

Metaphorical understanding of Jesus' resurrection

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In addition to being a central tenet of Christianity, Jesus Christ's resurrection is a powerful metaphor that relates to the human experience of change, hope and renewal. Although this event is frequently regarded literally, it can also be understood metaphorically to explore themes such as personal and collective transformation. This article seeks to explore some of these multifaceted meanings by considering historical contexts of relevant biblical texts (mainly the four gospels and Paul) and literary, artistic and cultural expressions, culminating in the ongoing relevance of the resurrection narrative.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article illustrates the need for interpreting the ancient references to the resurrection of Jesus metaphorically. Interpreting these mythological descriptions in a realistic, historical and literal sense renders them anachronistic in our time. Resurrection, viewed metaphorically, can, however, still convey rich and meaningful perspectives. It can still be a core element of one's existential belief.

Keywords: Ancient Near East; gospels; Graeco-Roman; Jewish beliefs; Jesus; literature; regeneration; resurrection; transformation.

Introduction¹

Over the years, many people have begun to read more widely and search more broadly for answers. People noticed, among other things, the mythical features and similarities between the Bible and other literature and began to ask questions. This led to the belief that the biblical text should be read within the context in which it originated. No religion arises in a vacuum, and no religion emerges with a completely new message. Just like cultures, religions expand and enrich each other. And no text exists in isolation.

The problem came when we started reading myths as history. The Bible is full of these mythological stories – and they are not meaningless but want to strengthen our spiritual lives. They are meant to help us find answers to life's questions and crises, but it remains just a paradigm. Of course, there are other paradigms as well. However, if you feel comfortable within the Christian paradigm, as you know it, you can stay there.

The narratives of the Christian religion are not in all respects historical facts. The Bible writers themselves did not intend them as history. And they knew it. It was a form of ancient scholarly practice. It was not wrong to reuse stories, change content, add or remove content to make a point or create a theology with it. That is just how it has been done throughout the centuries. However, today we no longer live with a mythological worldview. Our pursuit of science and theology looks different. Our way of writing history is worlds removed from what we read in ancient texts (Schutte 2010:146–166).

For me, the resurrection story, with all the research information we have available today, is about endings and new beginnings. It is a metaphor² that wants to teach one that one can only grow in one's humanity if one can 'die'. If one can change, renew, deepen and improve. Every time this happens, I experience something of the death of the old and the resurrection of the new. That is precisely why I still believe in resurrections, and I still consider myself a Christian.

1. This article should preferably be read together with the following two recently published articles: *Reflections on Peter Nagel's article: Problematising the Divinity of Jesus: Why Jesus is not θεός – including a short history of the doctrine of the Trinity* (Jones 2024b) and *Ascension of Jesus – drawing from the thoughts of Andries van Aarde* (Jones 2024a). It gives a thorough account of Jesus' divinity and how we should understand his ascension.

2. According to The South African Pocket Oxford Dictionary, a metaphor is the "application of a name or description to something to which it is not literally applicable". "Metaphors are ... imagery that makes sense to people because it comes from a shared historical context and is an expression of those people's experience of reality" (Chris Jones 2024a: 5; also see Jones 2024b:1–23). Space limitations prevent me from going into more detail regarding metaphor-theory.

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Understanding this better is what this article is about. The goal (and contribution) is not to present a balance between the more traditional (literal) understanding of the resurrection and the metaphorical understanding of Jesus' resurrection. Nor to criticise either of them (directly). Rather, I want to use some of the strongest classical arguments (there is more than what I am referring to) I could find to explain why I hold to a metaphorical understanding of Christ's resurrection.

We now turn to a brief historical context that tries to explain this approach regarding the resurrection of Jesus.

Historical Context

Resurrection in the New Testament gospels and Paul

According to New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg (1999:267), the two major categories of the Easter stories are 'tomb stories and appearance stories'. All four gospels provide information – with some variation of detail – on the story of the empty tomb. 'Appearance stories in which the risen Christ appears to his followers are found in three of the gospels (not Mark) and the book of Acts and are referred to by Paul'.

Providing distinct accounts of Jesus' resurrection, the gospels each reflect the theological and societal contexts of the authors. This will be looked at briefly.

By portraying Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as the first witnesses, *Matthew*,³ in Matthew 28:1–10, highlights the significance of women in the resurrection story – the so-called 'women tradition'. This was presented in such a way in Luke 24:22–24, that the men were upset because, according to the 'Peter tradition', Peter was the first to experience the risen Christ. The latter was also believed by Paul. However, this reference (Mt 28:1–10) emphasises the value of female voices in the early church, thereby challenging conventional gender norms.

Furthermore, within a context characterised by the struggle between good and evil, the righteous and the wicked and martyrship and being reborn, there is (already) in the late New Testament writings, such as Matthew 27:45–46, reference to a 'suppressed ecclesia'. This group of people has been 'empowered by virtue of the crucifixion events in Jerusalem' (Van Aarde 2020b:173), as referred to earlier in (the co-text in) Matthew 19:28 – with God's people already sharing in the rebirth (palingenesia – see below).

Apocalyptic⁴ or millennialist language was also used, and it expressed how tombs broke open and 'holy people who had been dead' entered Jerusalem (see Mt 27:51–53; Hengel 1995:181; Van Aarde 2020b:173). There was a desire among human beings 'to be congenial with the gods' and an

3. Considered a third-generation 'messianist'.

4. Although early Christian thought was permeated with apocalypticism, this will not be elaborated on and explained in this article because of limited space. These few thoughts in the text should be sufficient for the broader argument.

'eschatological longing for the return to a primordial situation (end times [*Endzeit*]) in which gods and mythical forefathers and foremothers are present. This longing manifests itself in cultic activity. For this reason, creation and paradise myths are often repeated in myths about a new heaven and earth⁵. In other words recreation myths. It is Van Aarde's (2020b:165) contention 'that the cultic activity of formative Christianity originated in a "tomb cult" – 'a tradition of ritual observances by Christians at the tomb of Jesus' (Smith 2014:3). The gospel of Matthew, in line with this view, 'represents a storyline consisting of a circular movement between "genesis" (Mt 1:1) and "palingenesia" (Mt 19:28)⁶, where the word "palingenesia" denotes the meaning "regeneration" rather than "resurrection"' (Van Aarde 2011:1). According to Van Aarde (2020b:191), this 'motif sets in motion the narratives of Jesus' death and resurrection'.

The 'end time', according to Matthew, had already begun. Against this background, Matthew 28:19 uses a 'midrash-type of apocalyptic reference that is *verbatim* similar to Daniel 7: 13–14 (LXX)' (Rahlfs [1935] 1971; Van Aarde 2020a; 2020b:304). 'The messianic era', according to Matthew, 'is connected with the end of a period [*the destruction of the temple*] and the start of a new one' (Van Aarde 2020a; 2020b:307). What we must keep in mind, is, that the natural world was not really separated from the supernatural within a 'pre-scientific' Mediterranean context.

Before moving on to Mark, it is important to note that experiencing this life-changing Easter event today does not depend on Jesus' physical resurrection (as referred to in the introduction). In Borg's (1999:131) words, 'Thus, as a Christian, I am very comfortable not knowing whether or not the tomb was empty. Indeed, the discovery of Jesus' skeletal remains would not be a problem. It doesn't matter, because Easter is about resurrection, not resuscitation'. Another New Testament scholar, Jürgen Becker (2007:27), echoes this opinion by reasoning that the 'empty tomb' does not refer to a 'historically verifiable Easter event'. It is rather a narrative that is a 'sign', referring to the ascension of Jesus.

What we must remember is that the verb 'appeared' was often used with reference to 'apparitions', meaning a specific type of vision (Borg 1999):

Like a vision, an apparition is a paranormal kind of experience, not visible to everybody who happens to be there, and not the kind of experience that could have been videotaped. (p. 231)

It is like Paul's Damascus Road experience (Ac 9, 22 and 26). It was a vision, and the people who travelled with him did

5. According to Roland Barthes (1957) the function of a myth is 'to empty reality' and fill the 'emptied history' with 'nature'. According to Van Aarde (2020b:8) this means that the 'intention of the myth is to use an image from nature to confirm the reality of reality. This articulates the reality of human beings in their relationship with the world of the gods'.

6. This is borrowed from his *Sondergut* – that which is unique to Matthew. Philo ... used the word [*palingenesia*] as a reference to 'restoration of human life or the regeneration of the world after the great flood' and Josephus, ... '[to] the reconstitution of the Jews after the exile' (Van Aarde 2020b:189; also see Sim 1993:4).

not have the same experience as him. According to Borg (1999:133), 'visions and apparitions can be true ...' However, Borg does 'not put them in the category of hallucinations. Equally important, apparitions do not involve a physical body, even though what is seen often includes seeing a person in bodily form'.

Mark (16:1–8) is usually viewed as the one who invented the 'empty tomb' narrative, seen from a 'historical-critical perspective'. 'Mark constitutes the primary text and Matthew and Luke depend on Mark,⁷ while John, together with the three other texts,⁸ took the Markan tradition forward' (Van Aarde 2020b:161). However, according to New Testament theologian Daniel Smith (2010:229–230), there could be a pre-Markan source, and considering this, Mark 16:1–8 is a 'post-mortem disappearance narrative' expressing a 'belief in Jesus' vindication by God'.⁹ This means that the divine hero empowers the other mourners (Paul) and the ones who fear (Mark). There were basically two options for the Jesus followers of the time: either they persevered or they mourned, feared and stalled. The latter would keep them bound to the human condition of corruption; however, they could allow the Spirit of God to recreate them, making them 'a slave of mortal creation, yet being recreated at the same time as a slave of God (and/or Christ)' (Van Aarde 2020b:177).

In Mark, fear caused 'that the kerygma about the risen Jesus' be 'not conveyed from Jerusalem and from Galilee onwards'. It was 'in anticipation of the desolation of Jerusalem ..., that Jesus as the "risen one" anticipated the calling of his disciples to go ahead into Galilee' (Van Aarde 2020b:187). Matthew then narrates the following important Galilean episode: 'Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted'¹⁰ (Mt 28:16–17). According to Van Aarde (2020b:187), the "'doubt" refers to the inability to embrace the "gospel of the resurrection", because of the obstacle to internalise "regeneration" themselves'. Matthew refers to 'little faith', which equals 'fear' in the gospel of Mark. So, 'little faith' does not have the ability to counter fear. Biblical scholar Jeannine Brown (2002) writes in this respect:

Their "little faith" is evidenced by anxiety for daily needs (6:30); fear and timidity (8:26); hesitation (14:31); and inadequate understanding (16:8). They still exhibit this "little faith" after the resurrection, when they both hesitate and worship in response to the risen Christ. (p. 119)

7. According to Marxsen (1970:38), 'Matthew and Luke both knew and used Mark's account of the Passion and the Easter events when they compiled their own. But they expanded Mark, using other traditions (supplementary material)'.

8. The 'added Markan conclusion (16:9–20) ... Peter (12:50) and the Epistula Apostolorum 9. According to Becker (2007:3, 17, 19), both Mark and John's passion narrations are based on a joint source' (Van Aarde 2020b:161).

9. This is also found in Sayings Source Q. Smith's argument is as follows: 'Q 13:34–35 connects Jesus' disappearance with his future eschatological role as the "Coming One" in a manner suggestive of other Jewish materials that understand the assumption of a prophet or sage as the basis of a special eschatological function. If Q also betrays a knowledge of Jesus' death, the assumption of Jesus becomes, for Q, the mode of his post-mortem vindication' (2003:123).

10. The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, 1952.

When we read *Luke 24*, we must remember that the 'tomb cult' was from early on part of Israel's collective memory (see Jeremias 1985). So, it had to do with certain ritual observances at the tomb of Jesus, by Christians and, in a sense, we are still part of this meaningful 'cult' (collectively and individually) (Van Aarde 2020b).

Just as a cult movement similar to that of the Samaritans that started around Joseph's/Jacob's tomb at Shechem, and a cult of 'Messiah followers' developed around Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem, so too did a cult develop around Jesus' tomb in Jerusalem. This is illustrated by Luke (see Prince 2007; Van Tilborg & Counet 2000) ... Here Christ-followers are in a movement from Jerusalem to Jerusalem – from Jerusalem to Emmaus, from Emmaus to Jerusalem. They eat in a normal way with the crucified and risen Jesus. The reference to their hearts warming upon 'seeing' Jesus ... illustrates how a normal state of consciousness can rapidly change into a state of transcendental consciousness.¹¹ (p. 174)

The interaction Mary Magdalene had with the risen Christ lies at the heart of *John's*¹² (20:1–18) intensely personal story. The transformational potential of individual encounters with the supernatural is emphasised by this relational aspect. Intimacy and recognition are conveyed when Jesus addresses Mary by name, encouraging readers to reflect on their own interactions with God. The instruction, 'Do not hold me' (John 20:17¹³), implies that accepting new realities – to be recreated among other things – and letting go of old attachments are necessary to comprehend resurrection.

Theologian John Painter (2008:45) further accentuates, with reference to the gospel of John, 'That the echo of creation should return in the resurrection narrative is not surprising'. This echo is not only present in the gospel of John, but according to New Testament scholar Martin De Boer (1998), it is also part of the Pauline literature. There is, in other words, a 'recreation' motif in the resurrection narrative. Another New Testament scholar, Willi Marxsen (1970), says the following about the four gospels' views on resurrection:

If one does not separate the end from the beginning – if, that is to say, one really sees each work as a whole – one can see that *all the evangelists want to show [is] that the activity of Jesus goes on*. It goes on in spite of his death on the cross; and it remains the activity of the same Jesus who was once active on earth. The conclusions of the different works are therefore designed to explain why what we have been told about the past ... is not a thing of the past at all, but is vitally relevant to the present. In other words, the evangelists want to address their readers – but the address is to remain *the address of Jesus*. (pp. 77–78)

Marxsen (1970) continues his argument by stating that:

Because ... Jesus is not dead but alive, what he said and did in the past determines faith [*now*]. And that is precisely what the endings of the Gospels bring out. (p. 78)

11. These states of consciousness are a basic element of resurrection faith. For research regarding 'states of consciousness', see, among others, (Craffert 2011:23; James [1902] 1985:388).

12. 'The fourth Gospel is the latest of the New Testament Gospels and was written in the last decade of the 1st century. Its authorship is disputed' (Marxsen 1970:55).

13. The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, 1952.

Does believing in the risen Christ need a specific understanding of the mode of the resurrection, he asks? The evangelists, according to him, provide a categorical 'No' in response to this question (Marxsen 1970:77–78). (Marxsen does not consider Jesus' resurrection to be a factual event; this is because it cannot be verified; see later.) Marxsen then makes the very interesting point: 'Jesus lived and gave a resurrection into new life even before his crucifixion. One could even say that Jesus was risen before he was crucified' (Marxsen 1970:77–78, 114, 117, 128, 184).

Marxsen writes in Thiselton (2007:557–558) that, 'The precise nature of the "experience" is unclear. The emphasis ... is on present belief, not on a past occurrence'.

According to New Testament scholar Andries van Aarde, to whom this article is dedicated, 'Paul¹⁴ developed a theological construct of participation in the risen Christ ... Because God turns shame into honour, resurrection faith is, according to Paul, the sign of new birth, a new start, new creation ... It is my conviction' reasons Van Aarde 'that the resurrection faith of the first Jesus-followers can be explained in terms of the concept "new creation"' (Van Aarde 2020b:159; also see Van Aarde (2018), John Painter (2008:45) and Martin De Boer (1998)). To embrace this new creation means choosing a life beyond mourning filled with fear. For Van Aarde (2020b:159–165), the "recreation" motif in the resurrection tradition can be explained in terms of a particular model emanating from a trajectory theory' (see Koester 1971) who provided Van Aarde (2020b:164) this 'model for explaining the resurrection belief' (also see Le Roux (2011). Van Aarde (2020b) states that:

In both formative Judaism and formative Christianity, the textual evidence of new creation as myth shows a historical development. The origin of the myth, the first of five links [representing five chronological phases] in the trajectory, is to be found in the metaphoric use of the motif of recreation, which originated in Israel's memoirs of God's creation from nothing [*re-creatio ex nihilo*]. (p. 165)

The five phases are:

- 'The descent of a corpse ... into the *she'ol*¹⁵ ...beyond the boundaries of both the social human world and the symbolic–mythological divine sphere.'
- 'The resurrection from the *she'ol*, which is expressed either by means of a metaphor referring to Israel as a 'corporate personality' (see Nickelsburg [1972] 2006; Schöplin 2009; Snijders 1969) or to an individual martyr.'
- 'The Hellenisation¹⁶ (see Grabbe 2002; Hengel 1974, 1989; Roukema [1998] 2003) (Graeco-Roman influence [– syncretic tendencies]) of the Semitic resurrection belief against the

14. Considered a first-generation Jesus follower.

15. For more information, (see Crenshaw 2006; Harrington 2005; Human 2004; Landes 1967; Rowley 1970; Van Selms 1967). Certain views of the underworld in the Old Testament such as a fortress, a town with portals and bars come from an old Babylonian myth (Gemser 1944:122).

16. To find out more about this theme in the history of Christian theology, see Gustav Aulén: *Christos Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (2010).

background of both the theology of *apotheosis* [*divinisation*] and ideas about immortality and reincarnation.'

- 'The empowerment of righteous believers who will participate in the renewed life of resurrected heroes and gods.'
- 'The [*non-closing*] fifth phase has an apocalyptic-millennialistic facet (see Crossan 1988; Hengel 1995). It pertains to the period when the resurrection belief is articulated as coping-healing narratives ... The righteous, who are caught up in a spiral of struggle and rejection, experience the miracle of healing when they engage with the resurrection narrative. This enables them to cope. For some it is a preteristic experience – resurrection has already occurred. Others look forward to the end of the struggle when hell will be replaced with the "end times" and God will reign.' (Van Aarde 2020b:165)

Van Aarde (2020b) states:

The empty tomb¹⁷ is one of the clearest illustrations of how [*re-creatio ex nihilo*] can recur again and again – be it in the mythical life of Herakles or Jesus or in our own. For us, Jesus is – as Paul writes in Philippians (3:9–11, 12–16) – the goal we are heading to in this trajectory. (p. 177)

Van Aarde (2020b; see Thiselton 2007:554–565) continues:

In a way, we are still part of a "tomb cult". The resurrection belief can still be meaningful to us – collectively seen or as an individual believer. (p. 175)

It is not about credos as such. Theologian Roy Hoover (2008) describes this spirituality (in which a person fully participates in everyday life) meaningfully:

Insofar as a resurrection faith expresses a response to the question of whether the pursuit of justice is worth the struggle, whether trying to live responsibly and with integrity is worth the trouble, the resurrection faith of ancient believers is concerned with actual human experience that is continuous with our own, not just with ideas that are dependent upon a no longer credible ancient worldview. What is true may not prevail, but only what is true can enable us to distinguish what is genuine from what is contrived. Justice may not be done, but justice is still the only basis upon which life in a truly human community is possible. Evil may defeat the good, but only the good can nourish and sustain a humane way of life. To affirm such things is to affirm what is continuous with ancient resurrection faith. A resurrection faith has always stood for the justice and moral virtue that are indispensable if human life is to have any final dignity and meaning. (p. 90)

According to Borg (1999:141–142), the New Testament accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection are interpreted in five primary ways. Every one of them makes affirmations about Jesus. The first two make it clear that Jesus is Lord and that the powers¹⁸ and the system of dominion are not. According to the third, the road of transformation is embodied in Jesus' death. The fourth emphasises that God's love for us

17. See Becker's (2007:27) remark in this respect earlier.

18. The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, 1952.

was incarnated in Jesus' death as God's only son. According to the fifth, Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice that ends the law, which is the basis of the relationship between God and humanity.

Additionally, each makes key assertions that are crucial to the Christian life. Jesus and dominance structures are direct opposites. Our freedom from the powers that govern this world and our life are made possible by God. The process of internal death and rebirth is the path of transformation. We are loved by God. God accepts us just as we are and is instantly accessible. All offer deep insights for navigating the modern Christian life.

Marxsen (1970:114, 117, 128) reasons in his book, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, that the assertion that Jesus is risen, 'In as far as it means a factual event of the past, can no longer be verified'. No one could have been asked if the event had actually occurred or if he was present and saw it, even if he had lived in the first generation. According to Marxsen, at least no one in the primitive church that we are aware of claimed to have seen it happen. And if there had been a witness, we might be pretty sure we should have known. As a result, something is being claimed for which no witnesses have been called and most likely cannot be called. Therefore, the only information we still have is what others said later. 'Jesus is risen' simply means that the crucified Jesus is urging us to believe today (Marxsen 1970).

If ... a man came to believe in Jesus after Good Friday, he knew himself to be called to faith by the same Jesus who performed an earthly ministry, who called men to faith, and who died on the cross. But if this Jesus was still *able* to call men to faith ... then it followed that he was not dead but alive. And that could be expressed by saying: 'He is risen'. (p. 128)

Hans Conzelmann, a renowned New Testament scholar (1973:94–95), writes that it is imperative to adhere to the assertion that the resurrection is not a historical event:

This assertion implies that theology can postulate no historical facts [*Tatsachen*] and does not need to do so, since it lives by proclamation. On the other hand, it implies that the church cannot altogether interpret historical research disinterestedly by constricting itself to a witness of faith. Otherwise the result is the fatal consequence that this witness becomes the object of faith ... and faith would then mean accepting a historical fact as true on the basis of someone else's faith. Faith would then have become a matter of human resolve [*Entschluss*], and thus a "work" ... Revelation is not "facts laid out before a person", it emerges – today – in the word.

There are historical-critical exegetes who are of the conviction that the New Testament does not contain evidence of 'a metaphysical ontological Christology' (Bultmann 1958:150; 1966:283). In his book *Jesus and the Word*, the well-known theologian Rudolph Bultmann (1958) argues:

Moreover, Jesus did not speak of his death and resurrection and their redemptive significance. Some sayings of such a character are indeed attributed to him in the gospels, but they originated in the faith of the church – and none of them even in the primitive church, but in Hellenistic Christianity. (p. 150)

Bultmann (1958) continues by saying:

It is then that Jesus did not speak of his death and resurrection as redemptive acts. This would not prevent others from so speaking of them, if they mean events in which they become aware of the divine forgiveness. (p. 151)

Also neither in his sayings nor in the records of the primitive church is there any mention of his metaphysical nature. The primitive community did indeed believe him to be the Messiah, but it did not ascribe to him a particular metaphysical nature which gave his words authority. On the contrary, it was on the ground of the authority of his words, that the church confessed that God had made him Lord of the church. Greek Christianity soon represented Jesus as Son of God in the sense of ascribing a divine 'nature' to him, and thus introduced a view of his person as far removed as possible from his own. (p. 152)

Jewish beliefs about resurrection

The various perspectives on resurrection held by first-century Judaism must be considered to understand the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. The Pharisees, a well-known Jewish party or sect (flourishing in Palestine between 515BCE and 70CE), saw the resurrection as hope the righteous could hold onto for the future. Texts like the Talmud, which describe the resurrection as the moment when the righteous will rise to eternal life, express this idea. Scriptures such as Daniel 12:2,¹⁸ which states that 'And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake',¹⁹ served as the foundation for the Pharisaic viewpoint.

In contrast, the Sadducees²⁰ (the party of high priests, aristocratic families and merchants – the wealthier part of the population) believed in a more immediate and material existence and rejected the idea of resurrection. Because Jesus' resurrection could be interpreted as both a radical affirmation and a transformation of Pharisaic ideas, this theological divide had an impact on early Christian thought. The resurrection was reinterpreted by early Christians as a present reality that was embodied in Jesus – and not only viewed as a future event.

This makes Jesus' resurrection a turning point that goes beyond accepted doctrine and provides a fresh perspective on life. It invites Christians to experience the power of new life right now by presenting resurrection as a present and transformative reality.

19. See Schutte (2010:149–151) and where the idea of life after death comes from.

20. The Sadducees also denied the resurrection of the dead (Ac 23:8). 'and they denied it for interesting reasons. They represented a consistent orthodoxy. The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead was not a genuine Jewish teaching found in the Old Testament; it had penetrated Judaism through outside influence. The ancient heritage had been altered by what was then a modern philosophy. The Sadducees pointed out that there was no scriptural authority for the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. Anyone who was orthodox, who was determined to adhere to "the faith of our fathers", who did not want to relinquish the Old Testament and desired "no other gospel" (and this was all true of the Sadducees) was bound to reject this teaching of "modern theology". One did not want to fall a victim to "modernism"! Expectation of the resurrection of the dead had become general among the Jews. In the second of the "Eighteen Benedictions" of the Jewish liturgy God is praised as "Thou that quickenest (or "will resurrect") the dead". But this idea soon came under Hellenistic influence also. This is hardly surprising, for it is easy to see how Jews who brought with them a dichotomic anthropology might soon, under Hellenistic Greek influence, interpret this in a dualistic sense. The ground had already been prepared conceptually through the twofold division' (Marxsen 1970:134–135).

Ancient Near Eastern parallels²¹

The metaphorical notion of resurrection is enhanced by the motifs of death and rebirth themes in many Near Eastern stories. The tale of Osiris serves as an example of death, dismemberment and resurrection in Egyptian mythology. The cyclical nature of life, death and rebirth is symbolised by Osiris, who is killed by his brother Seth and then raised from the dead by his wife Isis. This tale resonates with Christian notions of resurrection by highlighting both the certainty of death and the possibility of rebirth and regeneration (Eliade 1987).

The Inanna myth from Sumerian culture (Mark 2011), in which the goddess descends into the underworld and later returns, further illustrates this archetype. Inanna's journey highlights the interplay between life and death, emphasising the transformative power of descent and return. Such narratives underscore the universal human experience of seeking meaning in the face of mortality, reinforcing the resurrection's role as a symbol of hope and renewal.

By looking at these similarities, we may see how Jesus' resurrection fits into a larger mythological framework and exemplifies humanity's never-ending search for transcendence and understanding. Culturally, universal motifs of death and rebirth imply that resurrection is a basic component or aspect of the human condition.

According to Bultmann (1966), many of the conceptions attributed to Jesus were not new.

They came from old mythologies, from ancient hopes and dreams. The new element was simply the fact that all these assertions were made about this specific historical man, about Jesus of Nazareth. But the conceptions were not essentially altered by this ascription to a specific person. (p. 264)

Bultmann (1966) continues by stating that:

[T]his historical figure, because of the strong impression he made on people, became the occasion for believing the old wishes and fantastic dreams to be reality. At first, it was assumed that in one respect these visions had been modified, enriched and deepened. Because of the historical events, because of the earthly work, the passion, the cross of Christ, the profound conception of the self-abasement of the Godhead, of the suffering redeemer and his sacrifice of himself for sinful men was incorporated into the old myth. (p. 264)

However, this notion turned out to be a delusion. Not only does pagan gnostic mythology know the figure of the dying redeemer God, but it also recognises the figure of the pre-existing divine being who, in obedience to the will of the Father, endures poverty, suffering, hatred and persecution in order to construct the path to heaven for himself. This is precisely how Jesus is portrayed in the Gospel of John. This interpretation holds that the New Testament's Christology is not 'specifically Christian'; rather, it merely illustrates how

21.The first paragraph under this heading is AI/GPT generated.

ancient mythology was applied to a real historical person in order to almost completely conceal his unique, individual characteristics.

Graeco-Roman perspectives

Van Aarde (2020b) reasons that Jesus' 'body was not laid down in a family tomb'. He makes the point that:

As with the virginal conception ... I do not trace the empty tomb tradition back to the Jesus faction in Jerusalem, but to common Greek thinking that manifested in the stories of the deification of Herakles ... We have seen that the myths of virginal conceptions, ascensions to heaven, and being adopted by the gods are almost recycled ideas. These stories were not only very familiar in the first-century Graeco-Roman world, but also came to mind when (non-Israelite) philosophers of that period reflected on what Christ-followers said about Jesus, 'son of God'. (p. 159)

Van Aarde (2020b) continues by saying that as

Far as the empty tomb tradition is concerned, the 'theologian' of Alexandria, Diodorus of Sicily's work *Diodori Bibliotheca Historica*, is probably of the best-known textual evidence in this regard ... Diodorus refers to the heroic story of Herakles and his deification based on an empty tomb tradition, while Seneca satirically ridicules the deification of Caesar Claudius based on his *ascensus* into the sphere of the gods. According to Seneca, it should rather be a *descensus* into *Hades*, for Claudius did not have the virtue of the deified Caesar Augustus. (pp. 170–171)

Important to note is that Paul assimilated these narratives from the Graeco-Roman world²² together with the Hellenistic-Semitic world into his theology.

Romans 1:3–4 shows a clear similarity to the 'theology' on the Herakles tradition, as it is found with Seneca and Diodorus Siculus. On Mount Oeta Heracles faced a voluntary death. The pyre was his tomb. When no bodily remains were found, and by virtue of his ascension into the sphere of the gods, Herakles was declared son of Zeus. (Dungan & Carlidge 1974:352–353; Van Aarde 2020b:172)

Greek authors, like, among others, Hesiod (8/7 BCE) in his *Opera et dies* ... and Josephus (1 CE) in his *De bello Judaico* and in his *Antiquitates Judaicae* ... contributed to create the particular context of the 'theology of apotheosis' (Van Aarde 2020b:172–173).

It is against this background that Mark and Paul saw death and resurrection as two sides of the same matter. Flavius Josephus, Roman-Jewish historian and military leader, (also) refers to the fact that when one dies, there is a transmigration of the soul into a different body (revivification) (see Elledge 2006; Nickelsburg [1972] 2006; Wright 2003).

Together, these many narratives deepen our comprehension of the resurrection as a profound metaphor, inspiring readers to consider its implications on several levels in their lives. We will now more closely look at the ongoing relevance and

22.According to Freyne (2004:307), the effect of the Graeco-Roman world, also on the scribal roots of Matthew, cannot be disputed.

impact of the resurrection narrative on people's personal and collective transformation through, among others, artistic, literary and popular cultural expressions.

Transformation²³

Personal

The resurrection narrative invites people to let go of their previous identities and embrace fresh beginnings, making it a powerful metaphor for personal growth. Death and rebirth are common themes in literary and mythological heroes' journeys, illustrating significant internal transformation. This narrative structure echoes the resurrection story by implying that facing one's fears, letting go of old attachments and coming out stronger are frequently necessary for meaningful transformation. For many, it offers a story of optimism and hope, implying that people can triumph over their pain and distress and emerge from them revitalised (also see DeKruyf 2008; White & Epston 2024).

Community change

The metaphor of resurrection has not only given communities strength and courage to overcome hardships and to persevere in the fight for, among others, equality and justice but also highlights opportunities for redemption and forgiveness, striking a deep chord in both individual and collective experiences. Forgiveness, whether it be towards oneself or others, may be a life-changing experience that helps people let go of their guilt and resentment. Forgiveness and the idea of grace are strongly related in many religious traditions. The belief that everyone has the potential to change and that no one is beyond redemption is reinforced by resurrection. One example of the effectiveness of communal forgiveness in mending historical scars is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) role in the post-apartheid South African reconciliation process²⁴ (Tutu 1999).

Artistic, Literary and Popular Cultural Expressions²⁵

The metaphorical meanings of resurrection have been significantly communicated through artistic representations. The resurrection was portrayed as a victorious event by Renaissance artists like Michelangelo (1532) and Raphael, who focused on themes of light, transformation and divine grace. Raphael's painting *The Resurrection of Christ* (painted around 1499–1502) depicts Jesus' triumph over death as he emerges from the tomb. Viewers are invited to feel the joy and hope *connected* with resurrection through the vivid colours and dynamic poses. These artistic manifestations surpass linguistic boundaries, enabling viewers to connect viscerally with the themes of renewal and change. Furthermore, themes of resurrection are still explored by modern artists in a variety of

media, such as painting, sculpture and performance art. Using abstract forms to express the spirit of resurrection and renewal, artists such as Makoto Fujimura integrate spiritual ideas into their artwork (Fujimura 2017). Resurrection themes can be effectively explored through art, which encourages introspection and a sense of connection. Through artistic expression, the idea of resurrection invites people to delve deeply into their own experiences, transcending time and cultural boundaries.

Themes of resurrection have long been explored in the literature, providing insights into the complexities of human change. Characters like Sydney Carton in novelist Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) experience profound transformations that exemplify the spirit of resurrection. Carton invites readers to consider their potential for change through his ultimate sacrifice and redemption, which demonstrate the possibility of hope emerging from despair (Hughes 2016). Dickens' work's narrative arc reflects the themes of resurrection by highlighting the possibility of personal growth and the strength of redemption.

Themes of resurrection are still explored in modern literature as it examines social and personal hardships. Novels such as *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie demonstrate how resilient people and communities can be when faced with hardship, illustrating the never-ending pursuit of healing and renewal (Adichie 2006) – although not overtly labelled as resurrection, it can be seen throughout the narrative in several ways, both in terms of personal and societal renewal.

Resurrection themes are prevalent in modern popular culture and resonate with viewers through literature, music and movies. For instance, Disney's *The Lion King* illustrates the cyclical aspect of life by encapsulating themes of death, rebirth and self-discovery. The resurrection metaphor is mirrored in Simba's journey from exile to acceptance, highlighting the significance of accepting one's identity and responsibilities. Similarly, the themes of sacrifice and the enduring power of love are used in the Harry Potter series to explore resurrection motifs. The transforming power of friendship and love is embodied by characters like Harry and his friends, who show resilience in the face of darkness. Harry's resurrection after facing death is a powerful metaphor for hope and renewal, reaffirming that change is achievable even in the direst situations. These narratives reflect contemporary societal values and aspirations, allowing audiences to connect with the themes of resurrection on a personal level.

Conclusion

The metaphoric aspects of Jesus' resurrection demonstrate its timeless relevance in a variety of settings. The story of the resurrection provides deep insights into the human condition through themes of internal awakening, hope, personal transformation and collective consciousness. The resurrection is an eternal reminder that there is always hope for renewal

23. This brief section on transformation should suffice, although I realise that much more and in-depth arguments could be made here.

24. Also see Meiring 2022. Parts of this paragraph is AI/GPT generated.

25. The information under this heading is largely AI/GPT generated.

and fresh beginnings in a world that is sometimes characterised by hopelessness. It inspires us to interact meaningfully with the world as we navigate its complexities. By doing this, we take part in the ongoing narrative of resurrection, contributing to a collective journey towards renewal and transformation.

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Dedicated to the late Andries G. van Aarde, who passed away on 25 November 2024. He served as 'Professor in New Testament Studies at the Faculty of Theology and Religion of the University of Pretoria. Subsequently, he was Honorary Professor from 2009 to 2015 and Senior Research Fellow in the Unit of the Advancement of Scholarship at the same university ... He obtained an MA in Semitic Languages and holds a DD, PhD and DLitt. He acted as Editor-in-Chief of the journal *HTS Theological Studies* from 1985 to 2023 and was a rated scholar of the South African National Research Foundation. He has received three awards for academic achievements from the South African Academy of Science and Arts and authored the ground-breaking book *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus Child of God* (2001). He also received the prestigious Andrew Murray-Desmond Tutu prize for his two volumes: *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume one: Discontinuity in Content, Continuity in Substance*; and *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume Two: To and From Jerusalem*'. Because this article is in honour of him, his work consequently received more attention than that of other scholars.

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