
Lazarus of Bethany - suspended animation or final death? Some aspects of patristic and modern exegesis

J H Barkhuizen
University of Pretoria

Abstract

This paper comprises two aspects; In the first part the unique character of the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus is outlined, especially from the perspective of patristic exegesis. In the second part patristic exegesis, together with grammatical and semantic analysis, is taken as basis of argumentation — against an example of modern exegesis — as to how modern man should define and interpret this event in the life of Jesus.

There is little doubt that among the many miracles of healing and resuscitations in both the Old and New Testament, no one impressed the fathers of the early church to such an extent as the raising of Lazarus, resulting *inter alia* in the composition of a vast number of homilies on this subject (Puchner 1991:20). Of course, one major reason for this is the fact that the raising of Lazarus was widely seen as pointing forward to the resurrection of Jesus and man in general (Barkhuizen 1994:note 8). Its position in the overall framework of the passion of Christ, as narrated in the Gospel of John, confirms this point of view.

But there is also another important reason for its popularity in the early church, namely *its unique character*. As evidence for its unique character I refer the reader to homily iii.1.8.-41 of Amphilochius of Iconium, 'On the four-day {dead} Lazarus' (Datema 1978). I will deal at length with this part of his homily, since it will be referred to again in the second part of this paper. Amphilochius refers at the outset of his homily to the envious reaction on the part of the Jewish leaders to this miracle. This envy (*βασκανία*) on their part, he states, is clearly revealed in their plan to kill both Jesus and Lazarus shortly after the latter had been raised from the dead (cf John 11:47-53; 12:9-11). Amphilochius then explains the cause for their murderous attitude: the raising of Lazarus irritated them because of its very nature — for this was one miracle they could not slander (*οὐκ ἴσχυσαν συκοφαντῆσαι*). Amphilochius subsequently presents his audience with a list of miracles and the way the Jews slandered them:

- * the healing of the blind man — the Jews were not sure whether it was in fact the man who was born blind or not (cf also Hesychius homily xii.6.4-7, Aubineau 1978);
- * the raising of the daughter of Jairus from the dead — she was merely in a coma;
- * the raising of the widow's son from the dead — this also was merely a case of apparent death;
- * the withering of the fig tree — this did not happen at all through the divine word of Jesus, but it became parched due to the heat of the sun;
- * the water turned into wine at Cana — the guests were so drunk that they could not perceive it was a mere delusion.

We do not know whether these slanderous talks came from the Jews in the time of Amphilochius or not, for the only two resurrection miracles slandered by the Jews and related in the New Testament, are those of the blind man (Jh 9:9) — they were not sure whether it was the same man who was cured, and the resurrection of Jesus himself (Mt 27:62-64; 28:12-15) — they bribed the soldiers to spread the rumour that the disciples came and removed the body of Jesus from the tomb. The fact is, however, that for Amphilochius (and other fathers of the early church) the raising of Lazarus could not be slandered for various reasons, and that this was the basic reason for the murderous plans of the Jews concerning Lazarus and Jesus.

The reasons why this miracle could not be slandered are defined by Amphilochius as follows:

- * Lazarus was an important person in the community;
- * the presence of the Jews themselves at the funeral of Lazarus, as well as,
- * the fact that they knew that Lazarus was already four days in a tomb that was being sealed before their very own eyes, when Jesus finally arrived at the scene.

This latter reason is the key in understanding the greatness and uniqueness of this miracle. According to ancient beliefs the soul departed finally from the body after *three days*, and decomposition sets in only after the soul has left the body (Kremer

1985:63 and note 73; Daniélou 1953:155-159) — for this reason the references to the daughter of Jairus and the son of the widow from Nain as being near-deaths or comas. As to this concept of the separation of body and soul at death, we have an important piece of evidence in a homily on this very subject of the raising of Lazarus, written by Leontius, presbyter of Constantinople (homily ii.335-338, Datema & Allen:1987). Leontius has Martha in his homily respond to Jesus' question as to where they had buried Lazarus. In her response she points out that the case of Lazarus is something completely different from for instance the raising of the widow's son:

Τὸν υἱὸν τῆς χήρας ἀνέστησας, δέσποτα, ἐπειδὴ πρόσφατος ἦν ὁ νεκρὸς καὶ ἔτι ἡ ψυχὴ αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸ σῶμα περιπέτατο καὶ ἡ σὰρξ νοτιδα θερμότητος ἐκέκτετο.

You raised up the widow's son, Master, since the corpse was fresh and his soul was still flying about around the body, and the flesh had a trace of heat.
(Allen & Datema 1991:49).

Thus, in the case of Lazarus, the body would have been already in a state of decomposition — and the Jews, Amphilochius is stressing, knew this. This was also the reason why Martha could object to Jesus' command to remove the stone from the tomb: 'Sir, by now there will be a stench; he has been there four days'. And this also explains Jesus' reply: 'Did I not tell you that if you have faith you will see the glory of God' — the glory of God, of course, implying *inter alia*, that God, through the word of Jesus (cf Kremer 1985:30), has power over death, i.e. that He could reconstitute a decomposed body.

Thus the fathers of the church echoed Martha's natural assumption, knowing the climate from first hand knowledge, and seeing in this the glory and power of God to recreate anew a man already in a state of decomposition. This is *inter alia* Amphilochius' very argument why the Jews could not slander this miracle, and were consequently moved into planning the killing of Jesus and Lazarus. He writes of this decomposition as follows:

They (the Jews) knew that he was laid in the tomb exactly four days ago, and that a four-day corpse becomes dislocated on all sides: the flesh is reduced, the bones become disjoined, the nerve-system falls apart, the entrails are scattered all over, the stomach is spread on the ground.

(Homily iii.1.32-36).

Coming to the second part of this paper, it should be noted that the importance attached to the raising of Lazarus in patristic exegesis is also reflected in modern exegesis, as the two recent monumental works on this subject, those by Kremer and Puchner, apart from the various commentaries, clearly show. For the purpose of this paper the attention will be focussed on one article in particular (Bretherton 1993). The basis of Bretherton's argument is clear from the following statement: There are several biblical accounts of people being brought back from the dead, and from the descriptions given, may be considered to fall within the category of 'near-death' (Bretherton 1993:169).

The aim of this second part of the article is to examine his main arguments, especially those which can successfully be challenged from the perspective of both *patristic exegesis* and *grammatical analysis*.

Bretherton's first main argument concerns the use of the two verbs for 'sleep', *καθεύδω* and *κοιμάομαι*, the latter verb being used in the Gospel of John 11:11, 12. He writes: 'The word for "sleep" is sometimes used of physical death in various parts of the New Testament, but its general meaning is that of natural sleep ...' (Bretherton 1993:170). Bretherton (1993:169-170) also refers to the evangelist's comment that Jesus was making reference to his death as 'a strange editorial insertion'. John adds, of course, that the disciples thought that Jesus was talking of 'natural sleep' — *περὶ τῆς κοιμήσεως τοῦ ὕπνου*.

In a homily on the cross (PG 49.393-398) John Chrysostom actually refers to this very aspect in touching on the resurrection of Lazarus referring to both *κοιμάομαι* and *καθεύδω* on the one hand, and to both *ὑπνος* and *κοίμησις* on the other hand. Chrysostom, addressing his audience, explains the name *κοιμητήριον* for the graveyard. This is so called, he states, in order that the audience may learn that those who have died, and are lying there, are not dead, but are merely sleeping: *ἀλλὰ κοιμῶνται καὶ καθεύδουσι*, the name *κοιμητήριον* derived from *κοιμάομαι*. He adds that before the coming of Christ, death was called simply 'death'. But since the coming of Christ it is no longer called (as) such, but (death) has become 'sleep': *ἀλλὰ ὕπνος καὶ κοίμησις*. This, he says, is plain from (*inter alia*) the words of Jesus: *Λάζαρος ὁ φίλος ἡμῶν κεκοίμηται*, as well as from Paul's word in Ephesians 5:14: *Ἐγειραι, ὁ καθεύδων*. What Chrysostom is trying to tell his audience, and for that matter, telling us, is that, in the wake of Jesus' use of 'sleep' for death in the case of the resurrection of Lazarus, the New Testament has come to speak of the dead and death in terms of 'sleep'. This is confirmed by Pseudo-Hippolytus ('On the Fourday-dead Lazarus PG 62: *ὁ θάνατος εἰς ὕπνον μετεβλήθη* (62.773), and: *Ἀληθῶς γὰρ ὁ τῶν ἀνθρώπων θάνατος ὕπνος παρὰ τῷ Κυρίῳ λελόγισται* (62.776), and also Amphilochius (hom.5): *ἀφυπνίζων τοὺς κεκοιμημένους*, said of Christ when He entered Hades). This is obviously and quite rightly contrary to what Bretherton is trying to prove.

The second main point Bretherton has made concerns Jesus' statement that Lazarus has died (*Λάζαρος ἀπέθανεν*, John 11.14), a statement that has brought confusion among the disciples:

It is not surprising the disciples were confused by what appeared to be contradictory statements. First of all Lazarus was asleep; then Jesus was going to awaken him out of sleep, and now, finally, Lazarus was dead. Could not Jesus see the outcome of his illness or was he overtaken by events? It would suggest a fallible Lord, subject to fickle changes of fortune unless the 'sleep' to which he referred was a different kind of sleep, neither natural sleep nor the final sleep of death The juxtaposition of 'sleep' and 'death' ... suggests that for Jesus sleep connoted death, or that he was referring to another kind of condition for which there was no adequate terminology, and which lay somewhere between sleep and terminal death. He would then appear to be trying to explain to them the nature of this 'death', which was not ordinary sleep but a near-death state. (Bretherton 1993:170).

It is quite clear from Bretherton's observations that he is mistaken in so far as ancient terminology is concerned, for in the very homily of Amphilochius on Lazarus which I have introduced at the beginning of this article, clear-cut terminology is used which makes Bretherton's argument in this regard irrelevant. From this homily it is certain that ancient Greek had an adequate and clear-cut terminology to refer to the conditions of near-death, coma and final death. We have seen how in the very first paragraph of his homily quoted above, Amphilochius refers to the slanderous talk on the part of the Jews concerning the miracles performed by Jesus, two dealing with 'death' cases, apart from Lazarus himself, namely the widow's son and the daughter of Jairus. In the case of the latter Amphilochius states that the Jews belied this miracle by saying *ὡς κατηνέχθη καὶ οὐ τελείω παρεδόθη* (that she was in a coma and not given over to final death), and in the case of the widow's son the Jews were saying *ὡς τὸν θάνατον ἐσχηματίσατο καὶ οὐχ ὑπὸ τῆς τυραννίδος τοῦ θανάτου κατεπόθη* (that he was seemingly dead, and not swallowed down by the tyranny of death). The verb *καταφέρω* is already used by Galen (16.497 Kühn) in the second century A D to indicate a 'coma', or near-death, while the expression *τελείω θανάτῳ* speaks for itself. The verb *σχηματίζομαι* can in this context not mean 'feign' (It would be absurd to think the widow's son would 'feign' death at the risk of being entombed alive!), but can only be taken in the sense of 'seemingly' dead, i e apparent death, or suspended

animation. A further important piece of evidence is John Chrysostom (hom.62 on the Gospel of John, PG 59): John in this passage refers to Jesus who has remained two days before going to Bethany so that no one could say that He raised a man not yet dead, that it was a coma, that it was a faint, that it was a seizure, but not death: ἵνα μηδεὶς εἶχῃ λέγειν, ὅτι οὐπω τελευτήσαντα αὐτὸν ἀνέστησεν· ὅτι κάρος ἦν, ὅτι ἐκλυσις ἦν, ὅτι καταγωγή ἦν, καὶ οὐ θάνατος (59.343). There can thus be little doubt as to the fact that Bretherton has not taken into consideration clear evidence from ancient times, evidence which in fact nullifies this particular argument put forward by him.

A third main argument again concerns the use of the verb 'sleep' and 'die'. Bretherton refers to the explanation of Leon Morris (1971:543) that the verb in 11:11, *κεκοίμηται*, is in the perfect 'where the continuing state is meant'. Bretherton understands this statement by Morris as indicating that this continuing state implies 'a persistent, inert condition rather than a final, irreversible act having taken place. It would leave room for his being 'clinically' dead ..., and still available for re-call or resuscitation' (Bretherton 1993:170). Referring to the aorist in Jh 11:14 (*ἀπέθανεν*), he states that the same Leon Morris 'rightly observes that the verb ... is aorist, indicating the *permanence* of the state into which he had entered'. However, in a footnote, he does allow for the possible alternative of M Black, who has surmised we may take it as a Semitic perfect, when 'the continuing state will be in mind' (Black 1993:170). That the aorist should be seen as perfect, is also the opinion of Lindars (1972:390), and Bretherton again states that this implies 'a *continuing* state, a persistent death-like condition' (Bretherton 1993:170).

Here we will have to bring in an argument of a purely grammatical nature. As regards the perfect form *κεκοίμηται*, it is of course true that the perfect indicates a continuing state, in this case a continuing state of what is expressed by the verb *κοιμάομαι*, the meaning of which in a specific context, has already been established above — it is the term *par excellence* used by the Christian community for 'death' since Jesus' use of it in the case of Lazarus. So the perfect form indicates *not* suspended animation, a near-death like condition, but the continuing state of *death*, symbolized by the concept of *sleep*. I have referred above to Paul and Chrysostom, but in this very same Johannine passage we have in verse 39 τοῦ τετελευτηκότος and in verse 44 ὁ τεθνηκώς, which leaves no doubt as to the very meaning Jesus attached to his use of *κοιμάομαι*. Incidentally, the occurrence of both *τετελευτηκότος* and *τεθνηκώς* rules out the suggestion that *ἀπέθανεν* should suddenly be viewed as a Semitic perfect! This is confirmed by the fact that we have several uses of the aorist of this verb in this passage: verses 16, 21, 25-26, 32, and 37, and which also renders the suggestion that in only *one* instance out of 7 we must think of it as doing service as a perfect, doubtful!

Bretherton also refers to Jh 11:43-44 where Jesus calls out to Lazarus to come forth. He states: 'Of importance is the grammatical rendering. We do not have 'the dead man' (ὁ νεκρός) but a perfect participle (ὁ τεθνηκώς), indicating a continuing condition, rather than the absolute finality of death — he who had been in a death-condition' (Bretherton 1993:171).

Apart from the fact that we have already dealt above with what this so-called continuing condition is, Bretherton again has little to base his argument on. Two factors plead against his suggestion quoted above. Firstly, the use of the perfect *τεθνηκώς* to refer to the 'dead' (one who is finally dead) is so widespread in Classical, Hellenistic and Patristic Greek that it is almost impossible to cite all the instances where this is the case. Secondly, John writes at the very beginning of the next chapter (12:1) the following: *εἰς Βηθανίαν, ὅπου ἦν Λάζαρος, ὃν ἔγειρεν ἐκ νεκρῶν Ἰησοῦς*. Although John does not use *ὁ νεκρός* in 11:43-44, there can be little doubt that *ὁ τεθνηκώς* means — in the light of *ἐκ νεκρῶν* in 12:1 — 'the dead man'!

Finally, let me turn to Bretherton's argument concerning the 'cool tomb away from the heat and dust', in which 'his body may have been in what has been sometimes called a state of "suspended animation"' (Bretherton 1993:171). Bretherton concedes that Martha's suggestion that the body is already in a state of decomposition after having been four days in the tomb, is 'a natural assumption to make in that climate' (Bretherton 1993:171). Leaving aside the ancient belief that the body starts to decompose after four days (see above the evidence provided by Leontius Presbyter), one can also dismiss this observation as pure speculation. In almost all the ancient homilies on this episode, there is never any doubt that the body would at this time have started to decompose — in fact, at the beginning of this article I have referred to Amphilochius stating that this was the only miracle the Jews could not slander, and one of the reasons was the four-day period of his body in the tomb. I would suggest that ancient observations regarding the situation of burial and the temperature in burial caves would be more reliable than modern speculations.

To conclude: I have great appreciation for Bretherton's statement that we should take the difference 'between true resurrection and the *restoration* of Lazarus to *this* life' (Bretherton 1993:171) into consideration. Yet again my problem is that he weakens the concept of *restoration to this life* to signify only resuscitation of one who has experienced a near-death situation! One thinks here of John Chrysostom's words in homily 63 on the Gospel of John (PG 59.351): 'Of course it was *ξέρον* that a four-day (dead) and decomposed (*διεφθορότα*) body could be raised. But to the disciples He said: "In order that the Son of God be glorified", thus pointing to Himself; and to the women: "You will see the glory of God", thus pointing to the Father.' Perhaps we lack the

same existential faith displayed by both the disciples and Martha. To return to Bretherton: If we reserve the word 'resurrection' for that eschatological event which Bretherton has in mind, I have no qualms — yet, let us not forget that this was the very point made by Jesus when Martha could look only into the far away future of an eschatological resurrection, for Jesus in fact had the restoration of a four-day dead body to this life in mind.

The arguments brought forward, taking both patristic exegesis and grammatical analysis into account, are indeed not favouring Bretherton's point of view. In fact, a look at patristic exegesis, for example, shows that it belies the often made statement that patristic exegesis is not relevant or important for a modern understanding of Scripture. If Bretherton had taken evidence from patristic exegesis into account, he surely would have been much more careful in his analysis of this episode from John 11.

Works consulted

- Allen, P & Datema, C 1991. *Leontius Presbyter of Constantinople*. Australian Association for Byzantine Studies: Brisbane.
- Aubineau, M 1978. *Les homélies festales d'Hésychius de Jérusalem*, Vol. I, Subsidia Hagiographica 59. Society of the Bollandists: Brussels.
- Barkhuizen, J H 1994. Amphilochius of Iconium, homily 3: 'On the Four-day {dead} Lazarus', *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 5, 1-11.
- Bretherton, D J 1993. Lazarus of Bethany: Resurrection or Resuscitation? *Espository Times* 10, 169-173.
- Daniélou, J 1953. La résurrection des corps chez Grégoire de Nysse, *VigChr* 7, 155-159.
- Datema, C 1978. *Amphilochii Iconiensis Opera*. Leuven: (Brepols Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca 3.) Brepols: Leuven.
- Datema, C & Allen, P 1987. *Leontii Presbyteri Constantinopolitani Homiliae*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Kremer, J 1985. *Lazarus: Die Geschichte einer Auferstehung*. Stuttgart: Verlag katholisches Bibelwerk.
- Lindars, B 1972. *The Gospel of John*. Oliphants: London
- Morris, L 1971. *The Gospel According to St John*. Marshall, Morgan and Scott: London
- Puchner, W 1991. *Studien zum Kulturkontext der liturgischen Szene*, Vol. 1. Vienna: Oesterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.