Looking Ahead to the Resurrection Body:

Putting on the Imperishable

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Eternal Questions and Pastel Indifference

If Christians are to take seriously the witness of the New Testament and the promises of Jesus that those who believe in him shall have eternal life,¹ then hope and faith in this witness and these promises ought to shape the way in which believers live this life. Yet rarely do Christians today seriously consider what eternal life looks like. The phrase “eternal life” has become victim to the Christianeese² dictionary, which has swallowed up all sorts of beautiful and helpful words and turned them into Easter-egg-colored clichés. Christians consider “eternal life” to be perhaps analogous to the color lilac and not an eschatological hope or motivation for life.

Eternal life in Judeo-Christian thought is intrinsically tied to bodily resurrection. True belief in resurrection, it will be argued, is tied to living morally as embodied persons in this life. Three primary questions, then, drive this examination of eternal life and the resurrected body. The inquiry begins by asking, “What sort of existence do we have in eternal life? Is it bodily or spiritual? How are we to understand the biblical promise of eternal life?” Only after this issue is addressed will it be asked, “What do our resurrected bodies look like? (And how much can we even know about what they will look like?)” Lastly, the hermeneutical question will be raised: “What difference does all of this make to us now?”

¹ See Matthew 19.29; Mark 10.30; Luke 18.30; John 5.24; 6.40; 6.47, 6.54, 10.28; Acts 13.48; Romans 2.7; Galatians 6.8; Titus 1.2; 1 John 5.13.
² Christianeese is most commonly used by high school youth pastors in phrases such as, “Being sold-out for God”, “Rejoicing in your walk with the Lord”, and “Being a prayer warrior.” Christianeese merchandise was popularized by “WWJD” bracelets and XXL t-shirts imitating pop-culture advertising slogans through somewhat biblical pithy sayings sold by Christian bookstores everywhere.
What sort of existence do we have in eternal life?

Before the question of the nature of the resurrection body can be addressed, the concept of eternal life and its theological roots must be examined. It will be helpful to break the question, “What sort of existence do we have in eternal life?” into three sub-queries: First, how is eternal life different from the Platonic concept of immortality of the soul? Why is eternal life so radical in Judeo-Christian thought? Second, why does Judeo-Christian theology come to value eternal life so highly? Finally, why is eternal life necessarily connected to bodily resurrection? What is it about life which implies embodiment, even in an eschatological context?

How is eternal life different from immortality of the soul?

The basis for most popular conceptions of eternal life is the presupposition that the human soul is inherently immortal. This idea has its roots in Platonic philosophical reasoning. Plato and his followers held that the soul is eternal: that it both pre-existed the body and cannot be killed or destroyed after the body dies. Their belief sprung from a dualistic understanding of the cosmos. Matter – including the human body – is evil and temporary. Spirit (including the soul) exists in the realm of Eternal Ideals, which are perfect and timeless.3

The question of what eternal life looks like, then, is for Plato and the Neo-Platonists, “Where does the soul go once it is ‘freed’ from the body?” Some philosophers supposed that the soul is simply recycled into another body, reincarnated in Hindu-like

3 Gillman, The Death of Death, 57.
fashion. Most assumed that the soul goes to the higher realm of the spiritual, a heaven of sorts which is glorious because it is free of evil matter. The Gnostic writers picked up on this idea and ran with it.\(^4\) So, in more recent times, did Jonathan Edwards.

The basis for Edwards’s theology of eternal life or damnation was his assumption that the human soul is immortal – it must therefore spend eternity in either heaven or hell.\(^5\) It is not death which is an enemy; death is only a natural and even good transition from this base and “evil” physical life to the “real” spiritual life of the immortal soul. The enemy, in some sense, is rather Edwards’s “angry God”. The fear of death is the fear of judgment.

The Hebraic understanding of death is rather different. Death is not a dualistic separation of the good soul from the corrupt material body or a natural transition from one type of life to another. Death is a person’s ultimate enemy, “and only God himself is more powerful.”\(^6\) Death is the enemy because it is truly death, truly the end of life – life understood as both bodily and spiritual.\(^7\) The “overwhelming biblical view” in the Old Testament is that death is final and complete.\(^8\)

For a first-century Jew to speak of eternal life, then, was for him to say something radical. It was not assumed by the Hebraic mind that the soul would live beyond the body’s death. As will be expounded later, a person is understood to be a single unit – and

\(^6\) Schweizer, “Body”, 768.
\(^7\) This paper is not addressing the issue of why death occurs. It is presupposed that human death is the result of sin, that “the wages of sin are death” (Romans 6.23). However, in the author’s opinion, this does not imply that the Platonic conception of an immortal soul is correct. The reason the wages of sin is death may not be so much because the sinful soul needs eternal punishment, but rather because the sinful person has turned away from the source of eternal life, God himself. Eternal life is contingent upon being in communion with God. Eternal life is a gift, not a given – even in Eden. See Conrade, “Resurrection, Finitude, and Ecology”, Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments, 277 – 282.
\(^8\) Gillman, The Death of Death, 51.
it is *as a unit* that he falls under the curse of sin.\(^9\) Eternal life is not the natural state of the soul. It comes about only because God is stronger and more sovereign even than death and because being in communion with him is to be in communion with Life. Moreover, it was not clear that eternal life would be given. From what we can tell from the Old Testament, early Judaism was a religion largely focused on *this* life, on living “attached to life”\(^10\) and to the covenant with Israel’s God *in this world*.

*Why did Judeo-Christian theology come to value eternal life so highly?*

Yet even in the Old Testament there are hints at the sovereignty of God over death. Daniel 12.2-3 is one of the clearest examples of a passage pointing toward postmortem eternal life, explaining that “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”\(^11\) It may be that the book of Daniel was written late into the Second Temple period, but it nevertheless reflects a line of thinking which was – however foreign– still consistent with the theological seeds planted in earlier Jewish writings.

Isaiah 25.7-8 exemplifies this earlier formulation of theology.\(^11\) Here, death is “swallow[ed] up forever”; life is safeguarded for eternity. As one scholar writes, “there is no place for death anymore.”\(^12\) These verses come in the midst of the author portraying God as a conqueror and victor. God’s triumph over death is the culmination of his power

\(^10\) Martin-Achard, “Resurrection (OT)”, 680.
\(^11\) The dating of the “Isaianic Apocalypse” will not be discussed here. While many scholars would give it a later date than the rest of the book, there are a number who would disagree. Regardless of its date in comparison to the rest of Isaiah, it is almost certainly written before Daniel, which is what is important for this particular point. Schep, *The Nature of the Resurrection Body*, 52.
\(^12\) Ibid, 52.
over all forms of destruction and all enemies of his people. It follows from the idea earlier in the same chapter that God “has been a stronghold to the poor” (Isaiah 25.4). As God has helped the weak, so will he do so regarding humanity’s mortality.

The third Old Testament text which stands in opposition to the idea that the death of a human is final\(^{13}\) is Psalm 16.9-11. Here David\(^{14}\) expresses that God “will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.” While not a direct expression of belief in resurrection, it does seem that the psalmist is expressing a faith which conquers fear of death.\(^{15}\) The statement is reminiscent of the stories of Enoch and Elijah, those Old Testament characters who were “taken” (Genesis 5.24; 2 Kings 2.11) rather than experiencing death, rather than being “abandoned to Sheol.” Death and eternal life are contrasted by the way in which the person relates to his Creator: abandonment by or “walking with” (Genesis 5.23) God.

Jewish theologian Neil Gillman has expressed that the monotheistic Yahwistic faith of the Old Testament “demands the death of death”, even though the concept is so rarely explicitly stated in the Hebrew Scriptures. As in Isaiah, God is understood as the victor of all, conquering all fallenness and brokenness in the world.

“If God is truly God, if God’s will and power are absolute, then God must triumph over death as well. The death of death marks the final step in the triumph of the monotheistic God.”\(^{16}\)

The theology of eternal life, of God’s triumph over death, is not incompatible with Old Testament revelation – in fact, it naturally springs from the ancient writings. It is “based on YHWH’s power, on his justice, and on his love.”\(^{17}\)

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\(^{13}\) Gillman, *The Death of Death*, 51.
\(^{14}\) The author of the psalm according to its traditional superscription.
\(^{16}\) Gillman, *The Death of Death*, 259.
\(^{17}\) Martin-Achard, “Resurrection (OT)”, 684.
It should not be surprising, then, that a vibrant theology of postmortem existence was colorfully developed in the Second Temple Period writings. By the second century BC, Judaism generally asserted that death represented only one event in the “framework of human life” – but not necessarily the final one. By the first century AD, the central Jewish prayer, the Amidah, mentions the resurrection of the dead six times. As noted above, the Jewish eschatology which led to a development of a theology of eternal life and resurrection was founded on a traditional, Scriptural understanding of Israel’s covenant God. According to Gillman, “there was never a time when Judaism did not have some vision of an ideal end for humanity as a whole, for the Jewish people, and for each individual human.” This initially sounds like hyperbole, but it is true that even before the explicit formation of a resurrection-eschatology, Judaism did have a vision for “ideal ends” of individuals (perhaps with a prosperous old age, many descendents, and a peaceful end) and certainly for the Jewish people (the conquering of enemies and peace in the land of Israel).

But theodicy raised questions. The righteous suffered; the wicked prospered; God’s justice did not appear evident in this world. A theology of resurrection affirmed God’s justice and all the characteristics of YHWH that the Old Testament revealed. The resurrection was less an innovation of theology than it was a natural continuation of it. God has created and he can re-create. The world is not a failed experiment; God can restore even humanity’s failures. By the time the Mishnah was spoken and recorded,

18 Gillman, The Death of Death, 18.
19 The prayer became especially important and was mandated after the fall of the Temple in AD 70. It was likely composed slightly earlier in the same century. Crüsemann, “Scripture and Resurrection”, Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments, 99.
21 Martin-Achard, “Resurrection (OT)”, 684.
22 Ibid, 684.
denial of the resurrection was understood as excluding one from the age to come (Sanh. 10.1a). It is in this Jewish atmosphere that Jesus speaks and God reveals his power over death. In the resurrection of Jesus, “an action of God is shown that faith has already believed him to be doing.”

The New Testament presents the resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of the history of God with Israel and humanity so that it “finally and ultimately defines it.” This final event does not finalize history, but it re-directs it. The Christ event begins to re-create the cosmos. The representative of Israel is the fulfillment of the covenant and is the new model, the New Adam (Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15.45-49), for all who are “in him”. YHWH’s triumph over death has begun.

Why is eternal life necessarily connected to bodily resurrection?

To understand eternal life, it is necessary to take something of a step back and look simply at life. What is life? Does life require simply a sort of spirit or consciousness – or are our bodies necessary to our state of living?

As noted above, the Greek understanding of man was shaped by ontological dualism. The body was considered evil because it was matter. Additionally, the material body was only a hindrance to the real life of the person, which was the soul. The idea of

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23 Ibid, 680.  
25 Ibid, 95.  
26 Ibid, 95.  
27 Jesus is consistently understood this way in the Gospel accounts.  
28 See Matthew 5.17.  
immortality was accepted and understood by Platonic philosophers; the concept of resurrection was absurd. Why put a soul back into the prison of a body (cf. Acts 17)?

Yet biblical anthropology runs completely contrary to this dualistic vision of the person.30 Everything about the creation accounts in Scripture suggest that being men and women of flesh was part of the divine plan – it was, in fact, “very good.”31 Jewish literature repeatedly extols the body as a marvelous work of God.32 The Jews rejoiced in the material world rather than endorsing asceticism. As Augustine wrote, humans are *terra animata*, “animated earth,”33 and both the “animated” as well as the “earthly” parts of persons are to be understood as good creation. In the biblical accounts of the ascensions of Enoch and Elijah, nothing is written to suggest that they were escaping from a physical prison or that they ceased to be men of flesh.34 Why would eternal life not be bodily life? The physical world, including embodied life, was never understood in orthodox Judaism or Christianity to be created as flawed, inherently needing to be destroyed.

This is seen in the way in which the terms “body” and “flesh” are understood in the ancient Jewish and Christian literature. Traditional Judaism used the term “body” to refer to the *entire* person – the “heart-soul-might” person (Deuteronomy 6.5) – not just the physicality of a man.35 A person’s body is synonymous with his or her *self*.

Yet the Scriptural passages speaking of man’s flesh, the “physical substance of the body” (*basar* in Hebrew or *sark* in Greek), are sometimes misinterpreted through

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30 Gillman, *The Death of Death*, 75.
dualistic lenses. “Flesh” is used several times before the fall and is typically found in neutral contexts. Nevertheless, sometimes, such as in Genesis 6.12-13, connecting flesh and corruption are taken to point toward the inherent corruption of flesh. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, also, there seems to be a close connection between flesh and sin (as in the phrase “flesh of sin”). Many scholars, however, point out that the reason “flesh” is ever connected to sinfulness is because man’s flesh is the instrument by which he commits either sin or righteousness. This is true also of the Christian understanding of the connection between flesh and sin or righteousness. As one scholar notes, “The Christian in his physical soma, his body-of-flesh, is declared to be a member of Christ, a temple which is so holy that committing fornication means to sin against it.” The fleshly body can literally embody either corruption or righteousness.

It is true that the fleshly and embodied in Judeo-Christian thought is sometimes set up in a dichotomy. It is not, however, a dichotomy between evil flesh and pure spirit. Rather, the distinction lies between the perishable and mortal totality of man versus the holy and immortal nature of God. There is an emphasis on man as frail creature in contrast to the eternal and almighty God. In the New Testament passages of Matthew 16.17, Galatians 1.16, Ephesians 6.12, and Hebrews 2.14, the phrase “flesh and blood” is used to contrast the human with the divine or supernatural – not to contrast good and evil. For Paul and other early church leaders, body and spirit are viewed Hebraically – as a

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37 Ibid, 32.
38 Ibid, 33.
39 Ibid, 35.
41 Ibid, 202.
whole – and any corruption of flesh comes from its being used as a sinful instrument – despite its inherent goodness as creation.  

Interestingly, current philosophy supports the Hebraic understanding of man’s identity as being overwhelmingly connected to his body, which is exactly what the doctrine of the resurrection affirms. The fact that neuroscience increasingly points to the connectedness of intellectual, emotional, and possibly even moral traits with the physical or genetic makeup of a person should not surprise the Christian.

The spiritual and the physical are far more connected than the Gnostics would like to admit.

Humans are *terra animata*. Humans are embodied. And if humans are to be humans in eternal life, Judeo-Christian theologians and twenty-first century philosophers alike tell us, they will still be embodied.

Embodiment is a gift. It is necessary for social life; it constitutes “the very possibility of engagement with one another in this world or any other.” Through the body, man is connected to the rest of creation, with nature and history and society. The body is the means by which man experiences sensations and community, the way he experiences life. If there is *life* after death, then, it is contingent upon bodily resurrection – the resurrection of the *whole person*, body and soul, from death. If a person is to participate in the eternal Kingdom, he or she will be the same person before and after

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44 It is taken here that humans *will* be humans in eternal life. Whenever the biblical witness talks of eternal life or resurrection, it does so assuming this eternal life is given to humans and does not speak of a transformation of humans into another type of being. (Matthew 22.30 does indeed speak of humans being “like angels” in the resurrection, but not of their being actual angels.) In its symbolic and apocalyptic imagery, the book of Revelation still makes a distinction between the resurrected saints and the angelic and demonic beings.
46 Gillman, *The Death of Death*, 262.
resurrection. Eternally-living persons must be embodied persons, with a means of relating to other members of the Kingdom and the restored creation.48

That eternal life is embodied life was the view of the Jews who first expressed hope in life after death.49 Eschatological Jewish hope was material.50 Josephus attests to this when he describes the three prominent sects of first-century Judaism: the Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. According to Josephus, the Essenes believed in a sort of dualistic immortality of the soul, the Sadducees denied any postmortem life whatsoever, and the Pharisees held to the resurrection of the body.51 It is the Pharisees, though, Josephus tells his readers, who are most representative of the Jewish community and who are the truly pious.52 It is generally assumed that the Pharisees later became the leaders of the rabbinic movement after the fall of the Temple. Paul’s background (Acts 23.6; Philippians 3.5) was in this line of thinking, too, and his statements reflect an understanding of resurrection which is thoroughly whole-person-minded.

The biblical witness, understood in its totality, leaves no room for the dualistic perspective of Origen, who declared that “it is absurd”53 to suppose that any form of “passion” (linked with “flesh and blood”, in his mind) would exist in a perfect world.54 It was less absurd, according to Origen, to understand postmortem persons as having a sort

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48 Ibid, 208.
51 Nickelsburg, “Resurrection (Early Judaism and Christianity)”, 688; Gillman, The Death of Death, 118; Josephus, The Jewish War, 2.119.
52 Josephus notes that he himself belonged to a Pharisaeic group. Josephus, Life, 11.
54 Origen understood clearly how connected “passion” and “flesh and blood” are. Refusing to see either of these aspects of creation as good, he chose to (as Edward Gibbon so delightfully writes) “disarm the tempter.” Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 156.
of spiritual, “spherical life”, according to the Platonic idea that the sphere is the perfect shape.\(^55\)

If YHWH is truly all-powerful and able to overcome death, if the promises of Jesus about “eternal” or “everlasting” life are to be believed, then the Hebraic, biblical understanding of life must be connected to postmortem existence. One scholar sums this up, explaining,

“For Israel there could be no victory over death except that of a state of existence which called for a complete renewal of the human being. The resurrection of the dead, that is, of the body, is etched within the logic of Old Testament concepts.”\(^56\)

The totality of the person – body and soul – is mortal; the totality of the person – body and soul – will be saved from death.\(^57\) Any discussion of eternal life in the New Testament presupposes Jesus’s resurrection as the model for all believers\(^58\) and there is no legitimate usage of the word “resurrection” without the bodily aspect,\(^59\) as will be further elaborated below.\(^60\)

**What do our resurrected bodies look like?**

Asking what our resurrected bodies look like or how they operate might in some respects be getting oneself into shadier territory. Though Scripture makes it clear that

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\(^{56}\) Martin-Achard, “Resurrection (OT)”, 683.

\(^{57}\) Gillman, *The Death of Death*, 271.

\(^{58}\) Nickelsburg, “Resurrection (Early Judaism and Christianity)”, 688.


\(^{60}\) An interesting question which cannot be addressed here because of space constraints is one of when the resurrected life begins – whether one assumes a resurrected existence immediately after death or is in some sort of intermediate state between death and a general resurrection. See Lampe, “Paul’s Concept of a Spiritual Body”, *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, 110 for some discussion on an “intermediate state”. John 11.25-26 and Galatians 6.14-15 seem to speak of eternal life and the new creation as beginning *now*, in this life, when a person is “in Christ.” To consider eternal life as beginning before death, see Schweizer, “Body”, 765 and Beasley-Murray, “Dying and Rising with Christ”, 221.
resurrection is not “simply the resuscitation of a corpse”, the characteristics of that resurrected body are quite undefined.⁶¹ Three primary sources of information will be explored below to try to understand the resurrected body: the Scriptural accounts of Jesus’s resurrected body, Paul’s writings on the resurrection (focusing particularly on 1 Corinthians 15), and an examination of Eden.

*What can we know about the resurrected body from the resurrection of Jesus?*

All discussion of resurrection in the New Testament centers on the death and resurrection of Christ and on sharing in this new life of Christ. The Christian’s hope for resurrection is completely Christocentric.⁶² The resurrection of the dead is an eschatological event, defining the history of the people of God,⁶³ and is inaugurated in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Eternal life has begun even now. It is patterned after the resurrected life of Christ, described in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 as the New Adam.

Romans 6.3-11 explains that Christians share in the crucifixion of Christ, putting to death an “old self”, and will likewise share in Christ’s resurrection.⁶⁴ Sin and death no longer have dominion over the one who has participated in Christ’s death. Likewise, 2 Corinthians 5.14-21 portrays Christ in his death and resurrection as representative of humanity and as the model for the human race.⁶⁵ All hope of resurrection in Paul’s

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⁶⁵ Beasley-Murray, “Dying and Rising with Christ”, 219; Nickelsburg, “Resurrection (Early Judaism and Christianity)”, 689; see also 1 Thessalonians 4.14 and 1 Corinthians 1.5.
writings hinges on the fact that Jesus is the forerunner and example of the resurrected life. In Paul’s understanding, insofar as Christians participate in the life and death of Jesus, they will also participate in the resurrection of the Messiah, who is the New Adam.

This is seen clearly in Philippians 3.10-11, where Paul connects knowing Christ with knowing “the power of his resurrection.” Paul expresses hope that he may become like Christ “in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead”. Jesus is the exemplar of the resurrected person. By his resurrection, Christians may fully trust that they too may share in bodily eternal life for it has come to earth in the person of Jesus. As Karl Barth writes in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15, this fully human life is not

“behind us… like a Platonic idea… a truth which is only in heaven… No, it becomes our truth, not by our undertaking the hopeless task of going to heaven, but by its coming to us from heaven.”

66 Barth, The Resurrection of the Dead, 199.


One way to view the resurrected body, then, is to examine the biblical accounts of the resurrected Jesus. Unfortunately, readers are left with a variety of somewhat contrasting verbal pictures in this regard. In all the Gospel accounts, Jesus is seen bodily. But sometimes he is recognized (Matthew 28.9; John 20.20; John 21.7, 12), while other times the witnesses to his resurrected body are initially oblivious to his identity (Luke 24.13-24; John 20.15). Jesus eats (Luke 24.41-43; John 21.13-15), as he did before his death and resurrection (Matthew 9.11, 11.19, 26.21; Mark 2.16, 14.22; Luke 7.34, 7.36, 14.1). Yet he also vanishes (Luke 24.31) and appears miraculously behind locked doors (John 20.19, 26), moving in manners not normal for “regular” bodies.
The gospel writers wrote about the resurrection appearances of Jesus not to give a treatise on exactly what a resurrection body was like, but rather “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20.31). It was enough for Luke to note that Jesus “presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs” (Acts 1.3), while not precisely explaining these “proofs”. The passage which is most pertinent to this discussion is Luke 24.39, where Jesus says, “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.” The resurrection body of Jesus is he himself and is made of flesh and bones. He ascends to heaven in this very form.

Likewise, Christians can hope for heavenly bodies which are themselves and made of physical “stuff”.  

*What can we know about the resurrection body from Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 15?*

The longest chapter in the Pauline corpus, 1 Corinthians 15, is devoted completely to elucidating the resurrection and the resurrection body. Barth writes that this chapter “forms not only the close and crown of the whole Epistle, but also provides the clue to its meaning.”

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68 The issue of whether this is the same stuff as the premortem body unfortunately cannot be discussed here. See Schep, *The Nature of the Resurrection Body*, 53, for one writer who supposes that the resurrection body is indeed made of the same physical atoms as the first body. Lampe, “Paul’s Concept of a Spiritual Body”, *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, 113, argues that “[For Paul] the spiritual body of the resurrection can be created with or without transformed particles of the old one…” Likewise, Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 308, explains that “Paul does speak of a resurrection body and of resurrection of dead persons, but he does not speak of resurrection of the body or of resurrection in the same body.”

69 Kreitzer, “Resurrection”, 806.

70 Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 5.
presupposition that the dead will be resurrected.\textsuperscript{71} When he addresses the members of the Corinthian church who say that there is no resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15.12), Paul is addressing the fact that they cannot understand any of his teaching unless they receive the resurrection as truth. These Corinthians thought, “Here, on this crazy business of resurrection, we cannot agree with you,” and they did not even suppose that they consequently failed to agree with Paul on any subject.\textsuperscript{72}

The beginning of the chapter discusses what has already been expressed here: the relatedness of the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the faithful. Paul explains that the message of “first importance” (v. 3) is that Christ has died, he was buried, and “that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (v. 4). “So we preach,” Paul emphasizes, “and so you believed” (v. 11). The resurrection of Christ is a “meta-historical”\textsuperscript{73} event. It is the focus of the gospel message; it is the hope of Christians; through it – and it alone – is offered the gift of eternal life.

If the resurrection of Christ – if the gospel itself, for that matter – is to be believed, argues Paul, the resurrection of the human dead cannot be denied. “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (vss. 13-14). How can the resurrection of the dead be denied? God has proven that he is able to accomplish this act through the resurrection of the Christians’ Lord, Jesus.

Paul passionately explains that the gospel message is an eschatological one. The hope of the Christian reaches beyond this life: “If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (v. 19). It is not that the Corinthians are

\textsuperscript{71} Crüsemann, “Scripture and Resurrection”, Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments, 97.
\textsuperscript{72} Barth, The Resurrection of the Dead, 122.
\textsuperscript{73} Kreitzer, “Resurrection”, 806.
wrong to hope in Christ in this life, for they are rightly grasping the present transformative power of God. However, they are missing out on the eternal implications of Christ’s work. They are living Christian lives without any understanding of the permanence of God’s blessing and favor. Paul further explains the theological reasons for sharing in Christ’s resurrection. Christ is the New Adam (v. 22); he conquers all enemies, even death (v. 26); faith in him allows for freedom from fear of death and oppressive empire (v. 32). The Kingdom of God is further-reaching than the resurrection-denying Corinthians understand.

From verse 35 onward, Paul discusses the nature of the resurrection body. It must be noted that Paul was not trying to give an exact picture or thorough examination of the resurrection body. The main point of this chapter is simply to affirm the resurrection, to show the Corinthians that faith in the resurrection is necessary and understandable – even if not as logical as they might have liked. In answering the question, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body…?” (v. 35), Paul replies not with a systematic explanation but with an outburst: “You foolish person!” (v. 36)

“Don’t you get it?” he asks, exasperated. “Your objections are meaningless! Of course we’ll have bodies; of course they’ll be different from the ones we have now. But the point is the resurrection, folks, not the details!”

When this section in 1 Corinthians is used (or attempted to be used) to draw up conclusions about the precise nature of the resurrection body, it must be kept in mind that this was not Paul’s purpose in writing. It should not be expected that this chapter will answer all questions about the resurrection body.
The controlling image in Paul’s explanation is the metaphor of the seed. Just as one sows a seed, it “dies”, and it is then raised into a completely new and glorious plant, so too with human bodies. The bodies which are “sown” are “not the bod[ies] that [are] to be, but a bare kernel” (v. 37). There is continuity between the seed and the wheat plant – continuity even in the physical aspects. One seed becomes a wheat plant; another seed becomes “some other grain.” The identity of the seed does not change when it is transformed, but it is transformed. It becomes more fully itself.74

The image of the seed dying and rising anew may have conjured up associations in the Corinthians’ minds which are quite foreign to the twenty-first century Christian. The cult of Demeter and Persephone was immensely popular in the Greco-Roman world, and its religious myths and rituals revolved around the agrarian cycles – around seeds, growth, and harvest. The way in which the pious Greco-Roman would have understood seeds to operate was closely tied to the cycle of death and life lived out by Demeter and Persephone. Seeds did in fact die when they were buried. Whatever happened between sowing and harvest was a complete miracle, a mystery. The reason that the seeds lived out this cycle was that they modeled, in some sense, the life of Persephone. She, the vibrant and lifeful goddess, daughter of the goddess of grain, yearly went into Hades, the place of the dead, and returned. She went from life to death to life in a cyclical annual pattern – and, likewise, so too do seeds.

74 See C.S. Lewis’s Till We Have Faces for a beautiful examination of this very concept: that the resurrection body is one which is more fully the person. It is only the person given life by God who has a “face”. The resurrected person is the most real person. See also Witherington III, Conflict and Community in Corinth, 307: “God gives each seed its own plant body… Each person receives his or her own distinct body.”
Although Paul is not trying to endorse a Greco-Roman cult, he may be drawing on the understanding of “seeds” that the Corinthians might have held.\textsuperscript{75} He is evoking language of death and resurrection, of divine miracle and mystery.

Regardless of whether or not Paul meant to allude to the religious conception of “seed” the Corinthians may have held, the agrarian image is an excellent one, and vibrant even today. The post-resurrection body transcends the earthly body, though continuous with it in identity.\textsuperscript{76} Two key events happen at the death of both person and seed: “the dying of the seed and an act of creation by God.”\textsuperscript{77} Being sown and rising again applies to the body. The death and resurrection of a man is like the growth of a seed into a plant. It is not simply some conversion to a non-bodily existence.\textsuperscript{78}

Paul then goes on to discuss the dichotomy between the pre- and post-resurrection body, setting up a series of contrasts for his readers: perishable and imperishable; dishonor and glory; weakness and power. This list of contrasts culminates in his description of the body itself: “It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body” (v. 44). This verse has at times been understood to mean that the “sown” body is the physical one while the “raised” body is pure spirit, Gnostically freed from matter.

Yet a simple study of the language and context in which Paul wrote debunks this understanding of the text. Paul’s pairing of the \textit{psychikon} (translated “natural” by the ESV) with \textit{pneumatikon} (translated “spiritual”) is, as one Greek scholar has noted, “jolting.”\textsuperscript{79} On the cosmological scale which Paul has introduced in his other pairs of opposites, the most natural counterpart to \textit{pneumatikon} (in a Greek/dualist worldview)

\textsuperscript{75} Lampe, “Paul’s Concept of a Spiritual Body”, \textit{Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments}, 107.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Ibid}, 107.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Ibid}, 108.
\textsuperscript{78} Barth, \textit{The Resurrection of the Dead}, 191.
\textsuperscript{79} Johnson, “Turning the World Upside Down in 1 Corinthians 15”, 301.
would be *sarx* (“flesh”), not *psychikon* (simply meaning “pertaining to life”). Paul has refused to introduce *sarx*-related words into his collection of antitheses, suggesting that the difference between the pre- and post-resurrection existences is not that one is fleshly while the other is not.\(^{80}\)

If the difference between the *psychikon* soma (“body”) and the *pneumatikon* soma does not lie in the material makeup of these bodies, what does Paul mean by contrasting *psychikon* and *pneumatikon*? It may be helpful to understand what *kind* of adjectives these words are. Adjectives or qualifiers ending in –*ikon* typically do not refer to the *makeup* of the qualified noun, but rather to its *function*. Paul is not contrasting a body made up of natural life with a body made up of spirit, but rather a body *dominated* by this life with a body *empowered* by the Spirit.\(^{81}\) They are opposites, but not with regard to their material makeup. Their contrast has more to do with the presence or absence of this-lifely concerns or the Spirit.\(^{82}\)

When Paul writes in verse 50 that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God,” he is likely using the phrase “flesh and blood” as he does elsewhere, as in Galatians 1.16 and Ephesians 6.12, where “flesh and blood” is used to represent the mortal and perishable as opposed to the divine and immortal. If the passage is interpreted in this manner, it is not that material bodies cannot exist in the Kingdom of God, but rather that what is fallen and corrupted (and thus perishable) cannot exist in an imperishable Kingdom. “We shall be changed,” Paul writes (v. 51). We shall be changed

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\(^{80}\) *Ibid*, 301.

\(^{81}\) *Witherington III, Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 308.

\(^{82}\) *Johnson, “Turning the World Upside Down in 1 Corinthians 15”,* 303.
– not in a way which simply disposes of *sарx* and *psyche*, but in a manner in which such elements will be transformed and “clothed” in the new Kingdom.83

“For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (v. 53). Death will indeed be “swallowed up.” As Paul explains in 2 Corinthians, we groan in this body because we long “to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked” (2 Corinthians 5.2-3). In this section, Paul emphasizes that this event will not be like being unclothed, but rather being “further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (2 Corinthians 5.4).

The discussion of the body which Paul presents in 1 Corinthians 15.35-58 emphasizes that elements of both continuity and discontinuity exist between the pre- and post-resurrection body.84 The identity of a person remains the same, as the identity of a seed is in some ways the same as the identity of the grain into which it grows. Yet the nature and expression of this identity is vastly different, with new possibilities and potential.85 The eschatological hope is of something which transcends the body as we know it now86 – but not something which destroys our understanding of *body*. This is something bigger, more powerful than “mere resuscitation.”87

Passages like 1 Corinthians 15, emphasizing the radical transformation of the body in the eschaton, can help with questions such as, “How would it be possible for a human body to survive immortally?” and “Are natural laws different in the Kingdom of

83 Ibid, 306.
86 Russell, Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments, xiv.
God?” In 1 Corinthians and elsewhere, Paul responds to these inquiries in emphatic affirmatives.

Paul writes in Romans 8 that “the creation was subjected to futility… in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay” (vss. 20-21). Not our bodies only, but the “whole creation” will be “set free” in the eschaton. It is not known now what aspects of natural laws are parts of the creation’s “groaning” (v. 22), but it seems that these laws will be transformed. Nature, however it exists in a resurrected world, will permit the fullness of life intended originally by God.88 Questions about resurrected life which assume the scientific presupposition of *ceteris paribus* (“all else being equal” – a phrase necessary for the validity of the scientific method) with the current world cannot be answered.89

God will transform the world. All else is not equal.

*What can we know about the resurrected body by examining Eden?*

Methodius of Olympus, a fourth-century church father, described the resurrection in his work *Aglaophon he peri tes anastaseos* (*On the Resurrection*) through a metaphor. An artist cast a sculpture in gold. It was a perfect and beautiful sculpture, but at some point, it was defaced. The artist so loved his work and wanted it to be perfect that he melted it back into molten metal and re-molded it in an act of re-creation. The new creation was a restoration of the old, using the same material and mold, for these things

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were not what was wrong. Likewise, argued Methodius, God restores his creation through the resurrection, for “such was his love for humanity that he could not allow it to continue in this condition, remaining faulty and deficient to eternity.” Methodius’s metaphor properly understands the resurrection as redemptive, as a return to the original and ideal (“very good”) state of affairs. The first creation was ex nihilo; the new creation will be ex vetere. The new creation is the restoration of the broken.

God made no mistakes in creation.

This is the message of Genesis 1, which, one Jewish theologian has noted, “Israel could never forget.” Nature and humanity existed pre-Fall in an ideal state with God, and it is for this state that all of creation continually longs post-Fall. God promises in Isaiah to “create new heavens and a new earth” (65.17), but the same passage indicates that this “new creation” will look very much like the old creation in its most perfect state. Natural laws are turned upside-down – the “wolf and lamb shall graze together” (65.25) – but trees are still planted, houses still built. The cosmos will be transformed as humans will be; creation will be more real, more itself, more beautiful and more simply good than anything experienced in this life.

Thurneysen vibrantly explains the belief that it is this world – this originally-good world – which will be transformed. It is therefore possible, to a certain extent, to understand the new earth by looking at the current one.

“The world into which we shall enter in the Parousia of Jesus Christ is therefore not another world; it is this world, this heaven,

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90 Specifically arguing against Origen.
92 Gillman, The Death of Death, 56.
this earth; both, however, passed away and renewed. It is these forests, these fields, these cities, these streets, these people, that will be the scene of redemption. At present they are battlefields, full of the strife and sorrow of the not yet accomplished consummation; then they will be fields of victory, fields of harvest, where out of seed that was sown with tears the everlasting sheaves will be reaped and brought home.”96

Everything that God made was “very good”. Interestingly, restoration of the world does not necessitate the destruction of mankind’s good creation. The Bible begins with a garden and ends with a city. In gardens and cities, humans will have bodies to gather, to enjoy, to work.

Judaism is a religion which structures time.97 As Abraham Joshua Heschel notes, “Jewish ritual may be characterized as the art of significant forms in time, as architecture of time.”98 This is portrayed even in the manner in which the Sabbath is understood as pointing to both the beginning and end. It is a reminder of God’s act of creation and a foretaste of the age to come; it “recalls the cosmos that was and anticipates the cosmos that will be.”99 History is understood as being framed by these worlds, moving from creation to eschaton.100 The opening chapters of Genesis are the opening parenthesis,101 the eschaton closes the brief interlude of fallen human history. Whatever the metaphor, there is a certain “symmetrical elegance” to understanding the Age to Come as paralleling Eden.102

To begin to envisage what the resurrected body (and the cosmos it inhabits, with other resurrected bodies) “looks” like, then, involves simply imagining Eden. Perhaps,

97 Gillman, The Death of Death, 21; see also Heschel, The Sabbath, 8: “Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.”
98 Heschel, The Sabbath, 8.
100 Ibid, 21.
101 Ibid. 22.
102 Ibid, 55.
though, this is no “simple” task. The Genesis accounts of creation are certainly poetic accounts, which means that they express deep and beautiful truth in a manner which may not be as straightforward or literal as the systematic theologian might like.

What does seem clear from Genesis is that Eden looked much as the world looked post-Fall. All creatures great and small, all things bright and beautiful – the Lord God did indeed make them all, and they were all made as good. The creation of man, too, was good and fitting. Man is creature made of both the dust of the earth and the breath of God. This was true of man in the Garden and will be true of man in the Kingdom.

The curse of sin which plunged humanity and the cosmos into chaos and disruption was a curse of broken relationships between person and person, between humanity and nature, and between humanity and God. The new earth is one of restored relationships. There will be no warfare or social injustice, no toil in work or physical brokenness, and no separation from the source of Life himself. This is the Old Testament vision of the Age to Come and, interestingly, it is precisely the age which Jesus inaugurated in his ministry of teaching, healing, and reconciling.

Resurrection bodies, therefore, are physical bodies but restored physical bodies. It should not be ruled out that the resurrected person may even operate much like the pre-resurrected person in terms of bodily functions, for God gave Adam and Eve food, sleep, and sex. Unlike in this life, though, no aspect of the body would ever be working against the person. Even relationships within the body will be restored.

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103 The curses in Genesis 3 are, as noted in the next paragraph, primarily dealing with the relationships among the creatures. Although the serpent’s form seems to change (now crawling on its belly), no other changes in creation’s appearance are noted.
What difference does all of this make to us now?

The way in which afterlife is conceived affects not only a person’s philosophical thoughts about some indefinite future, but, more significantly, how a person views this life. The nexus of the hermeneutics of the doctrine of bodily resurrection rests in the fact that it is bodily resurrection, that it is an affirmation of the original creation of God. The resurrection of humanity (and the cosmos) is not a do-over. It is not that the potter throws away the clay and uses new material when the sculpture is distorted. No, the potter simply kneads the clay into a lump again and uses the same clay, the same good artistic vision and creates anew.

To hold the view that God would completely scrap creation – human bodies included – compromises the goodness of this (albeit fallen) cosmos. There is eschatological hope for all that God has made, for all the good things which are a result of being embodied persons. The body, for example, is what places a person into history and society. To say that people will be embodied people in the afterlife affirms the importance of even history and society.

The concept of resurrection is an affirmation of the value of the body. The body is cursed by fallenness – the relationships within the body are broken – but the body is crucial for personhood. It has such permanent worth in the eyes of God that he will restore its brokenness.

107 Herberg, quoted by Gillman, *The Death of Death*, 222.
The modern world has fallen again into the heresy of dualism, denying the connectivity of personhood to the human body. The scientific and medical community argues not that the person is essentially soul, as the Greeks did, but rather that the person is essentially mind – the capacity to make decisions and be autonomous. The body does not matter. What is important is that the person can make decisions about his or her body; that he or she has “higher human capacities for reasoning and self-awareness.” Personhood has been divorced from bodily life.

From this line of reasoning, the medical community can twist the Hippocratic Oath. Although doctors since the fourth century BC have sworn not to do harm or anything that might cause death, recently medical practitioners have claimed that there is no harm in doing anything that might cause the death of a “mere body” which no longer (or not yet) has discernable mental capacities of reasoning. The statement in the Oath against abortion is generally ignored, for it is assumed that any collection of body parts is not a “person” unless it has language and the ability to solve multivariable calculus equations.

Returning to a biblical view of personhood means affirming the embodied individual living out the history of the body, regardless of the person’s autonomy or lack thereof. It means caring for embodied humanity; it means not going the route of Hitler and his Nazi doctors who utterly devalued any beauty of the young, the elderly, the infirm, and the mentally challenged. It means healing and supporting, as Jesus did in his ministry.

The resurrection at the Parousia – the giving of the gift of eternal life in all its bodily fullness – is the consummation of the Kingdom of God. It is the anticipated event which gives Christians hope against all suffering and brokenness of this world.

This hope, though, has already been inaugurated. The Kingdom is at hand; the Spirit of God already dwells in the Christian (Romans 8.9). Christian community ought to already be a vision of resurrected reality. The Spirit dwelling in the believer brings life. Christians ought to live according to the Spirit (Romans 8.12), to live as persons-in-community according to ethical relations and a freedom from sin which characterizes life in the Spirit. This Spirit-led life points toward the truth of coming resurrection. As Paul explains,

“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” (Romans 8.11).

A Christian life points toward resurrected life. It recognizes embodiment as a gift; it lives by the Spirit; it looks forward to being clothed in immortality.

The hope of resurrection, firmly rooted in a faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, centers on the resurrection of the Messiah and encourages the Christian to live toward a Spirit-empowered life. The promise of resurrection is a guarantee that sin and death have been and will be defeated. Paul fittingly ends his discussion on resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 with a prayer of thanksgiving and an exhortation to moral living:

“Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing

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that in the Lord your labor [in the body] is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15.57-58).
Bibliography

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