

Ulrich Schmidt

The Paradox of Losing and Finding One's Life

(Vortrag, Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, November 2008, Boston [MA])

Ladies and Gentlemen!

every now and then another wave in the quest for the Historical Jesus surges and peters out after a while. The last one was the “Third Quest”,¹ promoted by the Jesus Seminar and a remarkable interest of the mass-media,² which faded after the new millennium had begun and left the field to the “remembered Jesus”³. Fortunately, the ebb and flow of this quest wash free some rocks which remain in spite of the tide, and witness fragments of the Historical Jesus.

1. The Paradox

One of these stones is the paradoxical double sentence of losing and finding one's life. It's the best attested logion: It occurs five times in the Synoptic Gospels and once in John. The semantic costume varies as this chart displays but the structure of the underlying idea is unmistakable. Therefore, many scholars agree that it is an original saying of Jesus, except the phrase “for my sake” – or in Mark “for my sake and for the sake of the gospel”. The following form might be original:

Whoever seeks to gain his life (ψυχη) will lose it; but whoever loses his life (ψυχη) will gain it.

Curiously, this well attested saying in many works on Jesus does not appear at all or only one or two times. This is to miss a chance indeed. As I was able to demonstrate in a recently published article,⁴ this paradox represents a thread which leads from Jesus to Early Christianity. It is a thread to which other textual material can be assigned. Let me give you a summary of my observations first.

1 Comp. e.g. L.T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus. The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, San Francisco 21996. J. D. Crossan and M. Borg responded to Johnson in the three-way email debate on the historical Jesus initiated by Harper Collins.

2 Comp. e.g. L.T. Johnson, *Real Jesus*, 9-20, or the *Time Magazine*, Dec. 06, 1999, with the cover tag “Jesus at 2000. Novelist Reynolds Price offers a New Gospel based on Archeology and the Bible”, and the cover story ‘Jesus of Nazareth Then and Now’ written by R. Price.

3 Comp. e.g. the German journal *ZNT* 20 (2007), or in more detail e.g. J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered, Christianity in the Making*, Vol. 1. Grand Rapids (Eerdmans), 2003.

4 U. Schmidt, ‘Zum Paradox vom “Verlieren” und “Finden” des Lebens’, *Biblica* 89/2008 329-351.

1.1. Chasing away the shadow of death

In the history of Christianity the paradox mainly appeared under the shadow of death. Preachers and scholars alike read these words as a call for being ready to die or even for martyrdom. This shadow is cast on the paradox by a certain composition: It occurs three times together with the two logions on carrying one's cross and on the endangered soul.

However, this shadow needs to be chased away. In the first place this threesome is a secondary compilation, so that the paradox needs to be interpreted individually – and this all the more because the blocks release the paradox themselves. Luke for example, in 9:23, inserts the phrase καθ' ημεραν, every day, in the cross idiom, which means an attitude for daily life and not for the exceptional situation of martyrdom. And Matthew prefers ευρισκω, to find, to σωζω, to save, which means that he has an advantage in mind.

That the shadow of death veils the paradox's meaning becomes also clear from its own semantics. The word which our translations render as “life” is originally ψυχη, psyche. While the meaning of the word in the Synoptics varies, the ψυχη usually is a burdened or endangered reality. The important thing is, that every time death itself is in sight, another key word indicates this. For example in the birth narrative it is the killing of infants and in Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane it is the explicit mention of θανατος, death.

In the other cases, where death is not the issue, the ψυχη occurs in a figure of thought which indicates the efforts within life itself and talks about the struggle of ordinary people like in Jesus teaching on sorrows. And the combination of σωζω and ψυχη is used only one other time: In the healing of a man with a withered hand whereas Jesus asks whether it's allowed to preserve life on the sabbath.

In short: The paradox deals with life itself, in the first place, and not necessarily with death.

1.2. Basic Pattern in Jesus Life

Now, the high frequency with which the paradox occurs, suggests that it was of some importance, either in the tradition or in Jesus life. And it's almost self-evident that this paradox sums up Jesus' way of life and conduct. According to the synoptic

tradition he lived an extravagant life. He went without things people usually long for: wife, family, home, job, property. And compared to birds and foxes he didn't have a home. As far as we can speak about an "ordinary life" for his days, he didn't have one, either he wasn't interested in it or he decided to renounce it. Consequently, phrase 1 of the paradox contrasts his way of life and the beginning of phrase 2, Whoever loses his life, sums it up.

The loss on the one side grew into a gain in another way. He didn't have a home for himself but had a lot of support, even by some persons in the upper class as minor hints tell, for example when Luke mentions Johanna, the wife an Herodian manager (Lk 8,3). There was a large network of sympathizers who provided support and shelter, for him and those who went with him. The local disciples maintained the wandering ones. Loss and gain are bundled in Mk 3: Jesus' mother and brothers showed up, most likely to dispute with him. But he refused to see them and concluded: Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother!

Obviously, the paradox mirrors Jesus way of life, ...

1.3. Basic Pattern in Jesus' Teaching

... and not only his way of life but also his teaching. Matthew 6 delivers his thoughts on sorrow which start with the phrase $\mu\eta\ \mu\epsilon\rho\iota\mu\nu\alpha\tau\epsilon\ \tau\eta\ \psi\upsilon\chi\eta$, do not worry about your life. The English translation do not worry about has a passive note of "being in sorrow". But the Greek word is more an active one in the sense of "to strive for". And the following sentences exemplify this striving for life as a struggle for the basic needs in life like food and clothing. But Jesus questions this strive: Do not worry about you life, he says and asks: Why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field. Instead, at the end of the paragraph, he encourages to strive for the kingdom of God in the first place which results in having everything we need. The paradox is present in here: Jesus objections recall phrase 1, and his alternatives to the sorrow as well as the pointer to the Kingdom of God the second phrase.

The "Rich Fool" in Lk 12 exemplifies perfectly phrase 1, and in Jesus' "Call for the Weary" in Mt 11 he invites to end searching in the very same direction. Most directly he addresses the issue when the disciples asked about the reward for their re-

nunciation. Peter asked: Lord, we have left everything and followed you. Having lost their lives according to the paradox, they want to know about the outcome. And Jesus answers, in accord with the paradoxical ending as well: Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, ... who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, ... and in the age to come. There are several exegetical problems, but the main statement is clear: Whoever gives up his life will receive a reward which begins in this life and will be completed in the world to come.

1.4. Beyond death

Like common sense, Jesus as well as Peter knows very well, that losses and gains are not always commensurable within life. Consequently, Jesus expands the timeline of the reward from this world to the world to come.

This also becomes obvious from the Beatitudes. Building on the paradox they bless people who have lost in their lives – the poor, the mourning, the hungry – and promise them gain. The single idioms start with the formula $\mu\alpha\kappa\alpha\rho\iota\omicron\iota$, blessed are, which expresses a present reality. And the first beatitude is ruled by a present reality all over: Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of God (Lk 6:20). But the following statements finish with future verbs. They leave open when the promised reality will become true. And finally, the series ends with a promise beyond death: ... because great is your reward in heaven (Mt 5:12a; Lk 6:23b). The paradox holds true, already in this life or another.

That the paradox expands its horizon beyond death became also important when Jesus made enemies and his violent death became inevitable. Scholars dispute whether he started to give his death a meaning in advance as in Mk 10,45 and whether he coined the predictions of his death himself. But the paradox assures a gain for the loss even beyond death. And since Psalm 22 is present in the narratives of the last week in some ways, it's worth mentioning, that it depicts those who will praise God after they – I'm citing – "could not preserve their lives" (Ps 22,29 [English count]).

1.5. The Aftermath: The Phrase "for my sake" and Paul

So far this paper operated with a reduced form of the paradox and left aside the phrase "for my sake" which is part of four references. At the presented timeline the paradox might have been without this

phrase at the beginning. But the more Jesus' life became a model for his disciples and his teaching pointed the way to the kingdom of God, the more such an addition became proper and expected. It doesn't matter whether it entered the paradox during his life time already or shortly thereafter.

Recent scholarship which deals with the Historical Jesus inquires of Paul again, because his letters are the oldest textual evidence. And interestingly, several times he formulates in a way that reminds of Jesus' paradox. In Gal 2,20 he builds a paradoxical sentence: I'm living, but no longer I, Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God (RSV). Paul spells out the paradox for himself: He lost his former life, for Christ's sake, and lives a new and other life. And in a similar personal manner, he describes himself in 2Cor as dying, and yet we live on (6,9). What he says personally here he also writes more generally, for example in 2Cor 5: Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again (5,15).

2. Critical Objections

Given the presented abstract of my constructive argument for the importance of the paradox of losing and finding one's life, let me give a summary of the results:

The paradox focuses on life in the first place; it encourages a particular way of life; and – as a result – it also offers a perspective beyond death. It resonates with a large amount of the synoptic material and even has its echo in the Pauline letters. Jesus' conduct and teaching are informed by this paradox, he proves it himself in life and death. Consequently, its truth had been related to the person of Jesus and was perceived as its content. It's possible to reconstruct a time line on which we can relate textual material of the Synoptics to the paradox. It appears to be original and essential to the Historical Jesus

2.1. Origin or Extract

Well, building a constructive argument is one thing, but considering possible counter arguments another. If I were to back out in this regard the argument would become weak. One of the counter arguments might question the reason for the presented affinity between paradox and other synoptic material: Does the paradox belong to the origin of the tradition or is it an extract drawn from

tradition. Against the extract-option we can argue:

(1) Firstly, to extract a pattern of thought from textual material is only possible if the pattern is already there. Whether it is explicitly said or inherently present, it was there before the extract could have been drawn.

(2) Secondly, it's generally acknowledged that tradition usually does not reduce but tends to expand. Early Christianity applied the orally transmitted material to given situations in order to make decisions. This was a process of growth. Why a reduction? And if a reduction, why then a paradoxical one? Summaries are intended to make things easier; but this one leaves you puzzling.

(3) And finally, we know that formulas had been built, but they had been kerygmatic like the one 1Cor 15: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ..."

2.2. The Massive Shadow of Death in the Sixties?

A further objection might argue that the shadow of death which I tried to chase away from the paradox was a reality in the Markan Community in the sixties in Rome⁵ – and this could be the setting of an extract. In this regard further support for the origin-option is possible from a postcolonial point of view. "Postcolonial Studies emerged as a way of engaging with the textual, historical, and cultural articulations of societies disturbed and transformed by the historical reality of colonial presence."⁶ The impact of the empire is equally true for the production of a text as well as its interpretation and needs to be considered in both regards.

2.2.1. Interpretative Level

In history, several empires left imprints on biblical interpretation. First it was the Roman Empire with its consumption of martyrs which encouraged each other with the paradox. Then the church won the empire over, which collapsed after a while. In the Middle Ages another empire fought with the

5 Comp. e.g. Donahue – Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Collegeville 2002, 41-46, especially. 45-46; oder B.J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans. The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark's Gospel*, Leiden 2003. While U. Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, Göttingen 31999, agrees with a certain Markan emphasis on the willingness to suffer (p.221) he questions Rome as the place of writing and the addressees (p.218).

6 R.S. Sigurtharjah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford/New York 2002, 11.

Church over power, but both united for the Crusades. And again the paradox was used in the context of death: It was supposed to encourage knights to enter the crusade and to explain the possible death with a promise. On the opposite side it helped to escape the empire and the possible death by entering monastic life.

Given these impressions a disparate conglomerate has crystallized around the paradox: Jesus' death, the martyrs in Rome and elsewhere, the crusades, and the abounding presence of death in the Christian History. This manifold usage of the paradox in these contexts of death caused an interpretative preference in this very same direction. Consequently, scholars are looking for an adequate place in Early Christianity where to place the paradox, for example in the supposed Markan Community in the Sixties in Rome.

This is not the place to pursue postcolonial studies regarding the interpretation of the paradox in more detail. But these few remarks are sufficient to call for a certain caution. The dilemma between the interpretative preference for death on the one side and the sense of life which I claimed for the paradox on the other side might be due to the frictions in the history of interpretation. A postcolonial approach on the text level might help.

2.2.2. Textual Level

Assuming that the presented constructive argument is valid it's useful to ask for the presence of the empire in Jesus' Israel. Does the presence of the Roman Empire in the times of Jesus build an adequate backdrop of the paradox?

The Roman rule lay heavy on the shoulders of the ordinary people in Israel. People had to sell property in order to pay taxes. The result was the destitution of a large amount of the population. The psyche of the Israelite people was under pressure, property was lost, traditions broken, and many people longed for the traditional way of life which they had been told of by the ancestors or which they drew from the Bible itself.

To preserve life in this context might refer to the desire for a way of life a person was used to and loved. In addition the phrase Whoever seeks to gain his life might refer to the hope of restitution. Given the Matthean euriskw this is not necessarily a passively waiting hope but more likely an active striving for it, a struggle to regain it. It even could imply the decision to fight for it as some people did, and this was a road to death. There was no use

in fighting against Rome anyway.

Phrase 1 of the paradox seems to mirror this situation. Under the conditions of the empire many people are in danger of losing the lives they had been acquainted with and the working poor had already lost it. And as Franz Fallon could demonstrate, the shaken psyche of a nation under oppression could result in many forms of desperation. The yearning for integrity, the desire for individual power to resist internally and externally in order to save one's life as it was known is present here.

Jesus however asks his people: Do not seek to gain or: preserve your life. In doing so he wants them to let go the acquainted way of life, to let it break. But this demand wasn't caused by resignation but stimulated by a hope which Jesus eagerly tried to stimulate:

In the words of G. Theissen Jesus initiated a *charismatische Wertrevolution*, a "charismatic revolution of values", not a "revolution of power".⁷ Instead of fighting Jesus ascribes attributes of the nobles to the ordinary people, applies values and virtues of the upper class and empire to the outcasts and destitute – for example royal attributes: In at least two idioms he called his followers "Sons of God" (Mt 5:9,45), a title which royals claimed for themselves. The same idea is implied in the line of thought that the lilies on the field are dressed better than King Solomon and that Jesus' followers are more than the lilies. And by calling his folks light of the world and salt of the earth he inverted the perception of relevance and importance of individuals in social hierarchy.

"Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life will gain it" refers directly to the people under the pressure of the Roman Empire. And given the focus of life in the paradox it's definitely not related to martyrdom probably somewhere in the Sixties in Rome but to the circumstances during Jesus' lifetime. In some way it is Jesus' resume of decades of Roman oppression. Given the circumstances to resist in the sense of winning back what we'd been used to is impossible. The only solution was in letting go in order to find something else. And Jesus introduced people to a different kind of community as we'd discussed already above.

7 G. Theissen, "Jesusbewegung als charismatische Wertrevolution", NTS 35 (1989) 343-360.

3. Results

We've made a long way in this short paper. The paradox has been proved to be at the center of Jesus' project. I want to sum up now. Let me formulate a summary, some additional consequences and an open question for further research.

3.1. Versatile Idiom

The paradox seems to have its focus on managing life in the first place, even under the pressure of the Roman Empire, but also holds true in the sight of the physical death. This idiom is somehow genial because it coins a central truth which fits many human experiences. It underlies Jesus' project from the very beginning and unfolds in many ways in his own life and death as well as the manifold experience of Early Christianity.

3.2. Ordinary People

Christian Theology in general and exegesis in particular has often depicted Jesus as one who calls into a radical discipleship, leaving behind everything. The paradox with the given setting of the Empire however gives a clue that he was concerned about the mental integrity of ordinary people as well. He is not only the Lord of radicals who are willing to leave everything behind but also of those who have nothing left to leave behind.

3.3. Does it help?

One might ask – from a Western point of view - if Jesus' alternative way of letting go and initiating a "revolution of values" had been a real help in the hard life many people had to endure. Where should the mental power come from to rethink your own fate with royal attributes when you're in danger of drowning in despair? However, the mental framework in which people try to make sense of their experiences is most important. There are countless examples from Ancient Literature to Amnesty International witnesses that people had been able to endure incredible hardships by maintaining a certain worldview.

3.4. Open Eschatology

Christian Theology in general and exegesis in particular has discussed whether Jesus was dedicated to a present or a future eschatology. The paradox in the given situation indicates something like an open eschatology. It's a real hope that the loss finds reward, that this reward which is an essential feature of the Kingdom of God, already begins in this life but finds its completion somewhere else.

3.5. Buddhist Note

And finally the open question. This paradox has a Buddhist tone. Having read Philip Jenkins 'The Lost History of Christianity'⁸ and Sugirtharajah adaption⁹ this is not necessarily coincidental. He questions the Eurocentrism in biblical scholarship and presents remarkable observations for the Indian presence in the Mediterranean World during the formative years of Christianity. This not only makes certain coherences between Jesus' logia plausible and understandable but also poses a new challenge: Does New Testament scholarship – after it managed to understand the presence of the Hellenistic world in Israel and Christianity – now have to deal with an interpretive expansion to the East? Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for your attention.

8 P. Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity. The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How it Died*, New York 2008.

9 R.S. Sugirtharajah, *A Postcolonial Exploitation of Collusion and Construction in Biblical Interpretation*, in: R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, St. Louis 2003, 13-36, 27-31.