Incarnation or resurrection – Acts 13:32-33

(Unpublished paper by Iver Larsen, REVISED November 2024)

The Greek word ἀναστήσας (having raised up) in Acts 13:33 is often misunderstood as if it refers to the resurrection. It actually refers to raising up Jesus as the promised prophet, so it refers to the incarnation when God sent his Son to the world.

NIV translates the two verses as follows:

We tell you the good news: what God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: "You are my son; today I have become your father."

I shall focus on the portion that reads in Greek according to the NA text: ὅτι ταύτην ὁ θεὸς ἐκπεπλήρωκεν τοῖς τέκνοις [αὐτῶν] ἡμῖν ἀναστήσας Ἰησοῦν.

Some translations make the resurrection explicit:

Good News Bible: And we are here to bring the Good News to you: what God promised our ancestors he would do, he has now done for us, who are their descendants, by *raising Jesus **to life***. As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.'

There are some serious textual problems in the Greek text of v. 33, but we first need to discover what this promise to the Jewish forefathers was. Peter, Stephen, and Paul were keen on explaining to their audiences that Jesus was the prophet to replace Moses that God had promised in Deut 18:15,18. Peter refers to it in Acts 3:22, Stephen refers to it in Acts 7:37 and Paul refers to it in Acts 13:33.

Acts 3:22: For Moses said, "The Lord your God **will raise up for you a prophet** like me from among your own people; (NIV)

Greek: Προφήτην **ὑμῖν ἀναστήσει** κύριος ὁ θεὸς (Lord God will raise up for you a prophet.) Notice that the pronoun "for you" (ὑμῖν) precedes the verb "raise up."

Acts 7:37: This is the Moses who told the Israelites, "God **will raise up for you a prophet** like me from your own people. (NIV)

Greek: Προφήτην **ὑμῖν ἀναστήσει** ὁ θεὸς (A prophet for you will raise up God or in normal English word order: God will raise up a prophet for you.) Notice again that the pronoun "for you" (ὑμῖν) precedes the verb.

So, we need to look at the promise in Deut 18:15: The Lord your God **will raise up for you** a prophet like me (NIV).

Greek LXX: προφήτην ἐκ τῶν ἀδελφῶν σου ὡς ἐμὲ **ἀναστήσει σοι** κύριος ὁ θεός σου (A prophet from your brothers/countrymen like me the Lord your God will **raise up for you**.

Paul refers to this very promise to the Jewish forefathers in Acts 13:33, but a copyist apparently got confused.

NA28 Greek says: καὶ ἡμεῖς ὑμᾶς εὐαγγελιζόμεθα τὴν πρὸς τοὺς πατέρας ἐπαγγελίαν γενομένην, 33 ὅτι ταύτην ὁ θεὸς ἐκπεπλήρωκεν *τοῖς τέκνοις [αὐτῶν]* **ἡμῖν ἀναστήσας** Ἰησοῦν

NA25 Greek says: καὶ ἡμεῖς ὑμᾶς εὐαγγελιζόμεθα τὴν πρὸς τοὺς πατέρας ἐπαγγελίαν γενομένην, 33 ὅτι ταύτην ὁ θεὸς ἐκπεπλήρωκεν *τοῖς τέκνοις* **ἡμῖν ἀναστήσας** Ἰησοῦν

Literal: and we to you are announcing (concerning) the promise given *to the fathers*, 33 that this (promise) God has (now) fulfilled *for the children* [their] **having raised up for us** Jesus.

In both Acts 3:22 and 7:37 the pronoun **ὑμῖν** (for you) precedes the verb *to raise up* as the beneficiaries of the promise. This Greek word order puts emphasis on YOU (the audience). These two have ὑμῖν (for you) since it is a direct quote from Deut 18. Paul changes it to an indirect quote as he wants to emphasize that the promise has now been fulfilled for us (ἡμῖν). In Deut 18 the pronoun follows the verb for raising up, but it clearly connects to the verb.

The earliest manuscripts do not have αὐτῶν (their) and this word is unlikely to be original (See NA25 above). If we assume that the text in NA25 correctly captures the original, what happened in the copying of manuscripts? The earliest manuscripts are unanimous in reading *τοῖς τέκνοις* **ἡμῶν ἀναστήσας** Ἰησοῦν "for **our** children having raised up Jesus." This makes no sense and cannot be original. It probably arose from a misunderstanding as a very early copyist did not recognize that **ἡμῖν** goes with **ἀναστήσας** (raised up for us), but a genitive "our" (**ἡμῶν)** fits better with "children." This early "correction" was then copied to subsequent manuscripts. Later copyists realized that the pronoun should in fact be **ἡμῖν** (for us), but they also added the genitive *αὐτῶν* to get "for their children." In this case the pronoun "for us" is seen as an apposition to "for the(ir) children" giving the sense "for us, their children." Whether this beneficiary is connected to the fulfilment of the promise or the raising up is not clear. This reading then became the standard in most manuscripts. But there is no need to add a possessive pronoun (our or their) to the children just like there is no possessive pronoun on the fathers. The promise was given to "the fathers" and fulfilled for "the children." Paul is talking to a mixed group of Jews (Israelites) and Greek proselytes (God-fearers) in the synagogue in Antioch (13:16). This means that the forefathers were not the forefathers of all the listeners, but only of the Jews. However, Jesus was sent to this world for all of us, Jews as well as Gentiles. For these reasons, I suggest that NA25 has captured the original and the pronoun **ἡμῖν** (for us) should be connected with **ἀναστήσας** (having raised up) to get the sense: "God has fulfilled the promise for the children by having raised up Jesus for us." It is possible, but I think less likely, to connect **ἡμῖν** with **τοῖς τέκνοις** to get "God has fulfilled the promise for us, the(ir) children, by having raised up Jesus." Another translation option might be: "God has fulfilled the promise by having raised up Jesus for us, the(ir) children." These variations do not make much difference to the meaning.

Because Peter, Stephen and Paul quote a very well-known promise of the Messiah as a new prophet like Moses, they emphasize to their audience that Jesus is that promised prophet whom God has raised up (sent to earth or caused to appear). It has nothing to do with the resurrection. Paul supports the concept of the incarnation with a quote from Psalm 2:7: *You are my son; today I have become your father*. The point seems to be that Jesus is different from Moses in that he is the Son of God. The same verse from Psalm 2:7 is quoted in Hebrews 1:5 and Hebrews 5:5. In 1:5 the topic is that Jesus as the Son of God is far superior to the angels. Heb 1:6 talks about bringing this Son into the world. It is the same idea as in Acts 13:33 but different words are used. Heb 5:5 talks about Jesus being qualified to be high priest, not because he came from the priestly line (descendants of Aaron), but because he was the Son of God. Jesus was and is an eternal High Priest.

When Paul turns to the resurrection in Acts 13:34 he says: God raised him *from the dead* so that he will never be subject to decay. Here Paul adds "from the dead" since it is the same Greek word for raising up. Without adding "from the dead" the meaning would not be clear.

In conclusion, if we accept that “for us” (ἡμῖν) goes with having raised up, we can with reasonable confidence suggest what is probably the original Greek text (as in NA 25) and it can be translated without the misguided reference to resurrection. It would be a slight revision of the NIV to become: “the promise (God) gave to the fathers/ancestors he has fulfilled for the children, by raising up Jesus for us.”

This has implications for how to interpret Psalm 2:7. It has nothing to do with being king, but being sent to earth as God’s Son.