

## “He Is Not God of the Dead, but of the Living.” How Should we Understand Jesus’ Saying?

By Ekkehardt Mueller

Jesus’ saying, extending from Mark 12:24 to 12:27, relates to the resurrection of the dead. For our study, only verses 26–27 are relevant:

“And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong.” (Mark 12:26–27)<sup>1</sup>

Matthew and Luke report the same saying (Matt 22:31–22; Luke 20:37–38). While the wording differs slightly and Mark and Luke contain an extra comment at the end of the saying, which Matthew does not mention there,<sup>2</sup> still the situation, the basic content, and the message are the same—especially the phrase, “He is not God of the dead, but of the living.”

### Approaches

This saying has puzzled some, including Bible students. The basic question is whether Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who according to Scripture are dead and were buried, are still alive or are again alive. Is Jesus talking about an immortal soul when He says that God is not the God of the dead, or of a resurrection of the soul right after death to an intermediate state?<sup>3</sup>

For instance, J. W. Cooper discusses the timing of the resurrection—that is, whether there is an immediate resurrection of the soul after death or a resurrection at the end of time.<sup>4</sup> When looking at Jesus’ saying, he comes to the conclusion that an “immediate resurrection cannot absolutely be ruled out.”<sup>5</sup> He strongly supports the teaching of an intermediate state of the soul after death. Cooper is a Protestant and subscribes to dualism. In order to defend it, he takes Scripture and

tradition as authorities in matters of faith. For him, the extrabiblical literature of the intertestamental and New Testament periods and the historical context of the first century AD seem to become the hermeneutical key to unlocking the meaning of biblical texts.<sup>6</sup> Regarding Scripture he writes, “But a distinction must be maintained between the personal vocabulary and beliefs of the New Testament authors on the one hand and the teachings of the New Testament on the other.”<sup>7</sup> When he studies the Gospel of John, he comes to the conclusion that John “twice locates the resurrection at a single future time,” but then turns around and claims “John’s account of Jesus’ words is clear. The only question is whether we are obliged to take them at face value in formulating our doctrines.”<sup>8</sup>

J. B. Green, however, finds Cooper’s position unconvincing. He suggests that there is a variety of views in Hellenism, including Jewish Hellenism, and not just one position. Therefore, “it is erroneous to allege that the NT authors lived in a milieu pervaded by body-soul dualism.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Jewish literature of the intertestamental period does not

provide us with faithful commentaries on OT perspectives. . . . We would be mistaken, were we to argue that a direct or simple line can be drawn from OT texts to Second Temple Jewish interpretation. . . . Hebrew understanding of death and afterlife were transformed under Greek and later Roman influence.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to Cooper, Green makes it very clear that people really die. According to Green, “from the perspective of our humanity and sans divine intervention, there is no part of us, no aspect of our personhood, that survives death. . . . life-after-death requires embodiment—that is, re-embodiment.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore,

Green points out that “an ontologically distinct soul, which constitutes the ‘real person’ and which guarantees survival of personal identity from this life to the next, is not only unnecessary but actually stands in tension with key aspects of the resurrection message of the Scriptures.”<sup>12</sup>

These two examples highlight how different approaches and presuppositions influence the outcome of the study of a biblical passage. Here is the approach taken in this paper: as Seventh-day Adventists we reject placing tradition and the creeds of the early church on an equal level with Scripture. Tradition and creeds are informative regarding the development of Christian doctrine, but they must be tested by Scripture. We also reject treating rabbinic sources and the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of Old Testament and New Testament times as equal to Scripture and as an interpretative key for the Old and New Testaments. We subscribe to *sola Scriptura* and its related principles that Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture. One has to be careful not to approach the Bible with preconceived ideas which one then attempts to prove with Scripture.

## II. The Situation (Context)

From Mark 11:27 onward, Jesus is involved in conflict with people who had a problem with His triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His claim of authority over the temple (Mark 11:1–26). According to Mark 11:27–12:12, Jesus had to defend Himself against the chief priests, scribes, and elders. Next He was tempted by the Pharisees and Herodians regarding paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13–17). Then the controversy with the Sadducees ensued about the issue of the resurrection (Mark 12:18–27). Finally, Jesus had to respond to a scribe’s question about the foremost commandment (Mark 12:28–38).

The dispute with the Sadducees began with them asking a question about the resurrection, built on the Levirate law that if a woman had no son and became a widow, the brother of her deceased husband should take her as wife (Deut 25:5), and expanded it to a hypothetical case in which one woman had seven husbands consecutively, all of whom were brothers. Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection (Acts 23:8). They also did not believe in angels and “are said to have rejected all Jewish observances not explicitly taught in the pentateuchal law.”<sup>13</sup> Their question, as to which of her seven husbands would she be wife to in the resurrection, was most likely intended to ridicule the concept of resurrection. Possibly, because of the Sadducees’ belief system,<sup>14</sup> Jesus could not answer with prophetic texts of the Old Testament, although a few such texts point to the resurrection (e.g., Isa 26:19; Dan 12:1–2, 13). He had to respond with the Torah, the Pentateuch, and this is what He did.<sup>15</sup>

However, it is very difficult to find a direct text about the resurrection in the Pentateuch. None of us are likely to have thought of the passage Jesus came up with. It is the situation when Moses encountered the burning bush and God spoke to him: “And he said, ‘I

am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod 3:6).

The issue at stake was the resurrection of the dead. While the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, obviously they did not believe in an immortal soul either.<sup>16</sup> But the immortality of the soul was clearly not the issue of the debate. Mark 12:18 talks about the Sadducees “who say that there is no resurrection.” The real issue was: is there a resurrection from the dead or is there none? Therefore, when studying the passage we must focus on this issue and should not bring other agendas to the table.

It may be useful to take a look at the larger context of the New Testament, especially the topic of resurrection. Some of this information may have been familiar to the Sadducees in oral form. 1) Jesus guarantees the resurrection (John 6:40; 11:25–26). 2) Jesus compared death to a sleep from which there is an awakening (John 11:11–13). 3) During His earthly ministry He raises people who were dead (Mark 5:22–24, 35–42; Luke 7:11–17; John 11:1–44). 4) Jesus predicts His own death and resurrection (Mark 8:31; 10:31), and He is raised from the dead (Matt 28:6; Luke 24:1–47). 5) More than five hundred witnesses testify that Jesus had been raised (1 Cor 15:3–8). 6) Since Jesus was resurrected, all humans will also be raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:20–22). However, there are two different resurrections: the resurrection to life and the resurrection to judgment/condemnation (John 5:28–29). 7) The time of these resurrections is still in the future. The resurrection order is Jesus first, then the believers, and finally the unbelievers (1 Cor 15:23–26). At Christ’s second coming, the believers will be raised from the dead (1 Thess 4:13–18). The unbelievers will be raised after the millennium to experience the final judgment (Rev 20:4–6, 12–15). Result: Jesus is the expert on resurrection. One should listen to Him.

## Analysis of the Text

Jesus’ response to the Sadducees in Mark 12:26–27 is a bit cryptic. The first part of verse 26, “And as for the dead being raised,” makes it clear that Jesus is referring to the same issue that the Sadducees are addressing, the question about the resurrection of the dead. Jesus discusses this topic and affirms that there is such a resurrection.

The question, “Have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying . . .” (Mark 12:26), directs the Sadducees back to Scripture they may have ignored. Even religious people and leaders of faith communities may neglect going back to Scripture, being caught up with their administrative deliberations and philosophical reflections. Jesus rebuked them, insisting on “the fact of the resurrection life by an appeal to Scripture and to God’s covenant faithfulness.”<sup>17</sup>

The quotation from Exodus 3:6, “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” has a deeper meaning than it seems to have at first glance. Moses is at the burning bush after having

been away from Egypt for years. When God introduces Himself to Moses as the God of his father, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, He not only reminds Moses of his Hebrew roots but also of the covenant God had made with the patriarchs. Just a few verses earlier “God heard their [the Israelites] groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (Exod 2:24).<sup>18</sup> This covenant needed to be fulfilled, and Israel needed to be freed from slavery. The promise of blessings for all nations through Abraham’s offspring would be “culminating in the coming of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> William Lane explains the importance of Exodus 3:6 in its context:

F. Dreyfus has shown that the text cited by Jesus has, in a strictly literal sense, a much more profound significance than has been generally appreciated and that it can set forth in all its fulness the biblical doctrine of the resurrection. . . . If the death of the patriarchs is the last word of their history, there has been a breach of the promises of God guaranteed by the covenant, and of which the formula “the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob” is the symbol. It is in fidelity to his covenant that God will resurrect the dead. In citing Ex. 3:6 Jesus showed how resurrection faith is attached in a profound way to the central concept of biblical revelation, the covenant, and how the salvation promised by God to the patriarchs and their descendants in virtue of the covenant contains implicitly the assurance of the resurrection.<sup>20</sup>

Mark Strauss adds, “He remains their [the patriarchs’] God even after their physical death because of the abiding nature of that covenant.”<sup>21</sup> But this situation implies that there will be a resurrection. James A. Brooks expresses the same concept in different words: “The fact that the phrase ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ carried with it the idea of the covenant faithfulness of God emphasizes the central truth of Jesus’ words for Mark’s original readers and for believers today: God is faithful, and we can rely on his promises.”<sup>22</sup>

With Mark 12:27 Jesus drives home His point about the resurrection: “He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living” (Mark 12:27, NKJV). While the two parts of this sentence are parallel, they also form a contrast. For the Sadducees God may have been a God of the dead with regard to former generations who had passed away. No afterlife and no resurrection! This is not true, Jesus says. God is the God of the living, including former generations.<sup>23</sup> That does not mean that these generations are alive right now or that they are in a kind of intermediate state (cf. Acts 2:29). It means that resurrection is assured to them as well as to us. In the words of C. A. Evans:

God is a God of the living. If this is true and

if God identifies himself also as the “God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” logic suggests that someday these patriarchs will again be alive. This will take place through the resurrection. . . . Therefore the patriarchs, though presently dead, must someday live.<sup>24</sup>

In Romans 14:9 Paul makes a statement that seems to conflict with Jesus’ words: “For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.” Obviously, Paul is talking about two different groups of people: those who are actually dead and those who are alive. Jesus is Lord over both groups due to His resurrection. Revelation 14:13 takes a similar direction: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. ‘Blessed indeed,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!’”

The situation is not different in Mark 12:7, except that the dead are described in a kind of metaphorical way to suit the situation of the dialogue with the Sadducees. Furthermore, in John 11, when Jesus is about to resurrect Lazarus from the dead, He speaks about him being asleep (John 11:11). The disciples misunderstand Jesus and tell Him that Lazarus will recover if he is asleep (John 11:12). John explains, “Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep.” Then Jesus tells them plainly, “Lazarus has died” (John 11:13–14). In Mark’s Gospel a similar situation arises with Jairus’ daughter. The people know she is dead (Mark 5:35). Jesus says she is not dead but asleep. They laugh at Him (Mark 5:39–40). He raises her. “In the New Testament the death of the believer is characteristically spoken of as ‘sleep.’”<sup>25</sup>

In addition, Jesus is known for some paradoxical or cryptic sayings. For instance, while He is the Prince of peace and pronounces a blessing on the peacemakers (Matt 5:9), He says that He does not bring peace but a sword (Matt 10:34).<sup>26</sup> He also says, “and let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one” (Luke 22:36). But when Peter actually takes a sword to defend Him, Jesus rebukes him, saying, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt 26:52). Quite frequently, Jesus spoke figuratively and did not intend to be understood literally.<sup>27</sup> This happened also when He used parables. Therefore, people sometimes missed His point while His disciples asked for a clearer explanation (Mark 4:10–13; see also Matt 13:10–23). Jesus may be using a similar approach here when He talks about God as God of the living and not of the dead.

John Nolland looks at the same story through the Lukan parallel and makes a valid suggestion to solve the riddle:

A statement about the immortality of the soul seems out of place in the present Lukan context where the focus is on the issue of resurrection (cf. Ellis, *NTS* 10 [1963–64] 275). It may

be best to make a distinction between being alive “as far as God is concerned” (αὐτῶ) and being alive as far as the People themselves are concerned. The shadowy world of the grave has nothing of life about it, if it is to be seen as a perpetual state; but if it is to be seen rather as a place of availability for a future beyond resurrection, made possible by the power of God, then those waiting in the wings, so to speak, are very much alive from the point of view of the purposes of God. We might paraphrase ‘all (no matter whether they have passed beyond death or not) are available to God’s future purposes, and so in that sense still living.’”<sup>28</sup>

This is supported in the following statement:

In a note to Luke 20:38, Friedr[ich], M. Battier and Theodor Berner say aptly and clearly: ‘In the eyes of God they are alive because He has decided to raise them up.’ God can speak of things that He has planned and determined for future events as if they had already happened. God can call into existence things that do not yet exist, and he can speak of the non-existent as if it already existed.<sup>29</sup>

### Conclusion

Jesus’ saying in Mark is difficult to understand. However, it is clear that Jesus is talking about the resurrection which is still future and that He tries to defend the idea of a resurrection and show that it is a truly biblical concept. This is the issue. Therefore, Jesus adapts to the Sadducees by using a text from the Torah, which at first glance does not look like a resurrection text and nevertheless supports the idea of a resurrection. The covenant God made with the patriarchs requires Him to raise them from the dead, and He will do that because He is the God of the living, the Lord of life, and the source of life. Thus, Jesus challenges the Sadducees who have rejected the resurrection and thereby any life following it. His statement about God not being a God of the dead, especially if compared with similar and yet different statements in Scripture—different in wording, not in meaning—should be understood figuratively, highlighting in an unprecedented way the gift of resurrection that He Himself has obtained through His death on the cross. Therefore, He can say, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25). Death is compared to a sleep, and the dead are “living,” but from God’s perspective only because He has purposed to bring them back to life again. As James R. Edwards has pointed out,

the ultimate answer to the Sadducees, however, is not the exegesis or even the authority of Jesus (neither of which they accept), but the *life* of Jesus, for the empty tomb will verify his teaching to the Sadducees . . . Jesus does not

simply announce the resurrection—he *is* the resurrection (John 11:25).<sup>30</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are from the ESV, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 12:27 adds a rebuke to the questioners after the saying. Luke adds, “for all live to Him” (Luke 20:38). In Matthew 22, the rebuke precedes verses 31–32, which is also found in Mark 12.

<sup>3</sup> This would be a kind of shadowy existence. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 231, asserts that the intermediate state means “that persons are held in existence without fleshly bodies until the resurrection” (231). See also *ibid.*, 81–85.

<sup>4</sup> Cooper, 120–121, notes about Jesus’ saying, “Although this seems to rule out the possibility that the patriarchs are extinct, it does not specify whether their resurrection has already taken place or is still future. For the immediate resurrectionist could assert that the patriarchs are alive precisely because they have already been raised. However, it could just as well be claimed that they are now alive in the intermediate state and will be raised.”

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid.*, 111.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 120–121.

<sup>9</sup> Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 51.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>13</sup> S. Taylor, “Sadducees,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 966. The Pentateuch are the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They are also called Torah. For the Sadducees, see also Gary G. Porton, “Sadducees,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 892–895.

<sup>14</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 427, states, “The Sadducees, who took their doctrinal stance from the Pentateuch, were notorious for their rejection of this belief as a later innovation, and the provision of M. *Sanhedrin* X. 1 was directed against them: ‘Whoever says that the resurrection of the dead cannot be deduced from the Torah has no part in the Age to Come.’”

<sup>15</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 721–722, mentions, “Because they [the Sadducees] accord privilege to the Torah, he himself [Jesus]

also turns to Moses in order to provide scriptural warrant for resurrection-belief.”

<sup>16</sup> See Taylor, 966.

<sup>17</sup> Lane, 428.

<sup>18</sup> This information is repeated and expanded in Exodus 3:6–9.

<sup>19</sup> R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 72.

<sup>20</sup> Lane, 429–430.

<sup>21</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 535.

<sup>22</sup> James A. Brooks, *Mark*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1991), 196.

<sup>23</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 475, observes, “‘God of the dead’ is not a term which is appropriate to Yahweh as he is revealed in the books of Moses.”

<sup>24</sup> Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 2001), 256–257.

<sup>25</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 481.

<sup>26</sup> The acceptance or non-acceptance of Jesus and the gospel will even split households.

<sup>27</sup> Here are a few examples: Jesus talks about cutting off one’s foot and plucking out one’s eye (Mark 9:45–47). Jairus’ daughter is dead and yet she sleeps (Mark 5:35, 39) and Lazarus sleeps but is dead (John 11:11–13). The cup from which Jesus’ disciples drink contains His blood (Mark 14:24). People have specks or logs in their eyes (Matt 7:3) and are blind while seeing (Matt 23:26). The destroyed temple that Jesus will raise in three days is His body (John 2:19–21). Nicodemus has to be born again although he is an adult (John 3:3–5), and the Samaritan woman is introduced to living water, which is not actual water (John 4:10; see also John 7:38). Jesus’ “I am” sayings are astonishing. He is the bread of life (John 6:35), the light of the world (John 8:12), the gate of the sheep (John 10:7), the good shepherd (John 10:11), and the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

<sup>28</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 967.

<sup>29</sup> Gustav Tobler, *Kein Tod mehr! Wann beginnt das ewige Leben?* (Zürich: Advent-Verlag, 1978), 199 (translated by Ekkehardt Mueller).

<sup>30</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 369.