Which Way is Up? Revival, Resurrection, Assumption, and Ascension in the Rhetoric of Paul and John the Seer

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A few exceptional narratives in the New Testament consider the boundaries between this world and the next, or between this world and the heavenly, and the possibility of crossing these. Four "ways *up*" (and so *through* these barriers) include revival (or resuscitation) and resurrection, assumption and ascension. Though early Christian texts are generally reserved in their depiction of barrier breaching, especially by means of the second pair (assumption and ascension), it is demonstrable that they have been informed by conventional motifs used in narratives from ancient Near Eastern, Graeco-Roman or early and middle Jewish matrices.[1] All four upward movements make their mark, retaining such vibrancy in the cultural imagination that they were stored in the rhetorical arsenal of New Testament writers, who employ them for theological and exhortatory purposes, as well as in narrative moments that evoke wonder. In this paper, I will sketch the general NT understanding of these four movements within their complex literary and cultural context, and then move on to examine the polemics of two New Testament writers—Paul and the seer John— who use the motifs of boundary crossing as viewed through the lens of the Jesus story.

Four Traditional Ways Up

First is "revival," or "resuscitation." Typically, the ancients depicted the custodians of death as guarding their gates jealously, so that re-crossing was a difficult affair: consider Orpheus and Eurydice, or the deal worked out for Persephone with Hades. Even in such traditions (including the NT) as afforded God supreme power over life and death, Death could be personified (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:26; Rev. 20:13)

and so understood as having his proper realm. Thus, revival was not infrequently described as "tricking death," as in the *Testament of Abraham*, where Death is eluded for a time by Abraham, and where finally Death must himself deceive the patriarch so as to bring him to his temporal end. (A/20.9).[2] At other times, revival is understood as subduing that which threatens to negate God's creative power, as in stories associated with Elijah and Elisha, Jesus and Paul. We also see metaphoric uses of revival language, as with Ezekiel's dry bones, and Romans 4:17b, where Paul celebrates God who "calls into being that which is not" (i.e. Gentile Christians) and who "gives life to the dead" (Jewish Christians). Recently, "revival" has had bad press in Christian theological circles, as the term "mere resuscitation" has been coined to dismiss belief in bodily resurrection. However, among those early Christians who hoped for a transcendent final resurrection (as distinct from bare resuscitation), revival also remained a sign of God's power over all life.

Our memory of the volatile second Temple period, however, should caution us against an absolute distinction of revival from resurrection. After all, French has no separate word for *resuscité*, and the Greek and Hebrew used several different words for both actions that have overlapping semantic domains: so it may be that the easy distinction is a trick of the English language. 2 Maccabees 7 through 14, for example, suggests that this author and his community looked forward to a simple renewal of life for the faithful: body parts are envisaged as being given back and enlivened. Think of the anticipatory Razi brandishing his own bowels (14:45)! As Stanley Porter points out,[3] the graphic nature of the expected resurrection is not very "elegant" in the Maccabean literature. Porter, however, seems to be engaging in special pleading when he dubs Razi's rhetoric "unclear"[4] as a reference to bodily resurrection—the words patently look forward to a revitalisation of the very same dying or dead corpse. On the other hand, in 2 Maccabees, the renewal of life is also described as "eternal" (εἰς αἰώνιον 7:9); reflection upon how a life might be prolonged forever leads ineluctably to the notion of a different sort of body and a renewed cosmos that could sustain such permanence.

This brings us to resurrection proper, envisaged in Daniel, with its general resurrection of the covenant people and their "wise" who will "shine like the stars" (12:3). The astral luminescence is heightened when taken over in Matthew, where Jesus assures the righteous that

they will, in the resurrection, "shine like the *sun*" (13:43). Resurrection, then, envisages a new type of life, no mere reversal of death. So in 1 Corinthians 15:44, Paul distinguishes between the human body now animated by *psychē* (σῶμα ψυχικόν), and the incorruptible eschatological body animated by *pneuma* (σῶμα πνευματικόν). In the absolute sense, however, NT writers associate only *Jesus* with an accomplished resurrection, and Jesus is seen as both exemplary and representative of the eschatological state of the faithful. In this interplay between the representative and exemplary, NT writers use resurrection language metaphorically to describe the present condition of those who "stand" "in Christ." Behind such tropes lurks the hope of a wholly transformative resurrection (including the body), fulfilled in Jesus but not yet in those connected with him.

Talk of the human body leads us to a discussion of assumption, a complex subject that issues the warning—"make no assumptions!" Frequently assumption has been facilely defined over against ascension by saying that the person does not die before being taken up. However, this is not always the case, as Daniel Smith demonstrates in his (as yet unpublished) doctoral dissertation.[5] Sometimes, the body is snatched up before death; elsewhere, it is "sloughed off," burnt to ashes, or transformed so that the rising one can assume his or her true spiritual reality. However, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, assumptions typically include the whole person. Hebrew Bible noteworthies such as Enoch and Elijah were understood to be assumed *and so not to have died*: later rabbinic commentary suggested that their deaths were postponed until the final battle. But what of those strange reports regarding Moses (with his mysterious tomb) and in later antiquity, regarding Mary the mother of Jesus? In these cases, the assumption may have been understood to prevent corruption—but not death.

Assumption should be distinguished from the temporary mystical ascent of the spirit or body, because it indicates a *definitive and final crossing of boundaries, orchestrated by a divine agent,* and associated with various narrative characteristics. The Jewish and Christian narratives highlight: foreknowledge of the assumption by the subject; observation of the assumption and/or unsuccessful search for the person assumed; the exceptionally righteous character of the one assumed; and association of the assumed with an eschatological return. Assumption stories about Enoch, Sybil (daughter of Enoch), Moses, Elijah, Melchizedek,

Eliezar, Jabez, Sirach, Baruch, Tabitha (of Acts 9), the repentant thief from the crucifixion, and Mary often depict their heroes as reserved in the heavens for some role in the consummation of all things. Typically, however, there is no outright encomium of the assumed, but a climax in which praise is offered to God: "My father! My father! The chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof! . . . Where now is the God of Elijah?"

Finally, we consider ascension. NT writers appear loathe to ascribe this to anyone besides the Christ,[6] and display at times a hostile tendency even against temporary mystical ascent: "Who will ascend into heaven?" (Rom 10: 6); "For David did not ascend into the heavens" (Acts 2:34); "No one has ascended into heaven except . . . the Son of Man" (John 3:13). Certainly in the NT a *final* ascension is seldom the prerogative of a mortal because it implies an active and successful procession (over against assumption, where the human object is seized by God.) Apart from the Jesus story, Biblical writings portray ascension as a human dream that reflects hubris: "I will ascend to heaven; . . . I will ascend to the tops of the clouds like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:13, 14); and Lady Babylon's "I rule as queen" (Rev. 18:7b).

Although only one author narrates the story of Jesus's ascension in the NT (Luke 24, Acts 1) the concept is prominent in other NT books. It is implied by John and Paul, known by the author to the Hebrews, present in the addition to Mark, and featured in the earliest hymns and creeds, as signalled in Philippians 2:5–11 and 1 Timothy 3:16. In Luke's double narrative, the story emerges as a critical episode in salvation history, even as the nexus between the ages. And so Luke codifies what is suggestive in other NT documents that know of the ascension.

Case studies in "ways up"

We turn to two NT examples of rhetoric that exploit the "ways up." Although the eschatological note in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 has spawned speculation in such contemporary phenomena as the *Left Behind* movie series, attention to the constraints of the text yields less grotesque results. Eschatological hopes and fears frame the letter: "Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1:10); "may your spirit and soul and body be preserved whole and blameless in the

parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:23). Again, Jesus is the one who "has died for us" (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν 5:10) and by whom the community may hope to obtain salvation (εἰς περιποίησιν σωτηρίας, 5:9) rather than wrath. The Thessalonians share with Paul the idea of Jesus's death and resurrection as effective for them, but effective *how?*

The problem of the Thessalonians was, I suggest, twofold—they understood Jesus's actions as substitutionary over against representative; and they had an idea of assumption that did not lend itself to their present situation. That is, their notion of *sotēria* ruled out the necessity of death for Jesus's followers (except, it seems, in the case of witnessing martyrs who clearly partook in the Messiah's pattern, cf. 1 Thess 3:3). But what of those who died in peaceable living (1 Thess 4:11), while awaiting the coming of the Lord? What sense could possibly be made of *their* deaths? The Thessalonian church knew of two life-patterns that were bound for glory—martyrdom, which would issue in the resurrection (cf. the Maccabean and Messianic model) and assumption, which was the sudden taking of one who pleased God like Enoch. But the glorious time of the martyrs had passed (at least for the time being), and some of their number was now dying without receiving the promised second type of blessing.

Paul's rhetoric is masterful. The letter is a whole, with the parts informed by each other. 4:13–18, however, is also a discrete speech act, in the deliberative mode:

Introduction,	4:13	Ethos established with grieving congregation
Proposition,	4:14b	God will lead up through Jesus those who are dead
Reason,	4:14a	Because Jesus died and rose again
Authority,	4:15	. . . by the word of the Lord . . .
Opposite,	4:15	We will not leave behind those who have died
Description,	4:16	Instead of example, vivid language picturing the hope
Citation?	4:17	"So we will be with the Lord forever"
Conclusion,	4:18	Pathos: therefore encourage each other

Paul begins by establishing his *ethos* before the hearers—concerned for their dismay, he wants to teach them (4:13); likewise, he ends by an appeal to *pathos,* telling them to encourage each other (4:18). Between these two bookends is Paul's argument. His thesis?—that God will lead up through Jesus and with Jesus those who have "fallen asleep" (4:14b). Why?—because Jesus himself died and rose again

(4:14a). On what authority?—Paul cites a "word of the Lord" (4:15), either prophetic, or an extension of a known Jesus saying. The appeal to authority is, contrary to usual rhetorical form, introduced before the description of the scene (4:16–17); thus Paul can end in a vivid style and so enrapture his hearers with him. Here is the vision: Those who have died rise, taking first place and not preceded in the parousial procession by the living. But both will be lifted up to a ceremonial meeting with the Lord and then begin the resurrection life. So the argument is mounted that the dead *can* be assumed, so long as they are raised first! Jesus's pattern of life, death and resurrection challenges expectations of what God can and will do.

Consider the actions and sounds: divine command, archangel's call, heavenly trumpet. This aural progression downward into the human sphere is followed by a visionary upward movement—the dead arise first, then all are glorified together in an upward movement. Paul thus argues that Jesus's "death" is "for us" whether we are awake or asleep. Some may follow Jesus's pattern, while others may avoid physical death because of his actions—but all rely, whether by representation or by substitution, upon the one who is the chief Actor. Paul is *not* picturing a mere resuscitation or revivification of those who have died.[7] This is too neat a pattern, not corrective enough of the Thessalonian "assumptions." There is, after all, a clear articulation in Paul's expanded teaching of 1 Corinthians 15: 51–52, where he states that the dead in Christ will be raised ἄφθαρτοι. The resurrection of 1 Thessalonians is no mere revival; moreover, assumption language is used of the entire group, those who are alive (according to the usual pattern) and those who are dead (a surprise made possible by the Christ-event). Paul goes on in 4:13–18 to exploit the language of life, death and reversals for the purpose of paraenesis. Dying and living are not always what they seem. The apostle, who has given comfort concerning those who are "asleep," goes on to warn that there is indeed a sleep unto death. One may be sleeping in death, but the morning will come; yet if one is sleeping in faithlessness, that day of morning will be experienced as a thief in the night. To the community has been entrusted the job of encouragement, so that those who have fallen into malignant sleep might awake, and so that those who grieve concerning those who have "fallen asleep in the Lord" might maintain their hope.

This section in 1 Thessalonians functioned for the earliest hearers in exactly the opposite manner to its sensationalist abuse today. Paul's readers in Thessalonica expected that Jesus's actions had opened a dry passageway through the Sea of Death. Paul establishes a challenging way of understanding Jesus's death "for them" and encourages them to continue faithful in the ongoing uncertainties of life as well as in the dramatic extremities of persecution. Old categories of assumption are relativised by Jesus's death, resurrection and ascension—God's pleasure can be conferred through death and not simply despite it. The Thessalonians needed assurance that Jesus's pattern went beyond substitution to representation, and thus was inclusive of their dead siblings in the faith. Today's dispensationalist, however, has reverted to substitution, and uses Paul's rhetoric against its grain in triumphal escapism. Where Paul's scenario established for the Christian community an eschatological function, as the vanguard of honour at the parousia, today's rapturist releases the Christian from projected trials let loose on everyone else. Paul's teaching was designed to strengthen marginalized Christians who were in a state of cognitive dissonance; distorted readings of Thessalonians confirm the assumptions of the so-called prosperity gospel. Would that they would revisit the text so that they can tell which way is up!

We turn from the earliest writing of the NT to one of the later ones—the Apocalypse of Jesus to John. Chapters 11 and 12 offer two intriguing examples of "ways up" that "prove" or "test" the rule. In chapter 12 the Messiah child is assumed, without an intervening death. Chapter 11 concerns the two assumed witnesses (Enoch and Elijah, or Moses and Elijah). No assumption is narrated here, though the ideal reader understands that these assumed have returned to fill their eschatological role. In place of assumption, we hear a tale of martyrdom and resurrection followed by ascension. The One who died, rose, and ascended is said, in chapter 12, to be assumed; the assumed heroes of chapter 11 take on the role of witnesses who die, rise, and ascend. Why a death, resurrection and ascension here? Why an assumption there? Which way is up?

In chapter 12, assumption language frames a central declaration about casting down and dying. We look up to the heavens to see the standoff between the woman and the dragon, and the male child snatched away to God's throne (12:1–6). In the second scene, the archenemy and his minions are thrown down (vs. 7–9): this is cele-

brated in the proclamation of verses 10–12, where Satan's downfall is linked to the death of the Lamb and the martyrs' witness, and where joy is envisaged in heaven, coupled with woe on earth. We cut back to the contest between the woman and the dragon, and learn that she is helped by being given two great divine wings to fly away—yet she flies not to heaven like Icarus, nor to the promised land like Israel, but to the wilderness where she must endure more (vv. 13–17). Up to heaven, down to earth, down into death, up to heaven, down to earth, "up" to the wilderness. Which way is up?

The seer applies assumption language in a sophisticated and almost playful (though ultimately serious) manner: thus he wages his theo-political warfare. Here the tables are turned on imperial power, as he seems to adopt the perspective uncritically, then exposes it as inadequate. In the words of Harry O. Maier, "Rehearsing in order to reverse. . . . Revelation unmasks the masquerade of tyrannical political power and urges its hearers to walk a more costly way."[8] You want an emperor? You want a king who will rule all the nations? You want a human being who is invincible? You want a man so bound for greatness that his end is apotheosis? Well, it isn't Caesar! Here is that one who will rule the nations with iron! This mere child is the one, a humble figure who is the Ruler of right. If anyone has the power to escape death, it is this one! If any is worthy of apotheosis, it is this one, this promised child[9] taken up to the very throne of God.

Yet, we already have him under another figure in the initial heavenly vision, standing in the midst of the throne, as in the midst of the elders (ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ θρόνου . . . καὶ ἐν μέσῳ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων 5:6). The kingly Lion stands as Lamb amidst his suffering people: so, too, in chapter 12. For in the *vision* the child is assumed without dying, the candidate *par excellence* for divine protection and honorific status; but in the *oracle* that interprets the vision, we hear of neither apotheosis nor iron rule. Instead, the voice proclaims that the Lamb's "rule" of vulnerability is shared by the martyrs. It is his humiliation and *not* his exaltation that issues in the Dragon's downfall. Like child, like mother: her wings take her to her own tribulation.

Consider now the two witnesses of chapter 11, who are protected by divine fire, can turn river to blood, and can strike the earth with plagues. This Mosaic and prophetic authority is juxtaposed with their martyrdom and their corporal shame. They die, a spectacle to the people and a cause of joy to their enemies. They then rise, animated

by the very *pneuma* of God, and stand (active voice, ἔστησαν), striking all with terror. Their resurrection is an epiphany; so too is their exaltation. Invited by God, ἀνάβατε ὧδε, they ascend observably on the cloud of heaven. Unafraid of pagan overtones, the nervy John adopts, where Luke avoids (24:50; Acts 1:9), the usual Hellenistic term for ascent (*anabasis*). Presumably John uses frank exaltation language for mortals because their life pattern calls attention to the Lamb: they are arch-witnesses. They *die* even though they have been given "power" to avoid death, and then follow in the upward movement—resurrection and ascension. Ultimately, their import is not heroic status, but that they are measured along with all whom God will reward: the "servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear the name, both small and great" (11:18).

John has a visionary offence for every reader. The images adopted and undermined in chapter 12 take their aim directly at the imperial ideal, while also questioning the Hebrew Messianic version of dominion. This Lamb conquers by sacrifice, not by rod. The visionary images of chapter 11 evoke the Hebrew Bible and para-biblical traditions in order to show that assumptive heroics are beside the point. The pattern of the Lamb is what counts. Further, there is collateral damage to Graeco-Roman values, in the overtones of Hellenistic assumption imagery, and in the conflation of Jerusalem with Rome (11:8). Still John has his cake and eats it too. The sympathetic reader of chapters 11 and 12 imaginatively is led to honour the two witnesses and the Messiah, then to find all heroes levelled before one who will not be a hero on human terms. We experience, as we so often do with John, a sense of vertigo. The only way up is the way down. But all ways up are at the service of this one way.

Which way, then, is up? NT writers inherited multiple traditions and so celebrate the Jesus meta-narrative. Conversely, they used this foundational story to understand other less central human dramas and also to speak about Christian living in general. Dramatic stories of "going up" helped them to make sense of the Jesus story, and also to explain the more mundane road that the follower of Jesus was expected to follow. All four modes up establish a dignity for humanity and for the body, but an unmatched reverence for the Christ. Worship and creed in the Christian tradition would continue to stress the moments of resurrection and ascension, while scenes of revival and assumption became, it seems, less significant. Yet in hymnody and folk

stories, the other modes would be retained. Revival language remained vital in the Christian imagination, especially in its metaphoric meaning of revitalisation. Assumption language, too, finds a home in the Marian narratives (transformed, of course, by a conjoined motif of death). In most cases, however, these stories are told within the boundaries of the Christian fold, and indicate the community's ongoing recognition that it awaits the redemption of the body. Assumption, along with the apostolic power to effect revival, takes no *normative* place within the kerygma itself , which heralds the most dramatic and decisive moments of boundary crossing—not revival nor assumption, but resurrection and ascension.

Notes

1. There has been much ink spilled in contemporary debate concerning whether Jewish or Graeco-Roman contexts are more fruitful in understanding our NT documents. Fred Wisse is well known for his trenchant contributions to this ongoing conversation. Equally salutary is his insistence that scholars not succumb to the temptation to engage in what Sandmel termed "parallelo-mania." The careful analyst will make a distinction between direct connection between NT texts and similar stories from other matrices, and "echoes" of what had become commonplace motifs in antiquity. Space permits us only to suggest a *general* influence upon our chosen NT texts.

2. The simpler ending of Recension B, in which Death is less powerful and the sovereign Lord brings about Abraham's death by "drawing out" his soul, plus the huge number of variants for this episode, may well testify to an involved discussion of such matters among Hellenistic diaspora Jews and the Christians who adopted this apocalyptic narratival elaboration of Genesis. At any rate, where the domains of Death and Hades were well conceived, even an immedi-ate revival of one who had died would constitute a true crossing of boundaries.

3. Porter, "Resurrection, the Greeks and the New Testament," in *Resurrection,* ed. Stanley E. Porter, Michael A. Hayes, David Tombs (JSNTSup 186: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 60. The burden of Porter's argument in this article is to question the notion that second Temple Jewish ideas of the resurrection inevitably included the body. He makes his point with Philo and Josephus, who "translate" the Jewish hope, as might be expected, into Hellenistic terms. The argument seems, however, strained when he handles the Maccabean texts.

4. Ibid.

5. Daniel Alan Smith, "The Post-Mortem Vindication of Jesus in the Sayings Gospel." Thesis submitted to the Toronto School of Theology, Toronto, Ontario, 2001.

6. For more discussion of NT ambivalence towards heavenly journeys, see the author's "Why Bring the Word Down?—the Rhetoric of Demonstration and Disclosure in Romans 9:30–10:21" in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. S. K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 129–48 and "Ambivalent Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Reflection in 2 Corinthians," in *The Intertexture of Apocalyptic Discourse in the New Testament*, ed. Duane F. Watson (SBLSymS; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002) 113–35.

7. Cf. Joseph Plevnik, "The Taking up of the Faithful and the Resurrection of the Dead in 1 Thess 4:13–18," *CBQ* 46 (2001): 274–83.

8. Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 199.

9. In antiquity, children who died prematurely were frequently spoken about as snatched from life (*harpazō*), a fate congruent with their purity, and connected in the popular mind with assumption.

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