Are we sexed in Heaven? Bodily form, sex identity and the resurrection.

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**Introduction**

The question of sex differentiation and its status in relation to human identity has become one of the most vexed and disputed questions in public discourse within contemporary Western culture. Though the presenting issues appear to be relatively straightforward and divide approximately into two areas of concern—that women and men should not be confined to predetermined roles within society, and that physical, bodily sex differentiation should not be emphasised—the underlying causes and concern turn out to be remarkably complex.[[1]](#footnote--1) The first part of the complexity arises from careless use of terminology in much of the debate. Differences between male and female are often referred to as issues of ‘gender’, but this is incorrect, since ‘gender’ refers to the culturally constructed understandings of masculine and feminine identity in any culture. A good part of the debate actually focuses on biological sex identity—not the differences between masculine and feminine, but the differences between male and female—and this is the focus of my concern here.

There is, of course, a strong connection here, in that an assumption about the interchangeability of social roles between men and women gives rise to the question of the connection between social roles and bodily sex identity, and this in turn raises the question of the pliability of sex identity.[[2]](#footnote-0) Those arguing that sex identity is to some extent pliable cite the existence of the intersex condition as evidence that binary sex differentiation is, in some sense, a secondary rather than primary human characteristic.[[3]](#footnote-1) This has been countered both by feminists, who see the recognition of bodily sex difference as vital in the protection of women’s safety, identity and contribution to society, and those who highlight the ideological, rather than medical, forces at work in the debate.[[4]](#footnote-2)

In response to this debate, Christians have often turned to the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 as a resource for reflecting both on gender roles and on sex binaries.[[5]](#footnote-3) But the other possibility is to focus not on origins but on destiny, on the *telos* of humanity in the biblical narrative—that is, to focus on heavenly perfection. I used the word ‘heaven’ here because of its prominence within Jesus’ teaching, particularly within the Matthean tradition, and because of its presence in what will transpire to be phrase ‘like the angels in heaven’. However, I use the term ‘heaven’ to refer to the realm where God’s just and perfect rule is exercised, that is, as a dimension of reality rather than a post-mortem destination, and with the assumption that the consistent perspective of the New Testament (‘if not with one voice, certainly with a cluster of voices singing in close harmony’[[6]](#footnote-4)) is that the Christian hope is of bodily resurrection in a renewed heavens and earth.[[7]](#footnote-5)

So my interest here is whether, according to the New Testament, we will retain our sex identity (as male or female) in the resurrection, with a particular focus on Jesus’ saying that ‘they will be like the angels in heaven’ (Matt 22.30 = Mark 12.25, compare Luke 20.36). This notion has become important, even for some of central importance, in the current debates about the church and same-sex marriage, particularly at the interface between Christian teaching and contemporary cultural debate. Is it the case that male-female marriage is part of the gospel that we have to share with the world, as some have claimed? Or (at the end of the argument), is sex identity only a secondary, rather than primary human characteristic, so that in the resurrection, sex identity is something that we discard as part of the new creation. If that is the case, and we are now living the resurrection life (as Paul argues in Romans 6, and elsewhere), then new life in Christ also means a radically new understanding of sex identity and sex differentiation in the new dispensation compared with the old.

**Two Challenges**

To provide a context for our discussion of the texts, it is worth considering two recent challenges to traditional Christian understanding of the importance of sex differentiation in creation. The first comes from Robert Song, a professor at the University of Durham, and is outlined the argument in his recent *Covenant and Calling*.[[8]](#footnote-6)

In his exploration of ‘Sex differentiation, sex and procreation’ (pp 38–61), at more or less the centre point of his argument (and its pivotal moment), Song reviews the range of different arguments about the significance of sex differentiation—sex hierarchy, which he dismisses, and sex complementarity in three different forms: biological difference, social functioning, and difference as a theological signifier.[[9]](#footnote-7) He is not persuaded by the theological arguments, and so concludes:

Sexual differentiation is therefore justified within marriage, but it is only justified because marriage in creation is oriented to procreation. There are no other grounds can provide the theological weight needed to require that marriage be sexually differentiated. However, this also implies that if procreation is no longer eschatologically necessary, then there are no grounds for requiring all committed relationships to be heterosexual (p 48).

Song makes two important logical errosrs here, which ultimately undo the shape of his argument. Firstly, he elides marriage with ‘all committed relationships’ and fails properly to distinguish these things and, second, he mixes his categories of marriage in creation and the eschaton by assuming that, in the age to come (which we proleptically inhabit) there can be marriage without procreation, rather than there being neither. But the key thing to note for our discussion is that he is basing his logic on the key text about ‘being like the angels in heaven’, which is where he has in fact begun his discussion.

If Song is starting to bring questions about sex differentiation from the future of eschatology into the present, another important thinker (also a professor in Durham) looks in the opposite direction. In his chapter within the collection of essays *Thinking Again about Marriage*,[[10]](#footnote-8) Mike Higton reviews the Church of England’s two most important reflections on the nature of marriage, and makes some important observations.

The aspects of this theology that I am most readily able to affirm are its insistences that to live well involves responding attentively to our bodiliness, and that we are not bodily in the abstract but always as particular sexed bodies. We receive that particularity, that differentiation, as a gift from God. (p 20)

But he goes on heavily to qualify this affirmation. The terms he uses are concerned with redemption, but this must (at least implicitly) include the fall, since without the fall there is no need for redemption.

We are not simply called…to live in attentive response to our bodiliness, but to live in attentive response to our bodiliness *in the light of God’s love for the world in Jesus Christ*. Christian ethics, then, is not simply conformity to creation but about creaturely participation in redemption.

Higton’s point here—that we must read creation through the lens of redemption—is curiously confirmed by the fact that the two texts in Paul which are most contended in current debates about sexuality, in Romans 1 and 1 Cor 6.9, come in his discussion of the fallenness of humanity and its need for redemption, and the participation in the kingdom of God now as an anticipation of the eschaton, rather than where we might normally expect to find them, in the ethical injunctions which usually follow Paul’s exposition of what God has done in Christ. Despite that, Higton’s direction of travel appears to be different from Saint Paul’s in heading towards a minimising of the significance of sex difference within marriage.

But what these two arguments (of Song and Higton) do for us is to highlight the nature of the discussion—that the question of sex identity and sex differentiation are held, like so many issues, in that tension between creation and new creation in which we are suspended.

**The key text**

This is strikingly true of our first and most important single text to consider: Jesus’ saying in Mark 12.25 = Matt 22.30 = Luke 20.36: ‘they will be like the angels [in heaven]’.

Catholic theologian James Alison discusses this text at two different points in his writings, both of which focus on the Sadducees’ theological failure in their understanding of God.[[11]](#footnote-9) He offers a careful close reading of the texts, but what he fails to note is almost as interesting as what he observes. He highlights the significance of this episode within the Synoptics: the wording of the first half of the pericope is almost identical in all three accounts; the debate has a common shape to it in the three narrations; and the episode comes at the same point in all three as part of Jesus’ teaching in the temple. Jesus has entered the Temple precincts in the week of his Passion; his authority has been questioned; he tells the parable of the vineyard (with a debt to Isaiah) and is nearly trapped on the payment of taxes before this episode; then goes on to discuss the greatest commandment. Matthew adds into this sequence the parable of the two sons and the parable of the marriage feast, whilst Luke moves the ‘greatest commandment’ question to a much earlier point—but overall there is impressive agreement about the context of the ‘angels in heaven’ episode.

The Sadducees’ strategy in questioning Jesus is to assume the truth of what he said, and then use the case of levirate marriage to create a *reductum ad absurdum*. The idea of bodily resurrection leads to an impossible contradiction, and must therefore be false. It is possible that the Sadducees have a problem with polyandrous relationships in particular, but there is more reason to suspect that the problem was with any kind of polygamous relationship, in a culture in which (notwithstanding exceptions amongst the social elite), monogamy was the norm.[[12]](#footnote-10)

What is more striking, and pertinent in the light of Jesus’ response, is the assumption on the part of the Sadducees that, for those who do believe in resurrection life, the mundane realities of everyday life in this age will continue into the age to come. This follows the trajectory of OT anticipations of even the most dramatic of God’s interventions into history to renew the cosmos, which all include references to mundane aspects of life to express the significance of their hope. So ‘they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree’ (Micah 4.4, Zech 3.10), and ‘the one who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed… They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit (Is 65.20–21). And this expectation is line with most (though not all) of Second Temple Judaism’s expectation, at least from the evidence of the Babylonian Talmud.[[13]](#footnote-11)

A striking aspect of the exchange is the method of Jesus’ response. Although elsewhere the Synoptics have Jesus citing the Writings (Ps 118.22 in Matt 21.42, Ps 110.1 in Matt 22.43 and pars) as well as the Latter Prophets (Is 61.1 in Luke 4.17f, Hos 6.6 in Matt 9.13, Micah 7.6 in Matt 10.35, Malachi 3.1 in Matt 11.10, Is 6.9 in Matt 13.14 and pars, Jer 7.11 in Matt 21.13 and par), in this debate he confines himself to citing the Torah, the only part of the Hebrew Bible believed to be authoritative by the Sadducees

**Some exegetical observations**

Comparing Matthew’s account with Mark’s, we notice some minor differences. Jesus’ (rhetorical) question to the Sadducees in Mark becomes a direct statement in Matthew, a change that Matthew is in the habit of making (see for example Mark 2.7 and Matt 9.3, Mark 4.30 compare Matt 13.31, Mark 9.33 omitted in Matt 18.2, Mark 5.30 omitted in Matt 9.22, Mark 6.24 omitted Matt 14.8, Mark 7.18 compare Matt 15.11, Mark 10.3 omitted Matt 19.4, Mark 8.12, Matt 12.39, Mark 9.12, Matt 17.12 and so on).[[14]](#footnote-12)

Matthew turns Mark’s verbal phrase ‘when the dead rise’ to the near-equivalent noun phrase ‘at the resurrection’ (Mark 12.25, Matt 22.30) and does the same again in the next verse. He personalises and contemporises the quotation of the OT; this is no longer ‘what God said to him’ but ‘what God said to you’.[[15]](#footnote-13) And he omits Mark’s emphatic conclusion (‘you are badly mistaken!’) substituting instead the astonishment of the people. But in other respects the texts are very close—even to include the minor *anakolouthon* (represented as a dash in most English translations) as Jesus moves from the specific question of marriage to the wider question of God’s relation with the dead.[[16]](#footnote-14)

In contrast to these close parallels, Luke offers some significance differences. The account of the Sadducees question remains the same, though slightly abbreviated by use of the adjective *ateknos*, ‘childless’ (Luke 20.29). But Jesus’ response is significantly refigured.

First, Luke recasts the response in more explicitly eschatological terms of ‘this age’ and ‘the age to come’ (vv 34–35); this configuration echoes Jesus’ comment in Matt 24.38 suggesting that ‘marrying and giving in marriage’ distinctively belong to ‘this age’. As part of this, Jesus links the age to come with judgement, since only those ‘worthy’ (v 35) can participate. And in contrast to the other two accounts, he brings out the theological or philosophical reason behind this; marriage and procreation belong to the age of death, since it is only because we die that we need to have children to continue our line and our work.[[17]](#footnote-15)

Commenting on Luke’s version, James Alison picks this up with some rhetorical force. In the old dispensation, the way past universal reign of death was having children, and in this context, levirate marriage was the man’s passport to immortality of sorts. But, in sharp contrast to the Sadducees failure of understanding and imagination (Alison declares) ‘There is no death in God’.[[18]](#footnote-16) Song also highlights this key observation.

What happens in the resurrection, when death shall be no more? If there is no death, the sustenance of the people of God no longer requires future generations to be born; and if there is no need for future generations to be born, there is no need for marriage…where there is resurrection, there is no death; where there is no death, there is no need for birth; where there is no birth, there is no need for marriage.[[19]](#footnote-17)

Song then cites John Chysostom: ‘Where there is death, there is marriage.’ (On Virginity, 14.6)[[20]](#footnote-18).

In Luke, Jesus then extends the logic of this into an eschatological reconfiguration of familial belonging, parenting and childhood. Those who rise are ‘children of the resurrection’, presumably because it is their resurrection which has given birth to them in this new age, but since it is God who has brought about this resurrection, they are God’s children, and this displaces any lines of heritage in ‘this age’. This idea makes clear connections with Jesus’ radical reconfiguration of family relations at several points in the gospels, and most explicitly and strikingly in Matt 12.49 = Mark 3.34 = Luke 8.21: ‘whoever does the will of God are my mother, my brothers, my sisters.’

Before moving on from the detail of this text, it is worth noting that Luke’s account includes a final comment from Jesus ‘…for to him all are alive.’ As Outi Lehtipuu points out, this echoes the description of the dead in 4 Maccabees, which gives expression to the possibility of some form of disembodied post-mortem existence.

The phrase “all live to him” has a close counterpart in 4 Maccabees, a writing that does not speak about resurrection but about immortality (*athanasia*) and that links “living to God” both to the patriarchs long gone and the contemporary faithful: “they believe that they, like our patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, do not die to God, but live to God” (4 Macc 7.19) and “those who die for the sake of God live to God as do Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the patriarchs.” (4 Macc 16.25).[[21]](#footnote-19)

The question here is whether Luke is adapting his account to make sense to an audience with a wider philosophical outlook, or whether he is simply speaking into a minority position within Second Temple Judaism.

**‘Being like the angels’**

Assuming that, overall, Jesus’ comment here is consonant with the emphasis elsewhere in the NT on bodily resurrection as post-mortem destiny, what might the phrase ‘they are like the angels in heaven’ mean? As Lehtipuu highlights, the resurrection of the body came to be hotly contested in the early centuries of the church, and with it there was debate about precisely what the phrase meant. Origen took it to mean that at the resurrection the human body will be transformed into a celestial ‘spiritual’ body of a much finer and higher substance than the ‘earthly’ body.[[22]](#footnote-20) But Methodius follows the teaching of Pseudo-Justin and Tertullian and argues against Origen, not least on the basis of the nature of analogies. To say ‘the moon shines like the sun’ does not mean that the moon is, in every regard, similar to the sun, and so the likeness between people in the resurrection and the angels offers only a partial parallel.[[23]](#footnote-21)

Out of the debates about this text in the context of resurrection, five distinct questions emerge:

1. In the age to come, will we have bodies, that is, is our destiny bodily resurrection?
2. If we have bodies, will those bodies have the marks of sex difference, that is, will we be male and female?
3. If we have bodies which are sex differentiated, will we engaged in sexual intercourse, that is, will our sexual organs have any utility?
4. If we have bodies with sexual organs which will have a use, will that lead to procreation?
5. If we have bodies which are sex differentiated, whether or not our sexual organs will have a use, and whether or not there is procreation, will marriage persist?

The importance of identifying these distinct questions is highlighted when we consider two alternative visions of the age in relation to Jesus’ teaching here.

First, this Midrashic text (in written form from the 8th century but claiming to record the teaching of Akiva ben Yosef from the end of the first century), sets out one possibility:

All the orifices [of the body] will spew out milk and honey, as well as an aromatic scent, like the scent of Lebanon, as it is said: “Milk and honey are under your tongue, and the scent of your robes is like the scent of Lebanon” (Song of Songs 4.11). And “like seed” which will never cease [to flow from the bodies of the righteous] in the world to come, as it is said: “He provides as much for His loved ones while they sleep” (Ps. 127.2), and friends are none other than women, as it is said: “Why should my beloved be in my house?” (Jer. 11.15). Each righteous person will draw near his wife in the world to come and they will not conceive and they will not give birth and they will not die, as it is said: “they shall not toil for no purpose” (Is. 65.23).... and they will come to the world to come with their wives and children. (Midrash Alpha-Beth)[[24]](#footnote-22)

In this vision of post-mortem existence we have bodies, sex difference, sexual intercourse and marriage—but no procreation. This is the kind of ‘mundane’ view that Jesus appears explicitly to be refuting.

Secondly, Ben Witherington argues that the phrase ‘they will neither marry nor be given in marriage’ abolishes the sex difference in the process, suggesting that there are no new marriages in the resurrection, but that existing marriage bonds will persist. Jesus here is not arguing against the existence of marriage per se, but against the need for levirate marriage since this is an institution which specifically exists to counter the consequences of death.[[25]](#footnote-23)

This is a surprising reading, since the Sadducees are in fact asking a question about existing marriages and not about marriages that might be conducted in the age to come. The pressing issue is precisely: this woman has been married to each of these men (bracketing out the issue of whether levirate marriages were considered to be full marriages in the usual sense); if marriage does indeed persist in the resurrection, what will it look like? And which of these marriages will persist?

Witherington’s reading also goes against the understanding of marriage elsewhere in the NT; it is Paul who introduces the idea of conjugal rights in 1 Cor 7, arguing that marriage should naturally involve sexual intercourse. And this in turn is tied in with an expectation of procreation; it is the fruitlessness of sexual relations in Romans 1 which contrasts with the fruitfulness of Abraham and Sarah in Romans 4, the contrast between idolatry and faith in God. In other words, across the NT the questions of marriage, sexual relations and procreation are bound closely together.

**Virginity and resurrection life**

We can confidently conclude, then, that Jesus’ saying answers ‘no’ to the last three questions about resurrection life: there will be no marriage, sexual intercourse or procreation in the age to come. This reading is confirmed by the majority of patristic interpretations of this text, which took it as a key text advocating virginity as an anticipation of the life to come—and it is striking how much interest there is on virginity in the fathers.[[26]](#footnote-24)

Cyprian of Carthage is typical of the kind of discussion we find: virgins are living the resurrection life already, because they are exemplifying the pattern of existence that Jesus is setting out in these verses.

What we shall be, already you have begun to be. The glory of the resurrection you already have in this world; you pass through the world without the pollution of the world; while you remain chaste and virgins, you are equal to the angels of God.[[27]](#footnote-25)

But what is really fascinating in the patristic writers is the way that they frequently move from the question of resurrection life and virginal existence (encouraged not least by Rev 14.4) to the question of the bodily organs, including sexual organs. They often appear to be responding to a very similar kind of *reductum ad absurdum* argument to the one that the Sadducees presented to Jesus: if we are to be raised bodily, and if we are going to do without sex in the resurrection, what is the point in having sexed, differentiated, sexual organs? The answers given are unambiguous. Lehtipuu summarises the arguments of Pseudo-Justin and Tertullian in this way: ‘If having sexual organs does not unavoidably lead to sexual intercourse in this world, it will certainly not do so in the world to come.’[[28]](#footnote-26)

This conclusion has a direct impact on the relationship between questions 2 and 3 above. If there is no marriage, procreation and sexual relations in the resurrection, but virginity demonstrates that sex difference need not lead to sexual relations, that allows for the possibility that our resurrected bodies will indeed be sex differentiated. But is this necessary? The answer of Jerome (also an ardent opponent of Origen) is unequivocal: bodily resurrection must of necessity imply the continuance of sex identity. ‘The apostle Paul will still be Paul, Mary will still be Mary.’[[29]](#footnote-27) Since we only know ourselves as bodily persons with sex identity, then true continuity into the resurrection (whatever the discontinuities) must involve retaining this.

If the woman shall not rise again as a woman nor the man as a man, there will be no resurrection of the body for the body is made up of sex and members.[[30]](#footnote-28)

Jerome supports this by himself going back to Jesus’ saying and noting that the phrase ‘they will neither marry nor be given in marriage’ in fact presupposes sex difference. If to be ‘like the angels’ implied losing sex difference, there would be no need to make explicit the absence of marriage, since that would not be a possibility.[[31]](#footnote-29) If indeed ‘Paul will be Paul and Mary will be Mary’, then after the resurrection ‘Jesus was Jesus’; since Jesus’ body was sexed prior to his death and resurrection, and that, following the resurrection, Jesus’ body still bore the marks of his wounds, then it is hard to envisage Jesus’ resurrection body not also being sexed.

Jerome’s conviction has shaped the history of Christian art in this regard. A particularly good example of this is the series of frescoes of the Last Judgement in the cathedral of Orvieto in Umbria, central Italy, by the Renaissance artist Luca Signorelli, painted in 1499 to 1503. Men and women can be seen pulling themselves out of the earth and then helping others to do the same as they prepare to stand before the throne (Rev 20.11). There is no doubting that their bodies bear the marks of sex differentiation!

This is the point at which new creation connects with first creation. As we noted at the beginning, Mike Higton observes that we experience our creatureliness in our bodiliness, and we experience this as male or female, receiving such differentiation as ‘a gift’ from God. It was not possible, for example, for Jesus to have been incarnated as a ‘generic’ human being; he needed to become either a man or a woman, and this historic particularity is expressed in recent decisions about the revision of the English versions of the Nicene Creed which have all retained ‘and he became man’ and resisted change to the sex-inclusive ‘he became human’.

We should not in passing that there is a parallel debate about sexual organs and digestive organs. If we cannot die in the resurrection, will we need to eat? If we cannot eat, why have digestive organs? The fathers make this connection, but so does Paul; in Romans 1 Paul associates a certain kind of sexuality as idolatry, but in Col 3.5 he calls greed idolatry. In the church in Corinth, problems with sex ran parallel with problems and questions about food and the stomach—and, Paul tells us, ‘God will put an end to both.’[[32]](#footnote-30)

**Sexuality, bodiliness and disability**

There is a fascinating parallel between our question about sex differentiation and contemporary debates about disability—whether disabilities which are seen to shape self-understanding and identity will persist into the resurrection. This is especially important for those who wish to resist a ‘medical’ understanding of disability, which will then be ‘healed’ in the resurrection. Nancy Eiesland, in *The Disabled God*, comments:

The resurrected Jesus Christ in presenting impaired hands and feet and side to be touched by frightened friends alters the taboo of physical avoidance of disability and calls for followers to recognize their connection and equality at the point of Christ’s physical impairment.[[33]](#footnote-31)

But if Jesus takes his bodily wounds into the resurrection life, then by the same logic he surely takes his bodily organs (both sexual and digestive) into this life. Luke 24 tells us that he ate fish, and John 21 that he cooked some for others; Augustine’s symbolic reading of these texts need not detract from their more obvious significance that resurrection is indeed bodily.[[34]](#footnote-32)

Frances Young, in *God’s Presence*, makes a similar argument in relation to her disabled son Arthur:

Arthur’s limited experience, limited above all in ability to process the world external to himself, is a crucial element in who he is, in his real personhood. An ultimate destiny in which he was suddenly ‘perfected’ (whatever that might mean) is inconceivable—for he would no longer be Arthur but some other person. His limited embodied self is what exists, and what will be must be in continuity with that. There will also be discontinuities—the promise of resurrection is the transcendence of our mortal ‘flesh and blood’ state. So there’s hope for transformation of this life’s limitations and vulnerabilities, of someone like Arthur receiving greater gifts while truly remaining himself.[[35]](#footnote-33)

Wes Hill reflects on the significance of this dynamic—the transcendence of our bodily life which yet allows us to be more truly ourselves—in relation to sexual identity.[[36]](#footnote-34) But he also warns us to draw a line on too specific speculation about the nature of resurrection life, and does so with a wonderful quotation from C S Lewis’ *On Miracles*:

I think our present outlook might be like that of a small boy who, on being told that the sexual act was the highest bodily pleasure should immediately ask whether you ate chocolates at the same time. On receiving the answer ‘No’, he might regard absence of chocolates as the chief characteristic of sexuality. In vain would you tell him that the reason why lovers in their carnal raptures don’t bother about chocolates is that they have something better to think of. The boy knows chocolate: he does not know the positive thing that excludes it. We are in the same position. We know the sexual life; we do not know, except in glimpses, the other thing which, in Heaven, will leave no room for it.[[37]](#footnote-35)

**Indifference to sex identity**

This sense in which we cannot actually envisage exactly what the resurrection life leads to a counter observation about the NT and discussion of sex identity. Despite the evidence that sex identity and differentiation persists in the resurrection, the NT displays a decided indifference to sex identity. This is evident in several ways:

1. Paul’s use of both Adam and Christ as archetypal humans, not archetypal male figures. In Romans 5 and 1 Cor 15, what matters is not their sex identity, their maleness, but their significance as archetypes of two ways of living. Paul is looking to the (undifferentiated) ‘adam’, the earth creature, rather than the male Adam, partner of Eve—as he makes clear in 1 Cor 15.47 when he makes a pun on Adam’s name by describing him as ‘from the dust of the earth.’
2. His similar use of Eve in 2 Cor 11.3, where she is **not** an archetype of susceptible women, but of all people in danger of being deceived.
3. Paul’s language in Gal 3.28, where he does not appear to be eliminating the differences between male and female, slave and free or Jew and Gentile, but downplaying the significance of such differences. John Barclay expresses this exquisitely:

In baptism, at the moment when believers put on Christ and enter the body of Christ, these previous hierarchies of worth are rendered insignificant (Gal 3.26–28; Col 2.9–11). In Christ ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3.28). These differences are not erased, but they no longer matter, and they can neither divide nor stratify the new Christian community. …It enables—in fact requires—a Christian community not just to *include* both slaves and free people, men and women, but to *regard their differences in status as insignificant*, treating them no longer as markers of differential worth.[[38]](#footnote-36)

1. Paul’s remarkable symmetrical depiction of mutual authority over the bodies of husband and wife within the marriage relationships in 1 Cor 7.4. The spare translation of the Authorised Version captures well the symmetrical structure of Paul’s grammar:

‘The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband:

and likewise also

the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.’

1. The complete absence of sex differentiation in the work of and gifts from the Spirit in 1 Cor 12. Barclay again comments lucidly:

Did God give the Spirit on the basis of gender, and does the fruit of the Spirit grow better on a male tree? The idea is absurd because (unlike most philosophers of his day) Paul does not think that gender differentials have anything to do with the way that God distributes his gifts.[[39]](#footnote-37)

There are some even more dramatic examples of indifference to sex identity in the Book of Revelation. In visual representations of John’s vision report of Jesus in Rev 1, Jesus is universally depicted with male sex identity. But the actual picture is more mixed. The gold band is not wrapped around his *stethos*, chest, as it is in the source vision of the angel in Dan 10 nor the angels similarly girded in Rev 15.6, but is around his *mastoi*, his female breasts. The best explanation for this is that Jesus polemically displaces the function of female goddesses, including Hekate, from whom he also steals the claims to ‘hold the keys to death and Hades’ and to be ‘coming quickly’.[[40]](#footnote-38)

The same applies to the depiction of the people of God; the 144,000 apparently male warriors in Rev 7 are also the female virgins of Rev 14. And the nuptial binary in the opening of Rev 21 is quickly dissolved by describing the city itself as the holy of holies and the presence of God with his people.

In these different ways, at the very least, the NT is marginalising the importance of sex difference as it has been previously construed.

**Conclusion**

Sex differentiation is not imagined to be absent in the resurrection, and indeed its absence would be unimaginable and implausible if the resurrection life is indeed bodily—as it is vigorously claimed to be in all NT texts that explore the question. To be human and bodily means to be male or female, both in this age and in the age to come.

But sex differentiation is seen to have lost its primary significance, because of loss of interest in procreation, and therefore the loss of interest in both sexual intercourse and marriage. It is therefore not possible to dispense with sex difference in marriage without actually dispensing with marriage itself. The two are inextricably linked.

Robert Song’s proposal, that because of the loss of interest in procreation in the age to come, we can envisage marriage-like sexual relationships which are non-procreative and therefore not necessarily other-sex relationships, fails in two directions. On the one hand, he fails to hold together sexual expression with the potential for procreation in the way we consistently find in Scripture, in which non-procreative sexual relations are characterised as (in some way) expressing the judgement of God. On the other hand, he imagines that there might be a form of marriage-like relationships which anticipate marriage in the age to come, when Jesus explicitly says that there will be no more marriage. The eschatological fulfilment of marriage is not non-procreative marriage, but the absence of marriage as an inter-human relationship in the light of marriage supper of the lamb (Rev 19.6–9), which is the union of God with his people. This absence of marriage (that is, singleness and virginity) is exemplified in the life of Jesus and Paul, and expounded in the theologies of the Fathers.

Mike Higton’s proposal, that we need to understand sex difference not simply by looking back to creation but by interpreting it through the lens of redemption in Jesus, is true to the extent that we need to rethink the significance of male and female in the light of the new covenant, as Paul consistently appears to. But this does not lead to a reconsideration of sex difference within marriage, since, in the eschatological fulfilment of our redemption in the final resurrection, the dissolving of sex differences is paralleled by the loss of the centrality of human marriage as both a pattern of human relating and the context for the essential task of procreation.

Yes, we will be ‘sexed’ in ‘heaven’—but it won’t matter have the significance that it does in the present age.

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**Appendix: a synopsis of the ‘angels in heaven’ pericope**

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| Mark 12:18-27 | Matt. 22:23-33 | Luke 20:27-38 |
| **18**Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. **19**“Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. **20**Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. **21**The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. **22**In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. **23**At the resurrection[a] whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”  **24**Jesus replied, “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? **25**When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. **26**Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’[b]? **27**He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!” | **23**That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. **24**“Teacher,” they said, “Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him. **25**Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. **26**The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. **27**Finally, the woman died. **28**Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?”  **29**Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. **30**At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. **31**But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, **32**‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’[a]? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”  **33**When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching. | **27**Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. **28**“Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. **29**Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. **30**The second **31**and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. **32**Finally, the woman died too. **33**Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”  **34**Jesus replied, “The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. **35**But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, **36**and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection. **37**But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’[a] **38**He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” |

1. Perhaps the best accessible guide to the complexities involved in the issues of transgenderism and intersex conditions is Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. It is worth noting in passing that such debates can only take place in post-industrial societies. In any other context, physical strength for men and the importance of child rearing by women has such an obvious importance that these questions of interchangeability hardly arise. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. For a Christian reflection on this issue in the context of a theology of creation, see Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Germaine Greer has been the most prominent feminist to argue that post-operative transgender men are not women, on the grounds that surgery on their genitals does not change their chromosomal identity. See Steven Morris, “Germaine Greer Gives University Lecture despite Campaign to Silence Her,” *The Guardian*, November 18, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/18/transgender-activists-protest-germaine-greer-lecture-cardiff-university. A recent report from the Tavistock Clinic highlights a new movement Transgender Trend, formed by parents of transgender children who reject, on non-religious grounds, the current ideological direction of current practice. See “Inside Britain’s Only Transgender Clinic for Children,” accessed November 8, 2016, http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/inside-britains-only-transgender-clinic-for-children-pdtqcf9nk. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. For examples of the first, see Richard Hess, ‘Equality with and without Innocence’ pp 79–95 in R. W. Pierce and R. M. Groothuis, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* (Leicester: Apollos, 2005) and chapter 1 of Ian Paul, *Women and Authority: The Key Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2011). For an example of the second, see deFranza’s summary of evangelical and Roman Catholic teaching, particularly John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*, in DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology* pp 154–172. It is disappointing that Thatcher dismisses such readings as inadequate to the task because they do not give the answers about sexuality that he appears to want. Adrian Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender* (Corby: OUP Oxford, 2016) pp 137–141. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2003) p 476. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. The best-known proponent of this view in contemporary discussion is, of course, N T (Tom) Wright, articulating this at a more popular level in N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 1999) and Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, (SPCK Publishing, 2011) and in his academic work in Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* pp 372–374 and 450–479. It is worth noting that Wright is far from alone in this understanding of New Testament eschatology. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (London: SCM Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. It is worth noting that Song is here reflecting systematically, rather than doing textual exegesis— but his taxonomy of views here is much more nuanced and persuasive than Thatcher’s assessment in Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender* pp 137–139. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. John Bradbury and Susannah Cornwall, eds., *Thinking Again About Marriage: Key Theological Questions* (SCM Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. The first comes in Chapter 2 ‘The Living God’ in James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1996), pp 34–41, and the second articulation three years later as the essay James Alison, “Being Saved and Being Wrong,” *Priests and People*, March 1999, 111–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. The question of the incidence of polygamy, prominent in narratives in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), in Second Temple Judaism stands behind both this episode and the comment about elders in 1 Tim 3.2. John J. Collins, “Marriage, Divorce, and Family and Second Temple Judaism,” in *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 104–62 offers a thorough review of the evidence. Despite noting the mention of polygamy in Josephus, Justin Martyr, and the *Mishnah*, and its practice by elites such as Herod and his sons, Collins does not depart from the broad consensus that monogamy was the norm throughout this period. This is in line with the conclusion of the earlier S Lowy, “The Extent of Jewish Polygamy in Talmudic Times,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 9, no. 3–4 (1958): 115–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. David Werden notes the divergence of views in rabbinical Judaism between those who anticipate life in age to come as devoid of bodily pleasures (‘In the future world there is no eating nor drinking nor propagation...’ TB *Berakoth* 17a; Rambam (Maimonides), *Hilchos Teshuvah* 8:2) and those who see mundane realities, including marriage, as persisting. In TB *Sanhedrin* 92b Ezekiel revives the dead who then go into Palestine, marrying and begetting children; *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* ch.4:19 describes the ‘world-to-come’ with family in God’s presence; in *Ketav Tamim* 91 Moshe Taku says, ‘And [after the resurrection] the righteous will take wives in accordance with their deeds...’; in *Midrash Alpha-Betot, Batei Midrashot,* we find: ‘Each righteous person will draw near his wife in the world to come...’ David Werden, “Eternal Marriage or Marriage in the Resurrection,” accessed November 10, 2016, https://www.academia.edu/8286632/Eternal\_Marriage\_or\_Marriage\_in\_the\_Resurrection p 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. This seems to me to be significant evidence for Matthean redaction of Mark, which does not appear to have been noted elsewhere. Peter Head comes close to this observation in his exploration of the questions of Jesus, though his main interest is in the issue of the ignorance of Jesus and his need to ask (non-rhetorical) questions to elicit information. Peter M. Head, *Christology & the Synoptic Problem: An Argument for Markan Priority*, SNTS Monograph Series (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) pp 111–116. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. There is a clear theological-interpretive parallel here with Paul’s claim in 1 Cor 10.11 that ‘these things were written as a warning for us’ (compare Romans 15.4 ‘For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us’) in that the purpose of the Scriptures is the contemporary formation of the people of God. The classic exploration of this phenomenon is Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, New edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. Anakoloutha are particularly characteristic of Mark, sometimes being followed in Matthew and Luke (as at Mark 2.10 = Matt 9.6 = Luke 5.24) and sometimes being corrected and smoothed (as at Mark 11.32 = Matt 21.26 = Luke 20.6). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
17. Making the eschatological framework more explicit, and moving on to wider philosophical questions, could support the idea that Luke is making a Jewish discussion comprehensible to a largely non-Jewish readership. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
18. Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* p 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
19. Song, *Covenant and Calling* p 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
20. The intimate connection between marriage and death is captured in the title of Dvora Weisberg’s exploration Dvora E. Weisberg, “Between the Living and the Dead: Making Levirate Marriage Work,” *AJS Perspectives*, Spring 2013, 10–12. See also her book-length exploration Dvora E. Weisberg, *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism* (Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
21. Outi Lehtipuu, ‘No Sex in Heaven—or on Earth?’ in Anne Hege Grung, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, and Anna Rebecca Solevag, eds., *Bodies, Borders, Believers: Ancient Texts and Present Conversations* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, Wipf and Stock, 2015) p 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
22. Origen, *De Principiis* 2.2.2. Origen appears to be using the language of ‘spiritual’ body here in a different way from Paul in 1 Cor 15.44, where for Paul the resurrection body is animated by the Spirit but still clearly a physical body in some sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
23. Methodius *Discourse on the Resurrection*, preserved in Epiphanius’s *Panarion* 64.12–62. See Lehtipuu ‘No Sex in Heaven’ p 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
24. Midrash Alpha-Betot, Batei Midrashot, II, ed. S. A. Wertheimer (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1980), 458, cited in David Nirenberg, “Posthumous Love in Judaism,” in *Love After Death: Concepts of Posthumous Love in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bernhard Jussen and Ramie Targoff, 2015, 55–70, p 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
25. Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2001) pp 328-329. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
26. Although various reasons are often read back into the fathers on this issue, their interest is surprising not least because the socio-scientific evidence suggests that it was the Jewish commitment to marriage and family, carried over into the early Christian communities (rather than virginity) which set Christians apart from their pagan contemporaries. See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
27. Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins* 22, cited in Lehtipuu ‘No Sex in Heaven’ p 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
28. Lehtipuu, ‘No Sex in Heaven?’ p 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
29. Jerome, *Letter 75 (To Theodora)* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
30. Jerome, *Letter 108 (To Eustochium)* 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
31. At this point, it would be possible to enter a debate on whether angelic beings are envisaged in Scripture as being sexed. If the ‘sons of God’ in Gen 6.4 are taken to be angelic, then they are not only sexed but oversexed; the angelic visitors to Abraham representing the presence of God in Genesis 18 appear to be ‘men’, as are the angels at the tomb after Jesus’ resurrection; it is often thought that the seraphs covering their ‘feet’ in Is 6.2 is a euphemism for covering their genitals (compare Ruth 3.7); this could explain Paul’s enigmatic ‘because of the angels’ in 1 Cor 11.10; and in Zechariah 5.9 we find angelic women. But Methodius’ argument, that ‘like the angels’ suggests similarity in some regards rather than identity in every regard, means that such observations cannot settle whether our resurrection bodies will be sexed. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
32. I have argued elsewhere that the regular and frequent fasting related in the New Testament, contrasted with periodic fasting related in the Old Testament, is symbolic of eschatological expectation, and so reflects a community which prizes both marriage (as an affirmation of this age) and virginity (as an affirmation of the life of the age to come). Ian Paul, “How Often Did Jesus and His Followers Fast?,” *Psephizo*, September 1, 2016, http://bit.ly/2bUsien. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
33. Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) p 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
34. Augustine says the fish of Luke 24 represent the faith of the martyrs that have gone through the fiery trials of suffering and that those in John 21 that "[t]he fish roasted is Christ having suffered" (Treatise 123). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
35. Frances Young, *God’s Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
36. Wesley Hill, “Will I Be Gay in the Resurrection?,” *Spiritual Friendship*, March 10, 2016, https://spiritualfriendship.org/2016/03/10/will-i-be-gay-in-the-resurrection/. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
37. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (Glasgow: Collins, 1960) pp 166–167. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
38. John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Subversive Power of Grace*, ed. Grove Books Ltd (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2016). p 17. See also his more detailed reflection in John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2015) pp 396–398. Thatcher also considers these questions briefly, but his exegesis is hampered by a hermeneutic of suspicion, and the pressing of Paul (against the evidence) into a ‘one sex’ model of humanity where the female is constantly subsumed into the male. Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender* pp 146–160. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
39. Barclay, *Paul and the Subversive Power of Grace* p 22. See also Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* pp 423–442. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
40. For a detailed exploration of this, looking at both exegetical issues the cultural and theological context of Revelation, see Ian Paul, “Jesus and Gender in Revelation,” *Psephizo*, December 1, 2015, http://bit.ly/1MSZY5e. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)