

Gerhard Lohfink. *Is This All There Is? On Resurrection and Eternal Life*. Trans. Linda Mahoney. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2017. xi, 300 pp. \$34.95. Hardback. ISBN: 9780814684511.

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Gerhard Lohfink, the distinguished German biblical scholar and theologian, offers an engaging and instructive exploration of Christian belief in resurrection and eternal life. He investigates and interprets Christian teaching in dialogue with various popular perspectives on death and afterlife, all of which he finds to be deficient. Echoing First Peter 3:15 and Anselm's famous definition of theology, Lohfink describes the method of the book as faith seeking understanding. He maintains that "it is only the experience of faith that makes possible a certain knowledge of anything having to do with God. However, that faith-experience must be able to justify itself to reason" (63).

Lohfink divides his investigation into five parts. Part One ("What People Think") explores a number of approaches to death that are evident in contemporary society, modern philosophy, and other religious traditions. These include skepticism about life after death; the notion of survival in one's descendants; continual reincarnation; dissolution into the universe; and extinction. Lohfink notes that many contemporary Christians believe in reincarnation. While he acknowledges that this belief reflects a justified longing for purification and affirms that human existence is not simply extinguished in death, he argues that the doctrine of karma with which it is associated is "profoundly inhumane" (35). It can lead, for example, to blaming the poor for their poverty.

The second and third parts of the book focus on the witness of the Old Testament ("What Israel Learned") and the New Testament ("What Entered the World in Jesus"). Lohfink reminds us that belief in the resurrection was only put into words at a late period in Israel (86). The "radical worldliness" of Israel (64) included a profound skepticism about all religious notions of the afterlife. Nevertheless, the psalms, especially Psalm 16, evince the conviction that safety in God is without limit. In chapters 24-27 of Isaiah, Lohfink finds reference to an eschatological raising of the dead, though he argues that this entails an awakening of the dead for life on a renewed earth rather than a resurrection to transcendence. He draws a similar conclusion about Daniel 12:1-3.

Like most exegetes, Lohfink foregrounds Jesus's proclamation of the reign of God, which he describes as "the final and ultimate coming of God's saving self-donation in this world" (99). When Jesus makes this reign of God present through his deeds of healing, he is "attacking death" (106). At the same time, Jesus's death by crucifixion manifests his experience of powerlessness, in which he had to rely entirely upon God and God's intervention. With reference to the resurrection of Jesus, Lohfink defends the use of "appearance language." This language arose out of the disciples' real experience of encounter with the Risen One – encounters marked by a "positively disturbing physicality on the part of Jesus" (116). Lohfink emphasizes the indissoluble bond between the resurrection of Jesus and that of all the dead; Jesus is "the firstborn from the dead" (119).

In Part Four (“What Will Happen to Us”) Lohfink moves from historical exploration to theological interpretation of statements of faith. He stresses that it will be God’s own self that is encountered in death. This encounter will involve judgment because “our eyes will be opened to behold our own selves” (152). At the same time, it will be an encounter with God’s “bottomless mercy” (159). Echoing Joseph Ratzinger (a major dialogue partner for Lohfink), he affirms that this encounter with the Holy One will entail a purification of the sinner that “suffuses her or him ‘like’ fire” (162). Concerning hell, Lohfink affirms its possibility as a state of isolation that is self-chosen rather than imposed by God. While every person must acknowledge hell as “a fearful possibility,” talk of hell “must always have a counterweight that is much heavier: God’s absolute will for salvation” (171).

As he has in previous publications, Lohfink affirms resurrection in death. Here he parts company with Ratzinger. Lohfink argues that the notion of an intermediate state, where the soul would await reunion with the body at the end of history, devalues the human body and reflects a confusion of eternity with earthly time. He posits that individual judgment in death and general judgment at the end of the world come together as one. The parousia will take place for each person in death, “a ‘coming’ to all people without exception, who encounter Christ at their deaths ‘together’ and ‘simultaneously’” (211). Critics of the notion of resurrection in death who argue that the notion of immediate resurrection removes the individual from connection with ongoing history may find Lohfink’s arguments on this point to be unconvincing.

Lohfink moves to the area of praxis in Part Five (“What We Can Do”). He underlines the call to solidarity with the dead, which aids the deceased in their process of purification. This solidarity is expressed in the most profound way in the celebration of the Eucharist. Lohfink also makes the familiar point that living in Christian hope does not mean despising this world; rather genuine hope means “opening the world to God so that the reign of God may come” (256).

Scholars who are better versed than I in the subtleties of world religions may question whether Lohfink’s analysis of other religious traditions is completely balanced. Experts on the topic of inculturation may question his treatment of ancestor veneration when he says, “Nor can they [Christians] practice a cult of the ancestors with long genealogies, small home altars, offerings, and above all they cannot see ancestors as having a kind of divine function in the lives of descendants” (234). While Christians should not ascribe a divine function to ancestors, the practice of other forms of ancestor veneration has been accepted in areas of the world where it is part of believers’ cultural heritage.

These critiques notwithstanding, Lohfink has given students of theology another carefully researched and clearly articulated work of scholarship. His style of writing has a way of luring the reader into active engagement with the topic. This book will be a valuable resource for graduate students of theology, and it is sufficiently accessible to be used in upper level courses in undergraduate theology.