

## THE RESURRECTION IN THE WORK OF KLAUS BERGER

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### ABSTRACT

This article offers selected thoughts of the recently deceased New Testament scholar Klaus Berger (1940–2020). In the first part of the text, I will introduce some of his systematising theses concerning the theme of Easter. I will first present three critical suggestions on the topic under discussion and then give space to an equal number of his positive statements. In the second part of the text, I will introduce the original interpretation of 1 Cor. 15 as found in Berger's monumental work *Kommentar zum Neuem Testament*. Berger's interpretation of 1 Cor. 15 will thus complement the reflection on Easter themes as presented in his confrontation-oriented attempt *Bibelfälscher* from 2013. In conclusion, we will attempt to place the aforesaid within the broad framework of Berger's historical, biblical, and theological hermeneutics.

### Keywords

Klaus Berger; Historical Jesus; Resurrection of Jesus Christ; Revelation of the Risen One; Easter faith; St. Paul's theology; Theological hermeneutics

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**K**laus Berger has long been known as a critic of the exegetical and theological mainstream, and this is no different when it comes to the crucial question of Jesus' resurrection. While he defends the belief that Easter faith is defined by the empty tomb and the transfigured corporeality of the resurrection, he adds, surprisingly, that the Easter message of the New Testament witnesses is usually over-emphasised, since pre-Easter Jesus had clearly already manifested his

divine status. Berger's constructive suggestions point in a similar direction when he defends the historical basis of the Gospel Easter narratives, the Christological significance of the earthly Jesus story, and especially the Transfiguration on the mount as a compelling prefigurement of Jesus' bodily and historical resurrection. Before attempting to summarise Berger's view of the issues raised in the text in the context of his exegetical and theological method, we will present his highly original interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15.

## 1. Critical Suggestions

Before proceeding to the specific points of Berger's objections, it should be recalled that the author is polemical primarily against liberal Protestant exegesis and theology as he came to know it during his time at the theological faculty in Heidelberg, which, he believes, has also significantly influenced Catholic theology. The contaminated theological source is then supposed to have caused the dismal state of Christian churches in Germany and elsewhere.

### 1.1 The Overestimation of Easter

In recent decades, Berger observes a paradoxically distorted interpretation of Easter in the work of a number of his colleagues: on the one hand, by claiming that it is not a historical event, they deprive Easter of its core; on the other hand, they overemphasise its theological significance.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1960s, this concept of Easter has marked a diametric change of perspective – while Jesus looked ahead towards the Kingdom of God, the post-Easter community turns its attention to Jesus and itself. Berger argues that 'the ugly gulf' between the historical and post-Easter Jesus is deepening, human and divine action is radically separated, with the 'divine' meaning (in some versions) Jesus' earthly story and possibly the disciples' (gifted) understanding that his death is not the complete end. However, the church then begins to pile on misinterpretations and misjudgements; the 'human' (to

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<sup>1</sup> According to Berger, Paul's vision at Damascus is, by more recent scholarship, seen as the foundation of Paul's gospel and has been compared to Martin Luther's *Turmerlebnis*. The Easter visions of the disciples are usually characterised as a figurative depiction of the experience of the community. Cf. Klaus Berger, *Die Bibelfälscher. Wie wir um die Wahrheit betrogen werden* (München: Pattloch, 2013), 90.

varying degrees, again depending on the author) then contaminates the tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Although God did awaken faith in the disciples, the church's practice, dogmatics, and structures were suddenly separated from the pre-Easter Jesus.<sup>3</sup> The Easter faith is a product of the early Christians, and the historical Jesus is lost behind their theological and literary productivity. Our author takes a strictly dissenting position towards this trend: Easter remains important, but its significance cannot be disproportionately and one-sidedly overestimated. According to Berger, it remains an important experience, but it cannot be assumed that it begins a completely new era. For our author, Jesus' promise in John's Gospel that the Holy Spirit would 'remind the disciples of all things' is, of course, true; the Easter experience also opens up a new understanding of the Scriptures, as Luke points out.<sup>4</sup> The power of the Easter experience, however, must not be overestimated and interpreted in the sense that everything divine and miraculous in the life of Jesus only begins with post-Easter interpretation. The stories of Jesus' childhood, the miracles, the predictions of suffering and other prophecies, the messianic mystery, and Jesus' statements about his own identity belong, according to our author, to the pre-Easter story of Jesus. The Resurrection brings *confirmation*, not a qualitative leap.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Hansjürgen Verweyen's Easter theses, where his somewhat exaggerated transcendental method detects this contamination already in the Gospel itself. Then in the German-speaking area, the leading expert on the Resurrection, Hans Kessler, perceives great errors in the post-biblical tradition, the so-called Hellenisation of Christianity.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Berger, *Die Bibelfälscher*, 86–87. This approach, according to Berger, is related to the mistaken belief that we know almost nothing about the pre-Easter Jesus. G. A. van den Bergh van Eysing even questioned the very existence of Jesus. Berger names his predecessor from his former work in Leiden, the Netherlands, along with the historians of religion R. Reitzenstein and W. Bousset as scholars who greatly intensified the sceptical mood on the post-Easter side.

<sup>4</sup> In the last decade, Berger has somewhat moderated his views in this respect. He used to argue that the Catholic theological tradition presumptuously substitutes the lack of awareness of the historicity of the Gospels by the Holy Spirit (the events did not actually happen, but the Spirit led the scribes to use them as symbols and metaphors to reveal the meaning of Jesus). In this, Berger saw a flaw comparable to Bultmann's grasp of the principle of *sola fides*, which regards as a virtue the idea that faith needs no support in the reality of Jesus' words and deeds. Cf. David Bouma, *Provokatör Klaus Berger: Kritika východisek současné novozákonní exegeze v díle Klause Bergera a její možné využití ve fundamentální teologii* (Ústí nad Orlicí: Oftis, 2011), 168–171.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Berger, *Die Bibelfälscher*, 88–89. Here, Berger confronts his Heidelberg rival G. Theissen, who in his famous textbook (Gerd Theißen, Anette Merz, *Der historische Jesus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013)) declares that the scene of the

## 1.2 The Post-Easter Deification of Jesus

Klaus Berger believes that the liberal scholarship has declared Jesus to be a charismatic but humble teacher, and only the later vague experiences of the disciples after the crucifixion became the impetus for his deification. Berger suggests that it is then thought to be followed by the process of subsequent posthumous deification that we might place within the broader category of euhemerism.<sup>6</sup> Jesus himself, however, took no action nor even suspected anything in this direction. Faith, in this interpretive scheme, is not based on Jesus but on the reflection of his disciples, for the Nazarene rabbi did not even allow himself to be addressed as a 'good master' (Mark 10:17–19). Jesus did not awaken faith in himself but concentrated on announcing the Kingdom of God, and any deification of himself was alien to him. This, however, sets up a fundamental conflict between Jesus and the church since the church in this interpretation is responsible for things no one asked for and which are not necessary: dogma, sacraments, institutions, etc. These are the results of later reflection, rather misleading with regard to Jesus.

In this view, Easter is about a change of consciousness (*Bewusstseinswandel*). The author is puzzled by the fact that, on the one hand, the present model derives all that is essential from Easter (faith, profession of faith, discipleship, church, sacraments, and opposition to Judaism), while on the other hand, it noticeably reduces the Easter events in their historical component. The Easter faith is caused by a change in the consciousness of the disciples and discipleship; sometimes, it is in a certain sense a conversion, and sometimes the cause is the enlightenment or simply insight into previously misunderstood contexts. In the New Testament, the 'primary' Easter texts are grounded on 1 Cor. 15:3–5; everything else beyond these rare hints must be evaluated as post-Easter in the sense of 'editorial' and therefore secondary.<sup>7</sup>

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Transfiguration (Mark 9:2–10), Peter's identification as a sinner after a successful fishing trip (Luke 5:8), and quite possibly the Last Supper would have disappeared from Jesus' biography and history without the post-Easter interpretation. Berger's colleague G. Theissen (known in the Czech Republic for his globally successful exegetical novel *Galilejský*) provides an important context for understanding our author. More in my dissertation: David Bouma, *Provokatér Klaus Berger*, 130–141.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Berger, *Die Bibelfälscher*, 90. The term was coined according to the legendary traveller Euhemerus, who claimed that, on an island he visited, the posthumous worship of rulers as gods was common.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Berger, *Die Bibelfälscher*, 90–91.

### 1.3 The Grave was not Empty

Berger criticises those streams of Christian theology that regard the empty tomb tradition as unhistorical and assume that Jesus was buried with criminals in some unknown place. The empty tomb in a literal, not merely figurative, sense sounds less spiritual, too material, too matter-of-fact, and too wondrous for the liberal scholarship. Berger thinks that the source of Easter faith is then placed in psycho-immanent visions. Instead, our author defends the respected parallels to Jesus' empty tomb, namely the rapture of the prophet Elijah, as well as the powerful metaphor of the empty tomb of Job's children from the pre-Christian Hellenistic-Judaic *Testament of Job* 39:11–40:3.<sup>8</sup> In all cases, the bodies do not lie in graves. As concerns Paul's writing, the critical scholarship on the question of Jesus' tomb is also mistaken as, by choosing to use the word 'resurrection', the apostle adheres to the Judeo-Hellenistic belief according to which a disembodied resurrection is unthinkable. The Pharisaically formed Paul does not accept the idea of the independence of the soul from the body, which is inherent to Hellenistic dualism; the opposite is true. In 1 Cor. 15, the verbs 'to change' and 'to put on' always presuppose 'something' that will be transformed or put on new, which is the old body. Nevertheless, our author admits that the apostle does not know the *ossilegium*, the report of the women's search for the body of Jesus. However, this does not convince Berger of the late apologetic origin of the tradition of Jesus' empty tomb. In this respect, let us also mention Berger's interest in the descent into hell, which our author wishes to defend against the charge that it is a naively mythological construction. The New Testament passages about Christ's descent into the realm of the dead (1 Peter 3:18; 4:6) and the corresponding article in the creed only confirm what the logical implication of the Resurrection is, namely, that Jesus died and consequently resided in the realm of death. For Klaus Berger, the nature of the descent into 'hell' unfolds on the axis of God's sonship – death – resurrection as a necessary consequence of the events between

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Klaus Berger, *Kommentar zu Neuem Testament* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2017), 204; Berger devoted an extensive monograph to this issue, see Klaus Berger, *Die Auferstehung des Propheten und die Erhöhung des Menschensohnes. Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Deutung des Geschickes Jesu in frühchristlichen Texten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976).

death and resurrection.<sup>9</sup> We will return to these ideas in the second part of the article devoted to the interpretation of 1 Cor. 15.

## 2. Constructive Suggestions

### 2.1 Easter as a Continuation of Christology

Berger summarises the key issue as follows: W. Wrede (1859–1906) succeeded in his thesis that Jesus' life was 'non-messianic'; he did not consider himself a messiah and did not encourage his disciples to think so. The Easter revelations, however, changed the situation completely, for the disciples came to the firm conviction that he was and must be the messiah after all. From this point – not without the influential contribution of R. Bultmann<sup>10</sup> – the construct of the successful theory of the *messianic mystery* unfolds. The evangelists, Berger summarises, brought their post-Easter insights into Jesus' pre-Easter story to give plausibility to the outburst of messianic faith and anchor it in Jesus' biography. According to this successful hypothesis, if Jesus speaks of his identity before Easter, the disciples must always remain silent because of the scribe's command. *Messiasgeheimnis*, then, is a post-Easter community measure that explains why Jesus' messiahship was not known during his ministry. Berger ironically compares the exegetes holding this view to the forensic scientists who revealed the 'machinations' of the early community regarding the wording of Jesus' biography by putting the famous 'tell no one' in his mouth.<sup>11</sup>

Berger responds harshly on this point, showing that there is a better explanation of the messianic mystery than the 'fraudulent invention of the evangelists'. The author gives possible reasons why the pre-Easter Jesus himself commanded his disciples to be silent about his identity. He may have waited for the confirming evidence of his resurrection, or he may have wanted to postpone the dispute with the Jewish elites over his own identity in order to gain time and peace to proclaim his message. Berger suggests that he may have been familiar with both texts on the hunt for the righteous (Wis 2) and the biblical tradition of the 'suffering righteous' and thus knew that the potential for conflict

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Berger, *Die Bibelfälscher*, 92–94.

<sup>10</sup> Berger refers to: Rudolf Bultmann, 'Die Frage nach dem messianischem Bewusstsein Jesu und das Petrusbekenntnis,' in: *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 19 (1919/1920): 165–174.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Berger, *Die Bibelfälscher*, 91–92.

around his person was fatal. Berger summarises that silence and secrecy in the Gospels do not conceal deception so a criminalistic interpretation is not right. He proposes either a solution in terms of the history of religion, which links hiddenness with wisdom, or a biographical-historical explanation, according to which Jesus needed time to clarify his legitimacy. Another point of Berger's interpretation will be the alleged diametric disparity between the systematic-theological significance of the Resurrection in liberal theology on the one hand and the weakness of the historical impulse on the other.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2 The Transfiguration as a Prefiguration of the Resurrection

Berger maintains that the Transfiguration scene (Mark 9:2–10 par.) cannot be reduced to a symbolic narrative created by the early Christian community to imprint the belief that the Jewish Law and the prophets were fulfilled in Jesus. The process is rather reversed. Out of experiences such as the Transfiguration, a belief in Jesus as the Son of God was gradually born. According to the Heidelberg exegete, we have before us the theological centre of Mark's Gospel, and it confirms Peter's previous confession: 'You are the Messiah' (Mark 8:29). From the mountainside down which the disciples descend with their Master, Mark sketches a great arc leading up to the Resurrection of the Son of Man. Through the perspective of his favourite canonical typological exegesis, the scene of Transfiguration reminds Berger of the Old Testament encounter between God and Moses on Mount Sinai. The theophany at Sinai and the gift of the Ten Commandments to Moses are fulfilled on the Mount of Transfiguration in the radiant person of Jesus and in the message 'This is my beloved Son, listen to him,' which Berger reads as a message from above that is perceptible to the eyes and ears – a typical theophany. The way towards the communion with God is no longer Moses with the tablets of the Law, but a person to whom one can cling. According to Berger, there is one more case when Jesus surpasses Moses: instead of the blood of a sacrificial animal, he unites man to God by the sacrifice of his own blood. By his resurrection, he thus becomes the ruler of God's kingdom, the Easter ruler of transformed hearts.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Berger, *Die Bibelfälscher*, 92–95.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Klaus Berger, *Jesus* (München: Pattloch, 2004), 68–74.

For Berger, the Transfiguration is the axis of the gospel; it is an event which he defines as mystical, whose legitimacy is attested to by two witnesses, namely Moses and Elijah.<sup>14</sup> It is not, in his view, a form of Easter vision but a theophany. It was the pre-Easter theophany, along with the miracles and prophecies, that co-created the story of the earthly Jesus and transitioned almost ‘organically’ into the Resurrection and Easter theophany. ‘As is almost always the case, the Easter date is not a boundary to be taken too seriously,’ the author explains.<sup>15</sup>

### 2.3 Resurrection as a Historical Event

Although Berger interestingly bridges the ‘Easter gap’ by emphasising the theophanic dimension of the earthly Jesus on the one hand and, very surprisingly for the theological mainstream, ‘toning down’ the meaning of Easter on the other, we will conclude the selection of his systematising suggestions by accenting the historicity of Jesus’ Resurrection. In his view, the Resurrection belongs to history because it took place in time and space. Only in this way is it comprehensible that it also had historical consequences and powerful impacts, such as, for example, the life of the disciples leading up to their martyrdom. For Klaus Berger, the Resurrection has a bodily dimension, which is not only manifested in the ‘empty tomb’ but also determines the identity of the Risen One, insofar as the disciples encounter the body transfigured. By emphasising the historicity of the Resurrection, the author underlines the fact that it is an event and not merely an idea. Early Christian anthropology leads us to view the resurrection of Jesus as a mystery that can be touched (1 John 1:1–4) since ‘touchability’ is both a fundamental parameter resulting from the incarnation and a distinguishing mark against docetism. It is precisely the illusory nature of the body that contradicts the Christian image of God and which, for Berger, is an unfortunate implication of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century exegesis. However, the author is still aware that the Resurrection remains a very delicate and special matter in terms of history and recommends a careful formulation: ‘The resurrection of Jesus is not an everyday event that can be controlled or reconstructed by the tools of historical science.’<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Bouma, *Provokater Klaus Berger*, 114–117.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Klaus Berger, *Sind die Berichte des Neuen Testaments wahr? Ein Weg zum Verstehen der Bibel* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002), 162.

<sup>16</sup> Berger, *Sind die Berichte*, 80n, here 81.



The Heidelberg exegete recommends avoiding statements problematising the evidentiality of the Resurrection since there are numerous events that can only be satisfactorily explained on the assumption of perceiving the Resurrection as historical. Nor is it an obstacle that, due to the unimaginability of this mystery, the biological-anthropological approach to the phenomenon of Jesus' resurrection fails, and so it remains by its nature 'non-public' and accessible only to the chosen witnesses. Its effects are among those mysterious events that escape the normal course of history and yet leave their traces, imprints, and consequences. In this context, Berger mentions the raising of Lazarus or the healing of the man blind from birth.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. The Resurrection in 1 Cor. 15

Let us now proceed to a demonstration of what I believe to be Klaus Berger's original thinking on the Resurrection. He is aware of the importance of this passage as it links Christ's resurrection with the future general resurrection of all Christians; he also refers to this exclusive chapter of Paul with regard to the exegetically significant theme of the kingdom of God and discusses its Trinitarian potential in an intriguing way. As a scholar who emphasises the historical anchoring of the New Testament witnesses, he understandably does not overlook the chapter's historical introduction, in which Paul defends his place on the list of eyewitnesses to the Risen One.

Berger first recalls the context of Paul's chief theological composition: that of the people in Corinth who do not believe in an eschatological resurrection. The Corinthians, the exegete suggests, may still believe in the immortality of the soul, but they are perhaps even more sceptical. Paul is determined to give them proof of the bodily resurrection as the goal of Christian hope, and he wants to base this proof on the reality of Jesus' resurrection. That is why he devotes close attention to securing this key point of his theology and presents a list of 530 eyewitnesses, among whom he counts himself. These authorities can testify to the risen Jesus, but they can also interpret it, which the apostle does with his magnificent sketch of the theology of history. According to the Heidelberg exegete, Paul envisions history as a space in which God wants to encounter people. In this respect, the appearances of the

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Berger, *Sind die Berichte*, 81; Cf. Bouma, *Provokater Klaus Berger*, 99–102.

Risen One are encounters of primary importance and are mainly about the physicality of the new creation. The implications of Jesus' bodily resurrection are crucial since the risen Christ foreshadows the destiny of believers. Jesus, the new Adam in Paul's view, opens up a different horizon for Christians, one in which death no longer plays a role and which is shaped – in sharp contrast to Hellenistic ideas – by the new corporeality of Christians.<sup>18</sup>

Berger approaches the question of Jesus' Jerusalem tomb, which, unlike in the Gospels, is not mentioned at all by Paul, by taking into account the paradigmatic role of Jesus' resurrection. Against the view that, according to 1 Cor. 15, Jesus' body remained in the tomb and the Risen One appeared in a purely spiritual form instead of in transfigured corporeality, Berger presents the following arguments to defend the hypothesis that Paul quite naturally assumes Jesus' empty tomb at the time of Easter:

a. As an expert on ancient Judaism, Berger makes an argument from the history of religion. He says that ancient Judaism knows no such thing as the idea of the 'purely spiritual' as opposed to the 'corporeal'. He states that the dualism of spirit and matter is found in the ancient world only in Plato, and then, through Christian Platonism, in the dogmatics of the ancient church; but in the New Testament, we are still dealing with the Jews. For this reason, Paul, when speaking of the resurrection, must mean something corporeal in the broadest sense of the word.

b. The next argument of Klaus Berger is derived from contemporary Jewish *apocalyptic eschatology*. Apocalyptic Judaism of the New Testament era shares with the Hellenistic milieu the term 'transfiguration' as found, for example, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In principle, according to our author, it is the transformation of man into something different and better, and even in extra-biblical contexts, it is a divine process. Judaism knows of a God-centred transformation, especially when one enters God's 'zone' or stands before His throne in order to withstand. This transformation, often expressed in the imagery of putting on new clothes, is found, for example, in the *Ethiopian Enoch*. In 1 Cor. 15:51–53, Paul speaks of the transformation of Christians, using the image of dressing; Berger emphasises that the whole person is transformed

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Berger, *Kommentar zu Neuem Testament*, 619.

to the point that the old body (*Leib*) no longer exists. It is a complete ‘change of clothes’ in which the whole old man is integrated.

c. The third argument is based on *Paul’s own thinking*: ‘For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality,’ says the apostle in 1 Cor. 15:53. Through the above-mentioned ‘clothing’, the mortal is transformed. And just a verse later it says that this ‘clothing’ of imperishability will lead to swallowing up death. Berger concludes that the mortal is simply no longer there – it is absorbed by life through the Holy Spirit. It encompasses the soul as well as the body. The Holy Spirit embraces, overcomes, and replaces everything in man that is subject to death. The essence of this process, according to our author, lies precisely in the fact that the old no longer exists but has been integrated into the change (*hineinverwandelt ist*).<sup>19</sup>

Because of the above reasons, Berger concludes, we must necessarily assume that, for Paul, the resurrection account presupposes an empty tomb, although it is not explicitly mentioned in the *Corpus Paulinum*. The absorption of all that was mortal implies the replacement of the old with the new without residue.<sup>20</sup>

However, important though it is, Berger does not wish to overestimate the category of transformation used by the apostle as the new is described in 1 Cor. 15 with the utmost restraint. In fact, Paul says only one thing: death will no longer be here, and the limitations imposed by mortality will be removed. Paul’s sober and mysterious statement contains the message that, in the resurrection, everything will be different and close to God. In fact, the mystery is twofold: transformation is possible, and Christians will still exist as persons after death, including the dimension of physicality. For Berger, transformation in Paul’s terms means both continuity of the person and radical newness.<sup>21</sup>

According to Klaus Berger, the contribution of 1 Cor. 15 lies primarily in linking Paul’s belief in the resurrection at the end of the ages with his belief in the resurrection of Jesus. The former he embraced as a Pharisee, the latter made him a Christian. He relates both to each

<sup>19</sup> In this place, Berger cites his translation of *The Epistle to Rheginos: A Valentinian Letter on the Resurrection*, in which he appreciates the image of Christ swallowing up death as well as the Resurrection that integrates both the psychological resurrection and the restoration of the body: Cf. Klaus Berger, Christiane Nord, *Das Neue Testament und frühchristliche Schriften [vollständige Sammlung aller ältesten Schriften des Urchristentums]* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verl., 2005), 1143ff.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Berger, *Kommentar zu Neuem Testament*, 619–620.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 620.

other and presents it to the Corinthians, whose understanding is further complicated by a Hellenistic cultural context, which regards the resurrection as absurd circling around the physicality of man. Paul proceeds in 1 Cor. 15:12–20 as follows: You Corinthians believe in the resurrection of Jesus; if this is the case, then the resurrection as such exists, and this possibility cannot be excluded. For Berger, the additional theme is the connection of the resurrection with the forgiveness of sins (1 Cor. 15:17): ‘And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.’ Up to this point, Berger notes, Paul associated the forgiveness of sins exclusively with the death of Jesus (still in 1 Cor. 15:3). Why, then, does he now condition the forgiveness of sins by Jesus’ resurrection? The Heidelberg exegete sees the answer in the fact that Jesus actualises his atoning sacrifice as a heavenly advocate and intercessor, that is, as the Risen One. If Jesus had not been raised, he could not offer his sacrifice to the Father to be our advocate and high priestly patron.<sup>22</sup>

A further challenge to Berger is introduced in the passage starting with 1 Cor. 15:20: ‘But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.’ Rejecting outright the solution that Jesus is merely the first link in a chain that starts a ‘wave’ of resurrection perpendicular to history, so to speak, Berger seeks the true meaning of the ‘number one’ resurrection (1 Cor 15:20). The style and thinking of the Heidelberg exegete are aptly represented by his interpretation of the following eight verses in his *Commentary* (1 Cor. 15:20–28) so let us briefly summarise his method and results. Klaus Berger begins his interpretation with the concept of kingship twice mentioned by Paul: Christ reigns as a king. According to Paul, Jesus’ kingship lasts from his ascension to the right hand of God to his return for the judgment, including the resurrection of the dead. Before giving his kingdom to the Father, Christ lives in an in-between period defined by the Resurrection at the beginning and the Parousia at the end.<sup>25</sup> Referring to the parable of the wheat and the tares from Matthew’s Gospel (Matt. 13:24–30), Berger emphasises that, in

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 621–622.

<sup>25</sup> For Berger, the in-between time corresponds to the hiddenness of the Risen One. The identity of Christians, the ‘children of the Resurrection’, is also invisible, but recognisable in the fruits and perceptible in the effects. Cf. his interpretation of Col. 3:3 in Klaus Berger, *Die Urchristen. Gründerjahre einer Weltreligion* (München: Pattloch, 2008), 146–148.

the kingdom of the Son of Man, good and evil are mixed, and separation comes only at the end. In his view, we know this kingdom also from the Apocalypse of John as the so-called millennial kingdom (Rev 20:4–6: a thousand is the number of the unlimited). For the sake of the Son's empire, the Father abounds in activity as he gradually subdues the enemy powers. Because of him, the Father also forgives men's sins and cares for men by turning evil powers away from them and humbling them before the Son since in him he has acknowledged and established his love for men. The verses 1 Cor. 15:25–27 underline the whole struggle of the Father for the Son: 'The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he "has put everything under his feet". Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ.' By 'powers', then, Berger means the stupefying and enslaving ideologies as well as the old enemies of life such as avarice and envy. In his view, the activity of the Father emphasised by the apostle is also to be indicated in Rev 12, where Michael casts Satan down to earth from heaven. The adversary of men in heaven no longer stands at the throne of God and complains against them, for it is the Lamb alone who intercedes for them.<sup>24</sup>

Without losing sight of the main subject of our concern, namely the Resurrection, which we now place together with the Heidelberg exegete in the Trinitarian framework of salvation history, we may repeat that the interim period of Christ's reign is by no means a period of rest; on the contrary, according to Rev 12, it is the time of the martyrs and of the church living in the desert. As was just mentioned, according to 1 Cor. 15, the Father himself is leading the fight against ideologies and seductive powers. Yet, there remain some bad people in the Church (Berger refers to Matt. 13:24–30) with whom it is necessary to live. The Father wages a struggle during the reign of Christ that culminates in the defeat of the most agonising enemy – death. Berger can now order the events: the resurrection of Jesus – his sitting at the right hand of the Father – the Father subdues the enemies of men for him – even the last enemy, death – Jesus comes again – the resurrection of the dead occurs. At this moment, according to the Heidelberg exegete, Paul's theology of history culminates. The following step is the Son's 'submission' to the Father, which is not a slavish necessity but a welcomed

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Berger, *Kommentar zu Neuem Testament*, 622.

occasion in which the Son once again shows who he is. Berger reminds us that, in Christianity, ‘submission’ is divine and that it corresponds to the fact that the Son in this relationship returns everything received in love to the Father. ‘Submission’ as an act of immeasurable filial gratitude expresses Jesus’ identity. After that, God can be all in all and permeate everything with his glory without things and persons losing their identity in the embrace of the Father and the Son. Everything will be transformed by God’s radiance and become beautiful. Berger illustrates the history of salvation on the Trinitarian horizon by the image of an unrolled and then rolled up carpet. The first stage goes from the Father to the Son and then to the Holy Spirit, while the eschatological stage has an inverse sequence: from the Spirit to the Son and from the Son into the hands of the Father. When Berger speaks of five epochs at this point, he also includes the recipient to whom God rolls out his ‘carpet’ of favour. The Spirit ‘takes possession’ of a person, who – as must be emphasised in our context – is completely saved, i.e., resurrected, journeys through the Son into the arms of the Father.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

The method of the Heidelberg New Testament scholar is defined by an internally coherent approach. It is characterised by a *hermeneutic of trust*, in which he wants to be loyal to the New Testament texts and fearlessly ‘criticise criticism’, especially historical criticism, and by a *hermeneutic of strangeness*, which wants to preserve everything in the New Testament that is disturbing, incomprehensible, and perhaps even offensive. In my dissertation, I have pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of Berger’s radical historicism,<sup>26</sup> which is also evident in the Easter theme. In his last decade, quite in line with my 2011 estimate, Berger continued to adopt an ecclesial and liturgical hermeneutics of interpreting Scripture, and the two gigantic works of the last decade prove it. In his *Commentary on the New Testament*, he has no problem with using the treasury of Eastern liturgy or Cistercian spirituality. Yet, he has retained his most characteristic feature, which is – in working terms – the method of the ‘extended canon’. Like no one else, he uses the Old and New Testament Apocrypha and all the intertestamental

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 622–624.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Berger, *Sind die Berichte*.

literature in his exegeses. It is not surprising, then, that in commenting on the Easter passages in the Gospels, for example, he works extensively with the otherwise rather despised *Gospel of Peter*, etc.

Berger speaks somewhat misleadingly of mystical facts, among which he includes the Easter visions, which he is inclined to see as a protocol record of a meeting rather than a theological production of a community. Nevertheless, Ratzinger, who otherwise does not hesitate to show his admiration for Berger and who also included him in the prestigious list of favourite authors in his *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy, rightly corrects him when he says that, in the Easter visions, we are not dealing with mysticism since the Risen One appears in a bodily form. Berger, however, insists on the term and regards it as closely related to his affinity for the sensually perceptible manifestations of God's love, which include Jesus' miracles in particular, but also the Transfiguration and, not least, Jesus' Easter 'visits from heaven'.

The author is convinced of a substantial continuity between the pre-Easter and post-Easter disciples, who, thanks to a general Jewish belief in the justification of eschatological martyrs and prophets and with the help of Jesus' sayings (Mark 9:31; 14:25; 8:31; 10:33–34), accepted both the appearances and the empty tomb as a bonus rather than a decisive argument for acquiring the Easter faith.

In the case of the Easter visions (and even the Transfiguration), Klaus Berger emphasises that something is happening from outside, from God's side, from the realm of the supernatural – *von außen her*. As we have just mentioned, he somewhat misleadingly labels the Easter perspective as mystical and inappropriately magnifies the intersection between these surely correlative gnoseological planes.<sup>27</sup>

Berger is a recognised expert in the history of religion and often objects to inappropriate ancient parallels to Christianity. He finds Celsus's argument that the apostles offer only a variant of the metaphor of the vegetative deities (Dionysos, Isis, Osiris) unsatisfactory for the following reasons: first, Jesus lived; second, he rose once and for all; and, after all, cults of dying and reborn deities did not occur in first-century Palestine. For the Heidelberg exegete, there are two moments that catalyse Easter belief: the disciples' encounter with the risen Lord and the secondary negative supporting argument of the empty tomb.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus von Nazareth 2*, (München: Herder, 2011), 300–301.

The author, who is fond of defending the historicity of the Gospel accounts, knows well that the texts vary in their reports of the appearances of the Risen One. They disagree even on the basic details of where the encounters took place, who first met the Risen One, and what was said during these meetings. However, for Berger, these variations confirm multiple times that He appeared to Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the ‘eleven’. Yet, Berger claims, the apparitions are not the prevailing reason for the disciples’ faith in Jesus; rather, they stand in continuity with the miracles and theophanies before Easter.

The author knows that the Resurrection gives plausibility to the meaning of the Easter faith, and he often develops this eschatological, soteriological, and Trinitarian dimension. As much as Berger is regarded as a radical historicist who emphasises the need to listen to the external, public voice of the New Testament (Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene), in his bestseller *Jesus*, he reveals that he also understands the inner voices that show us how belief in the Resurrection resonates deeply with a person’s deepest experiences and ultimate longings. Listening to history allows us to avoid *wishful thinking*; instead, sensitivity to inner experience teaches us that we cannot find faith in mere history.

Berger characterises the nature of the Easter appearances on several points: they were not accessible to disinterested observers; they were a revelation that affirmed the eschatological and Christological significance of Jesus; and they further called the recipients to mission through a unique experience that was not only internal but also external and visual.

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