

Lazarus, Christianity

The story of the raising of Lazarus was used by Christian theologians like Irenaeus (*Haer.* 5.13.1) and Tertullian (*Res.* 53.3–4) as an example that testifies to the corporeal resurrection of the dead. Irenaeus recognized another kind of theological symbolism in the story where Lazarus is described as coming out from the tomb “his hands and feet bound with bandages” (Joh 11:44). Irenaeus took this detail as “a symbol of a human being who is entangled in sins.” This line of interpretation became prevalent among subsequent Christian theologians and was represented, for example, by Origen, Ambrosius and Augustine (Hakola 249–250). Origen says that the fate of Lazarus shows how human nature is wavering, since even Jesus’ friend can become weak and die (*Fr. Jo.* 77). Origen adds elsewhere that Lazarus represents the one who has fallen away from being Lord’s disciple and returned to the Gentiles’ life (*Comm. Jo.* 28.55). Augustine concludes that Lazarus’ case is the worst of all of those cases where Jesus is presented as raising a dead person in the New Testament. Augustine equates the odor of Lazarus’ dead body (John 11:39) with the bad reputation of those who have made a habit of sinning and are accustomed to crimes. As such, there is nothing in John’s story that would refer to Lazarus’ sinful life. This was noticed already by Eustathius of Antioch who argues against Origen’s allegorical interpretation by saying that “no one has said or written these things against that righteous man” (*De Engastrimytho contra Origenem* 28.9).

In the sermon in 1518 Martin Luther follows Augustine and continues the interpretation that takes Lazarus as a habitual sinner who stinks and is buried in his sins (WA 1:274 lines 6–9). However, in his two later sermons on the Lazarus story in 1539 and 1540, Luther does not repeat Augustine’s interpretation anymore but focuses on the pastoral potential of Jesus’ words in John 11:11, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him” (Müller: 269–73). Luther explains that Jesus says these words to the disciples so that they may believe that for God death is only sleep. The story demonstrates how the one who is buried in front of our eyes is sleeping and – Luther adds – there can be no more wonderful and comforting sermon than this (WA 47:713 line 31– 714 line 1).

Elsewhere Luther says that because even Jesus was deeply moved at the death of his friend Lazarus and wept, Christians are allowed to weep and sorrow over the deceased (WA 36:239 lines 16–31; Leroux: 143).

John’s restrained description of the actual raising of Lazarus is dramatized in subsequent Christian tradition. For example, Amphilocheus of Iconium vividly describes how Lazarus’ “flesh was filled up, the hair was planted again, and sutures of the bones were bound together, the veins were filled with

clean blood (*In Lazar.* [orat 3] 5). Such writers as Basil of Seleucia and Romanos the Melodist depict in detail Lazarus' visit to the underworld where he meets the personifications of Death, Hades and Satan (Cunningham: 35). In the Greek liturgical calendar, Lazarus Saturday was celebrated just before Palm Sunday from the late fourth century onwards, and in many eastern liturgical hymns Lazarus is taken as an illustration of God's power over sin and death (Hofius). There is a clear anti-Jewish undertone in both Western and Eastern traditions because many commentators emphasize the culpability of the Jews who turned Jesus' greatest miracle into a slander when they decided to kill Jesus after the miracle (Hakola: 251; Cunningham: 38–40).

Various popular traditions fill in the gaps in the life of Lazarus after his raising from death. In the eastern cultic legends, Lazarus and his sisters escaped the Jews and came by boat to Cyprus where he lived 30 years and became a bishop of Kition (Puchner: 35). According to a popular medieval belief, Lazarus did not laugh anymore after he had witnessed the horrors of the underworld. In Greek folklore, someone could be described as "not laughing like Lazarus" (Puchner 55). Traditions that portray Lazarus' new life as miserable have recently continued in some queer readings that consciously challenge conventional Christian interpretations. For example, when the Lazarus story is read through the eyes of prisoners, Jesus' miracle is seen as a demonstration of his own authority but not as a blessing; it is especially upsetting in this setting that Jesus passes Lazarus to others and does not even embrace his beloved one when he comes out of the tomb (Havea: 169).

Only John tells of the raising of Lazarus and John is also alone in presenting the Lazarus incident as crucial for the events leading to Jesus' passion and death. Those who have wanted to harmonize the Johannine account with the synoptic gospels have often resorted to the argument presented already by Hugo Grotius that Matthew, Mark and Luke wanted to protect Lazarus from the wrath of the high priests by neglecting to record his raising from death. The mainstream New Testament scholarship has concluded that the story reflects John's theological agenda rather than presents a genuine tradition about the historical Jesus. Some scholars have tried to identify Lazarus with Jesus' beloved disciple, who appears only in John, but these attempts are not supported by the narrative of the gospel.

Bibliography

Cunningham, M.B. "Andreas of Crete's Homilies on Lazarus and Palm Sunday: The Preacher and his Audience", *Studia Patristica* 31 (1997) 22–41.

- Hakola, R. "A Character Resurrected: Lazarus in the Fourth Gospel and Afterwards", in: D. Rhoads and K. Syreeni (eds), *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism* (Sheffield, 1999) 223–263.
- Havea, J. "Lazarus Troubles", in: T. J. Hornsby and K. Stone (eds.), *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta, 2011) 157–173.
- Hofius, O. "Die Auferweckung des Lazarus in den gottesdienstlichen Hymnen der Orthodoxen Kirche: Ein Beitrag zur Auslegungsgeschichte von Joh 11,1–44", *Ecumenical Review Sibiu* 6 (2014) 428–448.
- Kremer, J. *Lazarus, die Geschichte einer Auferstehung: Text, Wirkungsgeschichte und Botschaft von Joh 11,1–46* (Stuttgart, 1985).
- Leroux, N.R. *Martin Luther as Comforter: Writings on Death* (Leiden, 2007).
- Müller, G. "Die Auferweckung des Lazarus in der Auslegung Martin Luthers und Rudolf Bultmanns", in: R. Gebauer and M. Meiser (eds), *Die Bleibende Gegenwart des Evangeliums* (Marburg, 2003) 263–279.
- Puchner, W. *Studien zur Kulturkontext der liturgischen Szene: Lazarus und Judas als religiöse Volksfiguren in Bild und Brauch, Lied und Legende Südeuropas* (Vienna, 1991).

Raimo Hakola