

Marriage and Resurrection Reconsidered: A Hermeneutical Clarification of Legal, Functional, and Ontological Categories in Luke 20:34-36

Pablo E. Ceballos
Universidad Adventista del Plata
Argentina

Abstract

The interpretation of Jesus' response to the Sadducees in Luke 20:34–36 has traditionally been understood as implying a denial of marriage in the eschatological age. This article argues that such a conclusion rests on a hermeneutical conflation of interpretive levels—legal, functional, and ontological—within the pericope. By situating Jesus' statement within its immediate polemical context, namely the Sadducean rejection of the resurrection and their appeal to levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–10), the study contends that the discussion is not primarily concerned with the abolition of marriage as a creational institution, but with the nature of resurrection life itself. Through a close grammatical and literary analysis of Luke's distinctive formulation—particularly the contrast between “this age” and “that age,” the verbs *γαμοῦσιν* and *γαμίζονται*, and the explanatory function of *γάρ* in Luke 20:36—this article demonstrates that the comparison with the angels is explicitly limited to the condition of immortality. It does not imply a transformation of human ontology or relational capacity. Consequently, what is negated in Jesus' response is not marriage per se, but the juridically contingent form of marriage presupposed by the levirate institution whose function is intrinsically bound to a social order governed by death. This hermeneutical clarification resolves longstanding interpretive tensions within the Synoptic tradition and contributes to a more coherent understanding of resurrection anthropology grounded in the internal logic and canonical coherence of Scripture.

**Introduction: Resurrection, Not Marriage,
as the Hermeneutical Crux**

The dialogue between Jesus and the Sadducees concerning the resurrection of the dead, preserved within the Synoptic tradition (Mark 12:18–27; Matt 22:23–33; Luke 20:27–40), has frequently been interpreted as a programmatic statement regarding the nonexistence of marriage in the eschatological age.¹ Within this interpretive trajectory, Jesus' declaration that "those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Luke 20:34–35)² is commonly understood as an ontological negation of marriage in any form in the life to come.³ This conclusion is often reinforced by the comparison with the angels and by the absence of explicit reference to procreation in the passage.⁴

Although the episode is shared by all three Synoptic Gospels, its reception history has frequently abstracted Jesus' response from the specific polemical and juridical framework in which it is articulated.⁵ As a result, the passage has been read as offering a comprehensive doctrine of marriage in the resurrection, rather than as a targeted response to a particular objection raised by the Sadducees. This tendency has given rise to several distinct yet convergent interpretive approaches. Some readings may be characterized as structural-abolitionist, insofar as they conclude that marriage as an institution is definitively abolished in the age to come.⁶ Others advance an ontological-angelic interpretation, construing the comparison with the angels as implying a transformation

¹ E.g., Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1969), 191–93; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 424–27.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations in this study are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (NRSVUE).

³ E.g., Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1969), 191–93; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 424–27.

⁴ See Ben Witherington III, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 278–80.

⁵ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 716–18.

⁶ Representative of this approach is Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1951), 1:35–37.

of human nature incompatible with conjugal relations.⁷ A third approach adopts a functional-procreative reading, associating the absence of marriage with the elimination of sexuality and childbearing as constitutive dimensions of future human existence.⁸ Finally, certain interpretations rely on an argumentum *ex silentio*, assigning doctrinal significance to what the text does not explicitly affirm regarding marriage in the resurrection.⁹

Despite their differences, these approaches share a common hermeneutical assumption: they treat Jesus' response as operating on a single interpretive level and derive general conclusions from an argument formulated within a narrowly defined legal and narrative context.¹⁰ This study contends that such convergence rests upon a conflation of hermeneutical levels, in which legal, functional, and ontological categories are improperly collapsed, yielding conclusions that exceed what the text explicitly or implicitly affirms.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the radical discontinuity between present human existence and resurrection life in Luke 20:34–36. In particular, Gehring argues that Jesus' comparison of the resurrected to angels entails not merely the cessation of marriage as a social institution, but a more comprehensive ontological transformation, including the abolition of sexual differentiation and reproductive capacity.¹¹ While this reading rightly underscores the eschatological novelty of resurrection life and the centrality of immortality in Jesus' response, the present study diverges from Gehring's conclusions insofar as it argues that the negation of marriage in the text is best understood within its immediate juridical and functional framework—namely, the levirate logic presupposed by the Sadducean question—rather than as a categorical denial of the creational male–female binary as such at the ontological level. The disagreement, therefore, concerns not the eschatological

⁷ Cf. Dale C. Allison Jr., *Resurrecting Jesus* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2005), 241–43.

⁸ See Raymond F. Collins, "Marriage and Sexuality in the New Testament," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 366–69.

⁹ On the limits of *argumentum ex silentio*, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 476–78.

¹⁰ For a methodological critique of category collapse in biblical interpretation, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 287–90.

¹¹ René Gehring, "'They Will Be Like Angels.' Paradise Without Marriage?," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 27, nos. 1–2 (2016): 55–84.

CEBALLOS: MARRIAGE AND RESURRECTION RECONSIDERED

horizon of the passage itself, but the hermeneutical level at which discontinuity is to be located and interpreted.

From this perspective, Jesus' response is not intended to redefine marriage as a universal institution, nor to pronounce comprehensively on its existence in the life to come. Rather, his argument functions to dismantle a *reductio ad absurdum* constructed upon levirate marriage—a juridically contingent institution designed to address the problem of mortality through the preservation of lineage (Deut 25:5–10).¹² The negation of “marrying and being given in marriage” must therefore be read in relation to a legal practice whose rationale presupposes death and succession. Where the defining condition of that practice no longer obtains—because “they cannot die anymore” (Luke 20:36)—its function necessarily ceases.¹³ Within this framework, the comparison with the angels does not establish an ontological identity, but reinforces the central premise of immortality upon which Jesus' argument depends.¹⁴

Methodologically, the present study focuses on the Lukan formulation of the passage, not in disregard of its Synoptic parallels, but because Luke's redaction renders the internal logic of the argument with particular clarity.¹⁵ The analysis combines close lexical and grammatical examination of the Greek text with a narrative reading of the exchange between Jesus and the Sadducees, attending both to its juridical presuppositions and to the progression of its argumentative structure.¹⁶ This approach enables a more precise distinction between the levels at which Jesus' response operates and, in doing so, offers a hermeneutical correction that preserves both the internal coherence of the text and its interpretive limits. Accordingly, the article does not seek to replace one dogmatic reading with another, but to clarify what the Synoptic account—and Luke 20:34–36 in particular—does and does not claim regarding marriage, resurrection, and the life of the age to come.

¹² Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 85–102; Bernard S. Jackson, *Studies in the Semiotics of Biblical Law* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 215–28.

¹³ Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (SP 3; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 309–10.

¹⁴ Green, *Luke*, 719–20.

¹⁵ François Bovon, *Luke 3: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28–24:53* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 96–99.

¹⁶ On narrative and juridical readings in Luke, see David P. Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), 215–18.

This study builds upon and significantly expands a hermeneutical proposal previously advanced by the present author, now applied specifically to Luke 20:34–36 and developed with greater narrative and grammatical precision.¹⁷

**The Sadducean Challenge: Torah, Polemic,
and the Denial of Resurrection**

Jesus' enigmatic statement concerning marriage in the resurrection (Luke 20:27–40) stands at the intersection of biblical exegesis, Jewish interpretive traditions of the Second Temple period, and early Christian theology. The Synoptic tradition preserves this episode with notable consistency (Matt 22:23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–40), even while each Evangelist frames the exchange according to distinct theological and rhetorical emphases.¹⁸ The passage has therefore long functioned as a *crux interpretum* within New Testament eschatology and is frequently cited as decisive evidence for claims regarding the abolition of marriage in the life to come.¹⁹ Yet such readings often proceed as though the narrative were offering a direct metaphysical pronouncement, rather than responding to a carefully constructed juridical challenge.

To grasp the true nature of the Sadducean question, it is essential to identify the hermeneutical axis that governs the entire pericope: the resurrection. The debate does not arise from a neutral inquiry into marriage as a general institution, but from a highly specific legal case drawn from the Torah—namely, levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–10). This institution, deeply embedded in Israel's social and familial structures, functioned as a juridical mechanism to preserve lineage and inheritance in the face of death.²⁰ The Sadducees' appeal to this practice is therefore not incidental, but strategically calculated.

¹⁷ Pablo E. Ceballos, “¿Matrimonio en la Tierra Nueva? Un análisis exegético a Lucas 20:34–36 a la luz de Deuteronomio 25:5 y Ellen G. White” (Tesis de Licenciatura en Teología, Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2020).

¹⁸ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 712–15; François Bovon, *Luke 3* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 86–90.

¹⁹ Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1969), 191–93; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 424–27.

²⁰ Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 85–102; Bernard S. Jackson, *Studies in the Semiotics of Biblical Law* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 215–28.

CEBALLOS: MARRIAGE AND RESURRECTION RECONSIDERED

All three Synoptic Evangelists explicitly foreground the Sadducees' theological position at the outset, noting that they "say there is no resurrection" (Luke 20:27; cf. Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18). This narrative marker is not merely descriptive but programmatic.²¹ It establishes the polemical context of the exchange and signals that the ensuing question is designed not to clarify doctrine, but to expose what the Sadducees perceived as the internal incoherence of resurrection belief. The scenario of the woman who successively marries seven brothers is thus best understood as a *reductio ad absurdum*, a hypothetical extreme intended to ridicule the plausibility of life after death.²²

The internal logic of this *reductio ad absurdum* may be schematized as a repetitive juridical cycle, in which active levirate obligation is continually negated by death and the absence of offspring.

A	The husband took her as wife (active)→she is given as wife (passive)
X	He dies without leaving descendants
B	The second brother takes her (actively)→she is given (passively)
X	He dies without descendants
C	The third brother takes her (active)→she is given (passive)
X	He dies without descendants
D-G	The same pattern is repeated four more times
X	Finally, the woman dies childless

Table 1: Juridical Repetition and Narrative Escalation in the Sadducean Reductio

The cumulative effect of this repetition is deliberate narrative escalation. Each iteration reinforces the same juridical premise while simultaneously emptying it of purpose, until the entire levirate mechanism collapses under the weight of mortality.

The logic of the challenge depends upon a crucial assumption: that the legal and social arrangements governing life in "this age" must continue unmodified in the resurrected state. If resurrection entails continuity of personal identity, then—so the argument runs—it must also entail the perpetuation of marital obligations, including those mandated

²¹ Hugo A. Cotro, "Best Is Better Than Good: Christology and Progressive Revelation in Hebrews," *DavarLogos* 17, no. 2 (2018): 4–5.

²² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (SP 3; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 307–309.

by levirate law. The question, “In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?” (Luke 20:33; cf. Matt. 22:28; Mark 12:23) is therefore not an innocent query, but a rhetorical trap, constructed to force the doctrine of resurrection into contradiction by pressing juridical categories beyond their proper scope.

Jesus’ response refuses the premises of this argument. Rather than adjudicating the case within the Sadducees’ legal framework, he introduces a categorical distinction between “this age” and “that age” (Luke 20:34–35). This distinction is not merely temporal, but structural, marking the transition between two orders of existence governed by fundamentally different conditions. The institutions presupposed by levirate marriage are intelligible only within an economy shaped by mortality. Once death no longer defines the horizon of human life, the social mechanisms designed to counteract its effects necessarily lose their function.²³

The climactic assertion that those who attain to the resurrection “cannot die anymore” (Luke 20:36) thus functions as the decisive premise of Jesus’ argument. It is precisely this affirmation that invalidates the Sadducean extrapolation of levirate obligations into the eschatological state. Within this narrative logic, the negation of “marrying and being given in marriage” addresses the specific juridical practice invoked by the question, rather than issuing a comprehensive ontological judgment on marriage as such. Read within its Synoptic and legal context, the pericope dismantles a fictive legal construction rather than articulating a systematic theology of marriage in the life of the age to come.

This juridical logic is precisely what structures the Sadducean *reductio ad absurdum*. By absolutizing a contingent legal mechanism designed to mitigate death, the challenge illegitimately extrapolates the logic of mortality into the eschatological horizon. The force of the objection, therefore, does not arise from marriage per se, but from the misapplication of a death-governed institution to a state in which death itself has been abolished.

Narrative Logic and Hermeneutical Reorientation in Luke 20:27–40

Jesus’ response to the Sadducean challenge must be read not as a juridical ruling on a hypothetical case, but as a deliberate hermeneutical

²³ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 36–38.

CEBALLOS: MARRIAGE AND RESURRECTION RECONSIDERED

reorientation of the framework within which the question itself is posed. The Sadducees' appeal to levirate marriage presupposes the continuity of legal and social institutions across eschatological orders. Jesus exposes this presupposition as fundamentally flawed, not by disputing the Mosaic legislation itself, but by redefining the ontological conditions under which such legislation operates.²⁴

The narrative resolution thus performs a hermeneutical correction rather than a juridical adjudication. By relocating the discussion from a legal dilemma to a theological affirmation grounded in Scripture, the pericope reframes the question itself and exposes the category mistake underlying the Sadducean objection.

The narrative framing is decisive. All three Synoptic Evangelists explicitly foreground the Sadducees' theological stance at the outset: they "say that there is no resurrection" (Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27).²⁵ This preliminary marker is not merely descriptive, but programmatic. As Cotro has observed, New Testament authors frequently place the hermeneutical key to a pericope at its very beginning.²⁶ In this case, the denial of the resurrection governs the entire exchange and signals that the ensuing question is not a genuine inquiry into the nature of the age to come, but a rhetorical construction designed to expose what the Sadducees perceived as the internal incoherence of resurrection belief.²⁷

Within this polemical context, the appeal to levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–10) functions as an argumentative stratagem rather than as the substantive topic of debate. The scenario of the woman who successively

²⁴ On Jesus' response as a hermeneutical reorientation rather than a juridical ruling, see Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 720–724; cf. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 423–426. Both emphasize that Jesus does not dispute Mosaic legislation itself but challenges the eschatological assumptions brought to the text.

²⁵ Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27. On the programmatic function of this introductory marker, see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 266–268.

²⁶ On the placement of interpretive keys at the beginning of New Testament compositions, see Hugo A. Cotro, "Best Is Better than Good: Christology and Progressive Revelation in Hebrews," *DavarLogos* 17, no. 2 (2018): 4–5.

²⁷ The term ἀνάστασις ("resurrection") functions as the lexical-theological axis of the pericope. Beyond its initial appearance as a contextual marker (Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27), it is invoked within the Sadducean *reductio ad absurdum* (Matt 22:28; Mark 12:23; Luke 20:33) and reappears decisively in Jesus' apologetic response, where the eschatological framework is redefined (Matt 22:30–31; Mark 12:25–26; Luke 20:35–37).

marries seven brothers is best understood as a *reductio ad absurdum*: an intentionally extreme case meant to ridicule the plausibility of life after death by forcing resurrection belief to operate within the constraints of a mortal, inheritance-driven legal system.²⁸ Jesus does not engage the case on its own terms. Instead, he exposes the category mistake upon which the objection rests.

This mistake consists in treating legal institutions designed to mitigate death as ontologically binding in a state where death itself has been abolished. As Matthew and Mark make explicit, the Sadducean error lies in “You are wrong because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt 22:29; Mark 12:24). Luke, rather than reproducing this rebuke verbatim, embeds it within the structure of Jesus’ reply by grounding the negation of marriage in the abolition of death itself (Luke 20:36). The disagreement, therefore, is not over the interpretation of Deuteronomy, but over the eschatological conditions presupposed by resurrection.²⁹

Resurrection thus emerges as the governing hermeneutical key of the pericope. It is not one doctrinal theme among others, but the interpretive axis around which all other claims must be recalibrated. Jesus’ response preserves both the integrity of Israel’s legal traditions and the coherence of resurrection belief by refusing to project death-governed social structures indiscriminately into the life of the age to come. The internal logic of the exchange may be schematized as follows:

²⁸ On the levirate scenario as a *reductio ad absurdum* rather than a genuine legal inquiry, see Craig A. Evans, *Luke* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 293–294; cf. John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 175–177.

²⁹ Matt 22:29; Mark 12:24. For Luke’s distinctive way of embedding this critique within the logic of Jesus’ reply rather than stating it explicitly, see François Bovon, *Luke 3* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 79–82; cf. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 1640–1643.

CEBALLOS: MARRIAGE AND RESURRECTION RECONSIDERED

A	Sadducean prejudice: disbelief in the resurrection.
B	Biblical basis for the argument (Deut. 25:5-6)
C	Argumentative stratagem based on levirate dynamics
D	Perceived absurdity of the resurrection based on levirate reasoning
D'	Exposure of the problem as a “misunderstanding the Scriptures”
C'	Angelic equality that abolishes levirate marriage
B'	Implicit biblical basis for the resurrection (Ex. 3:6)
A'	Resolution of the case: Confirmation of the resurrection

Table 2: Narrative and Hermeneutical Flow of Jesus' Response to the Sadducean Challenge

This schematic representation clarifies that marriage—and specifically levirate marriage—functions as a means rather than an end in the argument. The narrative climax does not occur with the negation of marriage, but with the scriptural affirmation of resurrection grounded in God's self-designation as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Exod. 3:6 GNT).³⁰ The juridical problem posed by the Sadducees is resolved not by legal refinement, but by a hermeneutical shift from social institutions shaped by death to divine identity revealed in Scripture.

By reframing the debate in this manner, Jesus neither abolishes the Mosaic law nor generalizes about marriage as a transhistorical institution. Instead, he exposes the limits of juridical reasoning when detached from the ontological transformation implied by resurrection life. The force of the argument lies precisely in this reorientation: resurrection, not marriage, defines the horizon within which the Scriptures must be read and understood.

Lexical and Syntactical Observations in Luke 20:34–36

Jesus' response to the Sadducean challenge unfolds through a carefully structured sequence of lexical, syntactical, and discursive contrasts. These features are not merely stylistic, but carry the explanatory force of the pericope itself.

³⁰ On Exod 3:6 as the narrative and theological climax of the pericope, see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 425–426; cf. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 724–726, who underscores that the affirmation of resurrection—not the negation of marriage—constitutes the decisive resolution of the dispute.

The following lexical and syntactical observations are not offered as isolated grammatical curiosities, but as interpretive constraints that delimit the scope of legitimate inference. Grammar here functions not illustratively, but normatively, regulating what the text may and may not be made to say.

A close reading of Luke 20:34–36 demonstrates that Jesus does not offer an abstract statement about marriage as such; rather, he dismantles a juridical inference grounded in a categorical confusion concerning eschatological realities.

The argument begins with an explicit distinction between two modes of existence: οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου and οἱ καταξιοθέντες τοῦ αἰῶνος ἐκείνου τυχεῖν (vv. 34–35). The noun αἰών in this context denotes not merely a temporal sequence, but a qualitatively distinct order of life.³¹ In line with broader Jewish apocalyptic usage, “this age” is characterized by mortality and transience, whereas “that age” is defined by the definitive overcoming of death.³² This contrast establishes the hermeneutical framework within which social institutions referenced in the passage must be reassessed rather than uncritically projected into the age to come.

A	οἱ υἱοὶ (the children)
B	τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου (of this temporal order)
C	γαμοῦσιν καὶ γαμίσκονται (they marry and are given in marriage)
X	δὲ (but)
A'	οἱ καταξιοθέντες τυχεῖν (those considered worthy of obtaining)
B'	τοῦ αἰῶνος ἐκείνου (that temporal order)
	καὶ (and)
	τῆς ἀναστάσεως τῆς ἐκ νεκρῶν (the resurrection from the dead)
C'	οὔτε γαμοῦσιν οὔτε γαμίζονται (they neither marry nor are they given in marriage).

Table 3: Adversative and Symmetrical Structure of Luke 20:34–35

The transition between these two descriptions is marked by the particle δέ (οἱ δὲ καταξιοθέντες...). While δέ can carry adversative force in certain contexts, its function in *koine* narrative discourse is often mild, signaling differentiation or progression rather than emphatic

³¹ BDAG, s.v. “αἰών,” notes the qualitative dimension of the term in eschatological contexts.

³² George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 257–60.

CEBALLOS: MARRIAGE AND RESURRECTION RECONSIDERED

opposition.³³ In Luke 20:34–35, the contrast is generated not by the particle itself, but by the semantic content of the clauses it connects. To overstate the adversative force of *δέ* risks attributing to the particle a rhetorical weight the discourse itself does not sustain.

The repeated verbal pair *γαμοῦσιν καὶ γαμίζονται* appears in both verses, first affirmatively (v. 34) and then negatively (v. 35). This formal parallelism indicates that the same social practice remains in view throughout the exchange. The negation does not introduce a new category of relationship, but suspends the applicability of the previously named institution under altered eschatological conditions. The scope of Jesus’ denial is therefore determined by the scope of the Sadducean question itself.³⁴ The synoptic comparison presented in the corresponding chart clarifies that, while Matthew and Mark preserve the same argumentative core, Luke develops its internal logic with greater explicitness. The following synoptic comparison illustrates how Luke preserves the shared tradition while expanding its internal logic.

Matt. 22:29-30	Mark 12:24-25	Luke 20:34-36
²⁹ Jesus answered them, “You are wrong because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.	²⁴ Jesus said to them, “Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?	³⁴ Jesus said to them,
³⁰ For in the resurrection people neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels of God in heaven.	²⁵ For when people rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven.	“Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, ³⁵ but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶ Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.

*Table 4: Synoptic Comparison of Matt 22:29–30;
Mark 12:24–25; Luke 20:34–36*

³³ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 673–75.

³⁴ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 724–26.

The causal clause in v. 36—οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀποθανεῖν ἔτι δύνανται—provides the decisive rationale for the preceding negation. The conjunction γάρ introduces the grounding premise of the argument: the abolition of death. The form of marriage presupposed in the Sadducean scenario operates within a social and legal system structured by mortality and designed to mitigate its consequences. Where death no longer functions as a constitutive reality, the juridical logic sustaining levirate marriage ceases to apply.³⁵ The argumentative flow chart included at this point makes visible that the negation concerns function rather than ontology.

X _A	γὰρ (because)
A	οὐδὲ ἀποθανεῖν ἔτι δύνανται (for they can no longer die)
X _B	γὰρ (because)
B	εἰσιν ἰσάγγελοι (for they are equal to angels)
X _C	καὶ (and)
C	εἰσιν υἱοὶ θεοῦ (they are children of God)
X _D	ὄντες (being)
D	υἱοὶ τῆς ἀναστάσεως (sons of the resurrection)

Table 5: Causal Structure of Luke 20:36

Further clarification is offered by the comparative expression ἰσάγγελοι γάρ εἰσιν. This analogy has often been misread as implying an ontological transformation of humanity into a non-embodied or non-relational state.³⁶ Yet the comparison is explicitly limited by the immediately following explanatory clause: “for they cannot die anymore.” Immortality—not angelic nature as such—constitutes the point of correspondence.³⁷ Luke’s broader use of angelic analogies confirms that such comparisons are selective and functional rather than

³⁵ Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 85–102; Bernard S. Jackson, *Studies in the Semiotics of Biblical Law* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 215–228.

³⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), 83–85; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1972), 227–229. For a contrasting interpretation that limits the comparison to functional immortality rather than ontological transformation, see Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 294–296; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 421–424.

³⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 421–424.

CEBALLOS: MARRIAGE AND RESURRECTION RECONSIDERED

substantial.³⁸ The accompanying explanatory table helps to delimit the scope of the analogy and guards against ontological overextension.

Level	Domain	Textual Affirmation	Textual Denial	Does <i>Not</i> Address
Legal	Levirate Marriage (Deut 23:5-10)	The levirate institution belongs to “this age” and serves purposes related to mortality and succession.	The continuation of levirate obligations in “that age.”	The abolition or continuation of marriage as a general institution.
Functional	Marriage social practice	Marriage operates within the context of death, inheritance, and procreation.	The necessity of marriage where death no longer exists.	The relational or affective dimensions of marriage.
Ontological	Human status in the resurrection	Resurrected humans are “like angels” and “children of God,” defined by resurrection life.	Mortality is a constructive feature of human existence.	Sexual differentiation, embodiment, or personal identity.
Eschatological	Resurrection life	Participation in “that age” and in “the resurrection from the dead.”	Any continuity of death-governed social structures.	A comprehensive doctrine of the afterlife.

Table 6: Hermeneutical Scope and Limits of Luke 20:34–36

The final clause—καὶ υἱοὶ εἰσιν θεοῦ τῆς ἀναστάσεως υἱοὶ ὄντες—introduces the present participle ὄντες. While participles may at times bear definitional force, the construction here is best read as descriptive. The phrase affirms filial identity in relation to resurrection without

³⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 1643–1645.

collapsing human ontology into resurrection status alone.³⁹ To press the participial form into an exhaustive ontological definition would exceed its grammatical function and distort the emphasis of the passage.

To treat the participial construction as ontologically exhaustive would be to impose later metaphysical concerns onto a narrative argument whose purpose is explanatory rather than definitional. The grammar supports continuity of identity within resurrection life, not a speculative reconfiguration of human ontology.

Significantly, the text remains silent regarding marriage as a transhistorical institution. This silence is rhetorically sufficient for Jesus' immediate purpose, but hermeneutically limited. Arguments drawn from such silence must therefore be advanced with caution. The passage clearly rejects the extension of levirate obligations into the resurrected state, yet it neither affirms nor denies the existence of marital relations beyond that specific juridical framework.⁴⁰ The final summary table delineates with precision what the text affirms, what it negates, and what it leaves unaddressed.

Silence, therefore, functions here not as a source of doctrine, but as a limit to inference. The pericope authorizes neither the affirmation nor the denial of marriage beyond the specific juridical framework under dispute.

Taken together, the lexical and syntactical features of Luke 20:34–36 expose the categorical confusion underlying the Sadducean challenge. By distinguishing between ages, functions, and conditions of existence, the text preserves the coherence of resurrection belief while dismantling an objection constructed on juridical premises inapplicable to the life of the age to come.

Angelic Likeness and the Logic of Immortality

A central element in Jesus' response to the Sadducees is the assertion that those who attain to the resurrection are "like angels" (ἰσάγγελοι, Luke 20:36). This comparison has played a disproportionate role in the reception history of the passage, frequently serving as the basis for ontological or anthropological conclusions that extend well beyond the argumentative scope of the pericope. A careful examination of Luke's

³⁹ Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 187–189.

⁴⁰ Richard Bauckham, "Resurrection as Transformation," in *The Bible, Theology, and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 143–146.

CEBALLOS: MARRIAGE AND RESURRECTION RECONSIDERED

formulation, however, indicates that the angelic analogy is neither exhaustive nor metaphysical in intent, but tightly circumscribed by the logic of immortality that governs the entire exchange.

In Luke's account, the comparison with the angels is explicitly introduced and immediately qualified by a causal clause: "for they cannot die anymore" (οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀποθανεῖν ἔτι δύνανται, Luke 20:36). Grammatically and rhetorically, the γὰρ clause functions as an explanatory justification for both the negation of marriage and the angelic comparison itself. The likeness to angels is not presented as an independent assertion, but as a corollary of the abolition of death. In other words, immortality—not angelic ontology—constitutes the shared point of reference between resurrected humans and angels.⁴¹

This observation is decisive for delimiting the force of the analogy. Luke does not suggest that resurrected humans become angels, nor that they assume angelic modes of existence in a comprehensive sense. Rather, the comparison operates at a single, clearly defined level: freedom from death. Within Jewish apocalyptic literature, angels regularly function as paradigmatic examples of immortal life rather than as models for human transformation in all respects.⁴² Luke's use of the comparison is consistent with this broader tradition and resists later speculative expansions.

Nothing in the text suggests that other attributes commonly associated with angels in Jewish or early Christian literature—such as incorporeality, asexuality, or heavenly function—are transferred to resurrected humanity. To infer such features would be to sever the comparison from the explanatory logic that immediately defines it.⁴³

The danger of overextending the angelic analogy becomes apparent when it is detached from its immediate explanatory function. Read in isolation, "like angels" has often been taken to imply the absence of embodiment, the elimination of sexuality, or the dissolution of relational bonds. Yet none of these elements is stated, implied, or required by the text. The logic of Jesus' argument does not proceed from angelology to

⁴¹ On the explanatory function of γὰρ in Luke 20:36 and its role in delimiting the scope of the angelic comparison, see François Bovon, *Luke 3: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28–24:53* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 63–65.

⁴² For angels as paradigms of immortality in Second Temple Jewish literature, see Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 27–41.

⁴³ Cf. 1 En. 15:4–7; Tob 12:15; Heb 1:14, where angelic identity is defined by functions and modes of existence not presupposed in Luke 20:36.

anthropology, but from immortality to the obsolescence of death-governed institutions. To reverse this logic risks inverting the argumentative flow of the passage.

Moreover, Luke's distinctive expansion of the tradition further constrains the interpretation. Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke adds the affirmation that the resurrected are "children of God" and "children of the resurrection" (Luke 20:36). These filial designations ground resurrection identity not in angelic resemblance, but in divine action and eschatological participation. The emphasis falls on relational status vis-à-vis God rather than on a redefinition of human nature along angelic lines.⁴⁴ The angelic comparison, therefore, functions as an illustrative analogy, while sonship provides the primary theological category.

Within this framework, the negation of marriage in the resurrection must be read functionally rather than ontologically. The levirate institution presupposes death, succession, and the preservation of lineage. Where death is abolished, the legal rationale that sustains such arrangements collapses. The angelic comparison serves to reinforce this point by identifying immortality as the decisive condition of the resurrected state. It does not, however, authorize conclusions about marriage as a creational or transhistorical institution, nor does it address the broader relational capacities of resurrected humanity.

Accordingly, the passage neither affirms nor denies marriage beyond the specific juridical framework invoked by the Sadducean challenge. Its silence on other dimensions of relational life is not accidental, but intrinsic to the narrowly targeted logic of Jesus' response. The angelic analogy clarifies why the Sadducean *reductio* fails; it does not supply a comprehensive anthropology of the age to come. Any interpretation that treats it as such risks attributing to the text claims it does not make and obscuring the precision of its argument.

Conclusion: Correcting Categories, Preserving Resurrection Hope

The present study has sought to engage critically with the dominant interpretive traditions that have shaped the reception of Luke 20:34–36, particularly those that appeal to this pericope as decisive evidence for the abolition of marriage in the eschatological age. When examined closely, these readings reveal a recurring hermeneutical pattern: the failure to

⁴⁴ On the theological significance of "children of God" and "children of the resurrection" in Luke, see Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 719–721.

CEBALLOS: MARRIAGE AND RESURRECTION RECONSIDERED

distinguish between legal, functional, and ontological levels of discourse, resulting in conclusions that extend beyond the textual and argumentative limits of Jesus' response. The corrective task of this study, therefore, has not been to deny the eschatological transformation affirmed in the passage, but to clarify the precise locus and scope of that transformation.

At the legal level, the traditional appeal to Luke 20:34–36 frequently universalizes what is, in fact, a juridically contingent institution. The Sadducean scenario presupposes the levirate law, a specific Torah-based mechanism designed to address the problem of death through succession and the preservation of lineage. Jesus' response does not abolish marriage as a creational reality, but exposes the incoherence of projecting a death-mitigating legal structure into a state of existence in which death no longer operates. The hermeneutical correction at this level consists in recognizing that the negation articulated in the passage applies to a legal arrangement whose validity is bound to historical and mortal conditions, not to marriage in an absolute or transhistorical sense.

At the functional level, many interpretations correctly observe that marriage in "this age" is closely associated with procreation and social continuity, yet err by allowing this functional observation to determine the essence of marriage itself. Luke's contrast between the two ages makes clear that the cessation of death renders certain functions obsolete, but the disappearance of a function does not entail the negation of the relational reality that once carried it. The hermeneutical confusion corrected here lies in the collapse of function into ontology: what no longer serves a purpose under conditions of immortality is assumed to lose its meaning altogether. The text, however, warrants only the conclusion that marriage as a response to mortality is no longer operative, not that human relationality is thereby annulled.

At the ontological level, interpretations that posit a transformation of resurrected humans into angel-like beings often exceed the grammatical and semantic constraints of the passage. Luke's formulation carefully limits the comparison with angels through the explanatory γάρ in Luke 20:36, grounding the likeness exclusively in the condition of immortality. To infer from this analogy a loss of embodied, differentiated, or relational human existence introduces metaphysical assumptions foreign to the text and shifts the focus away from the resurrection itself. The hermeneutical correction at this level consists in resisting the move from analogy to identity and in allowing the

comparison to function precisely as the argument requires—no more and no less.

These hermeneutical clarifications are grounded not in abstract theological reconstruction, but in sustained attention to the lexical, syntactical, and narrative features of Luke's account. The analysis of the verbal pair *γαμοῦσιν* / *γαμίζονται*, the deliberate age-contrast structuring of the pericope, and the explanatory force of *γάρ* in Luke 20:36 collectively delimit the scope of Jesus' negation and anchor it firmly within the logic of the resurrection argument. Moreover, the narrative setting of a juridical *reductio ad absurdum* posed by the Sadducees governs the flow and intent of Jesus' response, ensuring that its force remains polemical and contextual rather than speculative or systematic. These textual features converge to show that the passage itself constrains interpretation and resists readings that project onto it conclusions foreign to its lexical and narrative economy.

Taken together, these findings reorient the interpretation of Luke 20:34–36 away from speculative reconstructions of eschatological social life and back toward the text's central concern: the vindication of the resurrection against a challenge rooted in death-bound categories. When the distinct hermeneutical levels are respected, it becomes evident that the passage does not deny marriage in the life to come, but rather denies the applicability of levirate marriage—and, by extension, of marital arrangements whose *raison d'être* is inseparable from mortality. In this way, the enigma addressed by Jesus is not the fate of marriage, but the radical discontinuity between a world governed by death and an age defined by resurrection life. By correcting the confusion of interpretive levels, this study offers a coherent and textually grounded reading of Luke 20:34–36, one that preserves the integrity of the passage while illuminating the theological logic that undergirds it.

By correcting the confusion of interpretive levels and restoring resurrection to its proper hermeneutical centrality, this study contributes not only to the exegesis of Luke 20:34–36, but to broader discussions of eschatological anthropology, narrative hermeneutics, and the limits of doctrinal inference in New Testament interpretation.

CEBALLOS: MARRIAGE AND RESURRECTION RECONSIDERED

Pablo E. Ceballos holds a Licentiate in Theology from Universidad Adventista del Plata (Argentina). His research focuses on New Testament exegesis and resurrection eschatology, with particular attention to Lukan theology, juridical hermeneutics, and the interpretation of Luke 20:27–40 in relation to levirate marriage. His work also includes critical engagement with eschatological themes in the writings of Ellen G. White. He has contributed historical and biographical entries to the *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*. He may be contacted at ceballos.pablo.e@gmail.com.