, as is brought out immediately in verse 19."<sup>2</sup>

**Unity in Obedience** 

Verse 19 begins an explanation by Jesus to show that he is not being rebellious, but on the contrary, it is actually because he is so obedient that he is doing this. The context and theme of the whole chapter is the authority of the Son and his unity with the Father. God is active for man's good on the Sabbath, thus one who does God's will is also active for man's good on the Sabbath. Jesus as the Son is doing God's will — exactly as the Father tells him — and so is active, too.

But Jesus says **greater works** then this healing will occur. For the healing and full life of the *whole man* is God's desire. "The physical healing ('life') is *merely a sign* of the power to give eternal life." The passage under study is a discourse by Jesus explaining the concept of the unity of the Father and the Son and the giving of life by them.

The discourse starts with what appears to be a short parable of how a son learns from and imitates his father's work. This seems to include verses 19-20a (See below: Sources). The discourse stems from Jesus' teaching of the Unity of the Father and the Son, The other themes in the discourse (See below: Concepts) could be seen as elaborations upon that point, established in a progression.

Unity of Father and Son —> greater works, verse 20 (which involve giving life, verse 21) —> (related to) judgment —> summary: eternal life —> escaping death —> raising of dead —> summary of defense. This could occur in a conversational setting, or is just as likely as a literary device.

R. E. Brown suggests that verse 24 and verse 25 were originally separate sayings, incorporated here by the evangelist. This is attested to, he says, by the fact that both start with "Amen, amen," which tends to open a discourse. If this is the case, then the evangelist extended the discourse by connecting to it separately recorded sayings of Jesus which had been kept by the community, as other teachings of Jesus were collected and recorded in the gospels.

These particular traditions or teachings had important meaning for certain of the church.<sup>4</sup> Here they expand and explain the meaning of the giving of life, introduced in verse 21.

### Resurrection

In this way we get from a Sabbath miracle to a spiritual (figurative) resurrection. It would seem this relates to the conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, where Jesus says that those who believe already have eternal life.

Then the similar material in verses 26-29, containing a different emphasis (i.e., futuristic, literal), but on the resurrection also, could have been added. This would carry the extension of ideas in sequence to its ultimate conclusion in "history's future." A conclusion was added in verse 30, tying back in to the idea of the Son doing what the Father does.

Within this structure there are two different understandings of resurrection: one emphasis of a figurative raising to life, a new aware ness of God (verses 21-25), versus an emphasis on a literal resurrection of dead bodies. I think it will become clear, however, that the purpose of the passage is not to present these *two* contrasting views of resurrection, but rather to develop the meaning of *judgment and life* and to relate these to the person of Jesus Christ and his relation to God.

All through the passage the theme of unity of the Father and the Son is the "thread." Verses 19-20a, the parable; verse 21: Son grants life as Father; verse 22: judgment given to Son; verse 23: honor Son to honor Father; verse 24: hear word of Son = belief in Father; verse 25: dead hear God's *Son*: verse 26: Father and Son both *possess* life; verse 27: Son given power to judge (because he is Son of Man); verses 28-29: dead will hear Son's voice; verse 30: Son can do this only in will of Father.

We want to look at some suggestions as to how this passage was put together, dealing with it on the basis of two sections with differing emphases on resurrection. After this textual analysis, we then will deal with the passage as a whole by concepts, showing their development in the passage as a unity — as it now stands. The passage is so smoothly constructed and unitary in thematic development that, whether or not it was developed from separate sources, the themes of the passage must be understood on the basis of the passage as it now stands.

#### **SOURCES**

R. E. Brown sees duplicate sections of the same material here, the first being verses 19-25, the second virtually repeating this, but with a future emphasis, verses 26-30. Verses 19-20a is a parable and verse 30 is both a concluding statement for the whole passage and an interpretation of the parable. It may well be that verses 19-20a and 30 originally constituted a parable and application, and when put with the discourse, 30 made a convenient conclusion and provided a neat literary package.

Thus the body of duplicated material, according to Brown, is essentially 20b-25:26-29. Verse 20b serves as a bridge from parable to teaching about the granting of life, the "surprise" being that the Son gives life and judges as the Father does.

While verse 21 seems to refer to a resurrection by the Father of the literally dead, the emphasis is the giving of life — drawing upon the healing Jesus has done. Thus the healing by Jesus is an act of that total life-giving which is characteristic of God. The emphasis in this passage is that the Father gives life to men *through the Son*. And this is *eternal* life, a life from the dead, not simply normal life which we all have.

#### **Eternal Life**

The resurrection idea in verse 21, rather than being the subject under discussion, is a basis from which to develop the doctrine of eternal life. The power of the Son to grant life to those who hear and believe is grounded in that power of God to raise the dead and give life. At least the language of the passage is such that the effect of the transition from death to life is *now*.

This is emphasized by verse 25. Jesus healed the man because *now* God is calling the dead to life. In this section judging is the result of negative response, as life is the result of positive. And the emphasis concerning the life the Father and Son have is that they *grant* it.

## **End Time**

The emphasis, however, in the second section is specifically on the resurrection at the end time. There the life is *possessed*, not granted, by the Father and the Son. And there is *no* mention of life *now*. Here the dead come from tombs, and those who were wicked are damned *upon rising*.

We find a similar situation in John 4:23, in Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well. Jesus says there "The hour is coming, and now is when the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth." This reference "is clearly present, while in 4:21  $\xi \rho \chi \epsilon \tau \alpha t \ddot{\phi} \rho \alpha$  applies to the future." "An hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem."

Brown indicates that duplication of material such as we have in John 5 indicates an editor juxtaposing two versions from different stages of Johannine material. If John had put the two traditions together himself — whether variations of his own material, or from separate outside sources — he would've blended it or smoothed it into one version.

The more unitary appearance of the well conversation might indicate that the *evangelist* wrote this whole dialogue from one source, either independent tradition or his own evangelistic purpose. If he did, then perhaps he also wrote the whole of John 5:19-30, or purposely juxtaposed two versions of the same material *himself* — for the very tension or dual emphasis it has.

#### **Resurrection Now**

A possible purpose in this method, as opposed to blending and smoothing, is that the evangelist wanted to make his emphasis in the present-ness of the resurrection life (which he calls *eternal* life), while retaining a tradition of futuristic belief in bodily resurrection and judgment.<sup>7</sup>

Brown rejects Bultmann's suggestion that the second section was put in by a redactor to try to make the evangelist's theology more like the "official' view of the church. In Bultmann's view, the church in general believed in a final, apocalyptic view of resurrection and judgment and the Evangelist's realized eschatology was an innovation. I think he is right in stating that there was probably not that developed a difference, so this would not be a strong possibility.

R. H. Charles feels that verses 28 and 29 are interpolations from a non-Johannine hand (as are the words "at the last day" in 6:30, 40, 44, 54; 12:48). Charles follows Wendt in noting that "not only is the teaching of these verses at variance with that of the rest of the gospel, but they are also at variance with their actual context, and their excision restores unity of thought to the passage."

This is certainly possible theologically, especially when you consider that John never has Jesus ascending to heaven — the resurrection life is now. John continually emphasizes that eternal life is now, and Jesus even refuses to accept Martha's statement about her brother rising at the last day. <sup>10</sup> Charles further points out that the phrase  $oi \notin v to i \subseteq \mu v \eta \mu \epsilon i o i \subseteq c$  occurs only one other place in the Bible, that being (LXX) Isaiah 26:19. This is possibly the source for the phrase here, but in Isaiah it is used only of the *righteous*, not of all mankind. <sup>11</sup>

#### Life Now

Thus the main emphasis, in relation to the strong emphasis of the whole gospel, is that eternal life is now; the resurrection is being experienced whenever men hear the Son's word. But even verses 28, 29 do not change the realized eschatology, but only introduce the question of how the future events relate to Jesus and eternal life now.

And this tension does occur in other places in this gospel and other New Testament writings as well. Brown cites Boismard as suggesting that verses 19-25 is the later of the two, explaining by *realized* eschatology the delay in the second coming of the Lord. <sup>12</sup> I think this has merit, especially if we follow Brown in saying that verses 24 and 25 were originally *two separate* sayings (see above).

The 19-25 section could have been pieced together to offset the section which *now follows* it. The "amen, amen" could also have been prefixed to these by the redactor or even the evangelist to add emphasis. This phrase is used in the Fourth Gospel to indicate a solemn or important saying: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, [a basic truth]."

# One with the Father

It is really very difficult to determine *how* the passage came to have its final form. The thing we can do is bring out the meaning of the themes of the passage when related as in this passage. We have a declaration that eternal life is experienced *now* by those dead in sin who hear the voice of God's Son.

On the other hand, we have a statement that there will come a final day of judgment. (See below: *Concepts: Judgment.*) This dual emphasis occurs elsewhere. However this passage got to the shape it is in, we have the message as someone wanted us to have it — a resurrection teaching in which the concept involves both present-life experience *and* yet-to-come resurrection life. And these find a unity in substance through the basic theme: Jesus is one with the Father, and all events of life and judgment are related to him.

#### **CONCEPTS**

### Resurrection

Resurrection is the key concept here within the framework of the unity of the Father and the Son, and occurs in relation to giving or receiving life. In verse 21, the father raises the dead *and* grants

In verse 24, the one hearing and believing passes from death to life, and that life is eternal life. But it is not after physical death that he passes into life, for it is connected with hearing *Jesus'* word and believing (the one who sent him). And this believer has (Greek present tense) eternal life. Thus this verse and the whole passage (20-25) are no doubt proclaiming a spiritual resurrection.

#### **Resurrection Now**

This suggestion is corroborated by verse 25, where the dead hear the voice of the Son of God, and the hour in which they hear is *now*. This is very likely a confessional proclamation by the Johannine church concerning their own experience. "The aorist participle  $\alpha \kappa \sigma \nu \sigma \alpha \nu \tau \epsilon \varsigma$  suggests those who at the time of writing have been vivified by the word of Christ."

They are referring, then, to a general occurrence, not to a happening at a particular time. It should be noted here that only the "believers" are involved here, as opposed to the whole of mankind in verse 28. The only result mentioned is being raised to divine life by Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

It might be proposed that verse 25 itself contains a futuristic, or at least a dual, emphasis, since the present tense of *coming* ( $\check{\epsilon}\rho\chi\epsilon\tau\alpha i$ ) has the meaning of future arrival. And further, that the dead shall hear is future, indicating a futuristic resurrection. First of all,  $\check{\epsilon}\rho\chi\epsilon\tau\alpha i$  is modified by  $\kappa\alpha i \ v\hat{v}v\ \check{\epsilon}\sigma\tau iv$ , which does not simply add a present emphasis in addition to a futuristic but actually makes the meaning present. As in saying "The train is now coming."

The use of the future is also tempered by its context — they live when they hear, and the hour when they hear is *now*. As when we say, "I will go *now*." The use of the future here indicates contingency upon the *coming* of the hour. This statement is further qualified by the statement in verse 24 that "he who hears . . . has passed . . . into life." But the question of the dead brought up here does extend to the dead in the graves.

#### **Future Resurrection**

Verse 28 definitely refers to a physical general resurrection of the dead. Here the term  $\xi \rho \chi \epsilon \tau \alpha t$  clearly is future in import, for what is coming is the hour in which the graves open. And all will hear the voice this time, and there are two kinds of resurrection — of life for the good, of judgment for the evil. (This is consistent with the promise in verse 24 that those who have eternal life will not be judged.) The dead in the graves will respond to the same voice which the "living dead" heard in life. This is the emphasis here, not that there are two kinds of resurrection.

Resurrection is, thus, the giving of eternal life to those who believe, yet with the converse truth that resurrection also entails judgment. For the judgment is that they did not believe. So if this resurrection is viewed in apocalyptic terms, it must involve life and judgment as well.

#### Life

R. H. Charles points out that *life* is used in the Fourth Gospel in stead of *kingdom* which occurs only three times. <sup>15</sup> But life is conceived of in Johannine writings as a union with the divine community. It involved a personal knowledge of God and his Son, and this life is the presupposition and living germ of the resurrection life (6:40): "This is the will of my Father, that every one that beholdeth the Son, and believeth on him, should have eternal life; and that I should raise him up." Here in our passage (5:19-30), life and resurrection are integrally related. The unity of the Father with the Son is centered in the giving of life, as noted above.

The dead in verse 24 are the spiritually dead, as shown in our above discussion. A person can come alive by hearing the word of Jesus. "This eternal life which the believer at present possesses is already the resurrection life" (verse 25).<sup>17</sup> This means, then, that "eternal life in the Fourth Gospel is not a time conception, but a purely ethical and timeless one."<sup>18</sup>

But if this is a *spiritual* life and resurrection, what about the body – is it denied a resurrection? The second section of our discourse explains this, by verse 28 specifically saying the graves will open, It is also noted that life is possessed by the Father and the Son, and judgment is executed. Here the one to whom judgment is given calls to life dead bodies. Just as in 21-25, the one who has judgment calls to life dead spirits. In both cases, the dead come to life at the sound of the Son's voice.

# Judgment and the Son

Judgment, resurrection and life go together in the Father-Son discourse. The one who grants life and raises the dead also is the one who judges. Judgment involves deciding who will live and who will die. Thus not only does the Son judge the wicked at the final resurrection, but he raised the righteous to life at the same time (verses 27, 28). For those who believe, not only is judgment by-passed, but they enter into eternal life in this life.

There is a sense in which the judgment here is passive. The same voice calls all out of the tombs, but what makes the difference in the two groups lies with those people — the righteous live, the wicked are judged. The same call brings life and death; which it is is determined by the individual. In a figurative resurrection, the Fourth Gospel declares (3:18) that the condemnation is that they did not believe. This negative aspect of the coming of the Son is not stated in verses 24, 25, but it is stated that those who do believe are the ones who do *not* come into judgment.

All the way through this passage, the term  $vi\delta_{\mathcal{C}}$  is used. Jesus has identified himself with this in verse 17, by referring to  $\dot{o}$   $\pi\alpha\tau\eta\rho\mu\sigma\nu$ , and the evangelist explains the charge in verse 18, that Jesus called God  $\pi\alpha\tau\epsilon\rho\alpha$  idea. It is fairly clear, then, that we are meant to equate Jesus with the Son in the discourse.

In verse 25, for the first time the term  $\tau ov \ vio\hat{v} \ \tau o\hat{v} \ \theta \varepsilon o\hat{v}$  is used. Everywhere else, except verse 27, the term is simply  $\dot{o} \ vi\acute{o}_{\varsigma}$ . This might be thought to indicate some intrusive other source, in verse 25, and we have considered that possibility. Yet as the climax of the Father-Son discourse, version 1, it is a perfect conclusion. It is consistent with the line which started the confrontation: Jesus claims to be God's Son (claims God is his Father).

## **New Picture**

But rather, the interesting change in phrase comes in verse 27 in the phrase "Son of Man." Not only is this a new phrase in this context, but is a unique usage for all gospels, for here Son of Man is anarthrous:  $\delta \pi \ v i \delta \varsigma \ \alpha v \theta \rho \delta \pi o \hat{v}$ . This indicates an apocalyptic motif. Brown notes that in Daniel 7:13 the phrase is also there anarthrous.

What is the import of this?<sup>19</sup> It is a new fusion of old concepts into a new picture of judgment, life and resurrection!

- (a) The Son of Man is stated as the one who raises the dead. "We never find a clear and emphatic statement [in Jewish writings] that the Son of Man will raise the dead." 20
- (b) The Messiah is identified with the Son of Man. Strack-Billerbeck quote a Rabinnical tradition that God gives the key of death to the Messiah.<sup>21</sup> Here the Son of Man is the figure standing in this office.
- (c) The figure of the Son of Man is more than an emissary of God or an agent. He in some sense participates in God for Sonship is emphasized to the point of unity, though being a dependent relation of the Son to the Father. This is intensified in the text in verses 21 and 26 by the use of  $\omega\sigma\pi\epsilon\rho$  to describe the relation of the acts of the Son to those of the Father. What the Son does is

not only dependent on and integral to what the Father does, but it is of the *same essence*. Thus when the Son acts, it is the Father's acting, He has *turned over* to the Son judgment, the Son gives life, and it is the Son's voice that calls to life. And the Son has life in himself *just as* the Father has

(d) The crowning result is that Jesus is the Son of Man! Jesus' phrase "my Father" is at the basis of the discussion, so he is to be identified with the Son in verses 26-29. In verse 27 this Son is said to be Son of Man. Thus Jesus has been identified as the Son of Man. Thus what is going on now in Jesus' words and works is of ultimate meaning and importance, involving the whole meaning of life.

# CONCLUSION

Bultmann seems to have identified well the difficulty of the Jews in understanding what Jesus meant by being God's Son. They could not envision that "Jesus' Sonship, and his claim to be equal to God and to work like God, only make sense in that Jesus, as the Son and as the one who works like the Father, *reveals* God, and that precisely because he is the Revealer he must make the claim which sounds so blasphemous to their ears."<sup>22</sup>

The evangelist's finished product in John 5:19-30 gives us a concept of *Jesus as the Son* and the Son as one *who acts like God*, Thus when Jesus performs an act, there is much more to be considered than breaking the Sabbath. It is a matter of life – Jesus' acts are ultimately life-giving.

The thrust of this passage is not to talk about two different kinds of resurrection or two different times in which they will occur. But rather the emphasis is that when Jesus acts and speaks, it is God acting and speaking. Thus men are accountable for their response. And those who believe will receive the life which God and his Son grant.

Further, since an apocalyptic figure with final authority is equated here with Jesus, the conclusion is that the apocalyptic judgment is going on now in the encounter with Jesus. 'Now is the judgment of the world" (12:31). The ultimate work of the Son of Man is already going on in Jesus now. Judgment is executed in the person's own response to Jesus (3:18).

There is not an emphasis on contrasting resurrections. There is simply the assertion that because Jesus is the perfectly obedient son to whom all authority has been given, he gives life to all he wants to, which are those who hear and believe his father (verse 24). As this touches on the fate of the totality of mankind, the apocalyptic image assures us that even this is safely in Jesus' hands, because he is also the one to whom final judgment is given.

Life is received by hearing and believing — this is resurrection in this passage. And judgment is the opposite result of the same confrontation decision event with Jesus. His words offer the occasion for receiving eternal life, which is escape from judgment. But their rejection also entails the judgment.

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#### **FOOTNOTES**

<sup>\*</sup> Scripture quoted from the International Children's Bible, New Century Version, copyright © 1983, 1986, 1988 by Word Publishing, Dallas, Texas, 75039. Used by permission.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The background of this saying is a strong Rabbinic tradition – "God is essentially and unchangeably creative (εργάζεται ['ergazetai])." (C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 213.) This is the kernel of the discourse in verses 19-30. (See: Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, Vol. 2, pp. 462-466.)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 245.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 214.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> For example, to answer such questions as: Why has the resurrection and return been delayed? What does it mean to be in the kingdom?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> A. H. McNeile and I. H. Bernard, *Gospel According to St. John* p. 318.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Brown, pp. xxxvii, 219.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> For this proposal it would not be of crucial note to determine definitely the source of the 26-29 section. I would think it more likely that there had come to be circulated differing interpretive traditions of resurrection sayings of Jesus. They would both have gained a popular adherence, and the evangelist wished to preserve both.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Brown, p. 220.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> R. H. Charles, A Critical History of the Doctrines of a Future Life, p. 429.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Charles, p. 430.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Charles, p. 429.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Brown, p. 220

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Barrett, p. 218.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Barrett, p. 219.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Charles, pp. 425-430; John 3:3, 3:5, 18:36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Charles, p. 427.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Charles, p. 427.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Charles, p. 428.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> McNeile and Bernard say, "The absence of the article is not to be pressed," pointing out that official titles tend to be anarthrous. However, the parallel to Daniel is poignant. (A. H. McNeile and J. H. Bernard, p. 244.) *Interpreter's Bible* states that it is quality not title which is indicated by anarthrous use. This still is consistent with our contention here. It is the quality of Jesus as a man in full relation with God as Son which makes him fit for this appointment. This is also supported by the writer of Hebrews, who states (Heb. 5:8-9) that Jesus earned the right to become our Savior and Intercessor, by his obedience, by which he proved worthy of the office or honor.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 321.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Strack and Billerbeck, p. 465.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Bultmann, p. 245.

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