

Saint Paul on the Resurrection of the Body

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Setting and structure

In the passage, Paul treats very specifically the nature of the resurrection body. Paul reaches this point only after much important preliminary work in the several preceding pericopae. (1) In 15: 12-19 he introduces the topic of the resurrection by leveling an accusation: some among the Corinthians say there is no resurrection of the dead, despite their confession of the resurrection of Christ himself. Paul lists the many sobering implications of this contradiction. (2) In 15:20-28, Paul identifies Christ as the 'firstfruits' of the more general resurrection of all who are in Christ, and introduces the distinction between Adam and Christ which will become so important in vv. 35-58. (3) In 15:29-34, more practical considerations are presented; e.g., if there is no resurrection, then 'why are we endangering ourselves all the time?' [v. 30]. (This is a good question!) Following his consideration specifically of the nature of the resurrection body in vv. 35-49, our focus here, Paul offers some speculations on the nature of the resurrection event, when the believers who have fallen asleep will 'clothe themselves' with 'incorruptibility' and 'immortality' (v. 53). His consideration of the subject closes with a practical injunction: believers are to 'be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain' (v. 58). One is thankful for such practical advice following the speculative abstractions of the preceding.

At the risk of coursing too broadly for the purposes of our task here, it may be useful to call to mind several other important NT passages concerning the resurrection of

the dead. Jesus himself seems to have believed in it, based on his debate with the Sadducees recorded both in the synoptics (Mk 12:18-27; Mt 22:23-33; Lk 20:27-36), and (in a different way) his treatment of this belief in the Johannine tradition (Jn 5:25-29; cf. Jn 12:24 [‘unless a grain of wheat shall fall...,’ etc.]). Belief in a resurrection of the dead had existed in the Jewish tradition since the time of the Maccabees, when despair over the eternal fate of brethren fallen in conflicts with the Hellenists led to an extension of the Deuteronomic code post-mortem: both the righteous and unrighteous would indeed receive their due, though perhaps not during this earthly life. From the start of Christianity a confession of the resurrection of the body was among the new tradition’s most central and controversial beliefs¹. By around the 80s AD, the author of the letter to the Hebrews felt able to present bodily resurrection as a ‘basic’ teaching about Christ which believers should ‘leave behind [i.e., no longer question] ... [so as to] advance to maturity’ (Heb 6:1-2). More passages could be cited, yet perhaps these suffice.

Turning now to the character of 1 Cor 15:35-49, most authors would agree that the passage could be described as a diatribe, a common rhetorical device employed by Stoics and Cynics in this period². Nevertheless, as noted by Barth³, Paul’s aim in these verses is not to *prove* the resurrection of the body as a fact discernible by natural reason. As he writes⁴, ‘[n]o proof is adduced, only *room is created in thought*’; we are not promised an understanding of the resurrection, but only the possibility of understanding if indeed it (i.e., the resurrection) is to be understood.

¹ As the *Catechism* notes (§996), ‘From the beginning, Christian faith in the resurrection has met with incomprehension and opposition. “On no point does the Christian faith encounter more opposition than on the resurrection of the body” [St. Augustine, *En. In Ps.* 88,5: PL 37, 1134].’

² Ellis 111, Collins 565, Barret 370.

³ Barth p. 186; cf pp. 196-197.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190. My emphasis.

Most authors divide vv. 35-49 into two parts⁵, with some commentators identifying each as a distinct pericope. First, in vv. 35-44a, Paul (1) ‘makes room’ for speculation about the nature of the resurrection body by showing, through analogies from the natural world, the necessity of death as a (pre-)condition of life, then (2) offers some initial considerations concerning the nature of this body by presenting a series of four illustrative antitheses. Second, Paul seeks, in vv. 44b-49, to establish *both* the radical discontinuity between our current, ‘earthy’ bodies and our promised spiritual bodies, *and also* the shocking, glorious fact of the identity⁶ of these two bodies (i.e., to employ what is perhaps an awkward term in this context, the presence of the same ‘ego’⁷ in both states).

Textual exegesis

Our exegesis will follow the two part structure outlined above. Translation is from the New American Bible.

- 35 *But someone may ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come back?’*
- 36 *You fool! What you sow is not brought to life unless it dies.*
- 37 *And what you sow is not the body that is to be but a bare kernel of wheat, perhaps, or of some other kind;*
- 38 *but God gives it a body as he chooses, and to each of the seeds its own body.*
- 39 *Not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for human beings, another kind of flesh for animals, another kind of flesh for birds, and another for fish.*
- 40 *There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the brightness of the heavenly is one kind and that of the earthly another.*
- 41 *The brightness of the sun is one kind, the brightness of the moon another, and the brightness of the stars another. For star differs from star in brightness.*

⁵ My description of the parts here as ‘the necessity of death’ and ‘discontinuity’ is borrowed from Conzelmann, p. 281. Cf. Barth, p. 184. It is worth noting that Murphy-O’Connor, a prominent Pauline scholar, suggests an alternative division, between (1) vv. 35-41, ‘opening the mind of the questioner’, and (2) vv. 42-49, the nature of the resurrection body.

⁶ This point is developed explicitly by Grosheide, p. 383.

⁷ Barrett, p. 372-3.

- 42 *So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible.*
- 43 *It is sown dishonorable; it is raised glorious. It is sown weak; it is raised powerful.*
- 44a *It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.*

V35-6 These harsh verses follow immediately upon Paul's accusation that some among the Corinthians 'have no knowledge of God' (15:34), presumably because they refuse to confess a bodily resurrection. One is led to think that an understanding of this belief, and adherence to it, is somehow essential to an understanding of God himself (cf. Heb 6:2), leading Paul to attempt a remedy of their ignorance by an explicit consideration of the resurrection body. It is unclear whether v. 35 presents a rhetorical question, attributed to the Corinthian community generally, or whether Paul had specific individuals in mind. The personal character of the invective, 'You fool!', in v. 36 would seem to suggest the latter, though of this interlocutor's identity we are given no clue.

In any case, one is reminded here of Paul's assertion in Rm 1:20 that '[e]ver since the creation of the world, his [God's] invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made'. In the same way, Paul argues here that the natural movement from life, through death, to new life is and has been always clearly evident in the natural world, for 'what you sow is not brought to life unless it dies' (v. 36). However his hearers might assess his upcoming speculations about the precise nature of the resurrection body, then, Paul seems to assume a recognition of at least the conceivability of such a body on the far side of death.

V37-41 Heeding Aristotle's caution against the use of 'strange and superficial analogies'⁸, Paul employs everyday images from the natural world with which all his readers would be familiar. Three analogic sets are presented: (1) the agricultural⁹ (vv. 36b-38), (2) the zoological¹⁰ (v. 39), and (3) the astronomical (vv. 40-41). One notes the ascension here, in a neo-Platonic sense, from the base to the celestial. The agricultural analogy is set on what Collins calls an axis of *time*: the seed, over time, becomes a new, yet identical, thing, in whatever body 'God chooses'. The zoological and astronomical analogies are set upon an axis of *space*: the various kinds of 'flesh' (*sarx*¹¹, among the zoological) and 'glories' (among the astronomical) are determined by God according to the nature of the thing in question, not over time but variously in space. Even within single classes – Paul singles out the heavenly bodies (the stars) – there are distinctions of 'brightness'. Notably, this distinction is not one of *intensity* but rather of *kind*; again, God grants a body to each thing according to his will for that thing.

Important to note here is the absence of any natural necessity: Paul knows nothing of necessity, much less of genetics. As Harrisville puts it, provocatively, Paul 'strikes at the notion of the automatic persistence of life'; this catalog of analogies 'proves nothing', being rather simply 'a witness to the creative will of God'¹². Indeed a certain divine willfulness does seem to characterize this view. This will become significant in vv. 44b-49, below.

⁸ Noted by Collins, p. 563. The definition of the following three analogic sets and identification of 'axes' is taken also from Collins, p. 563f.

⁹ Walter (p. 175) notes the prevalence of images of sowing in preaching in Paul's day (e.g., Jn 12:24)

¹⁰ Collins (p. 566) notes that Paul's distinction here of humans, animals, birds and fish echoes the creation account in Gen 1:24-26; one might note that cattle and 'creeping things', however, are here omitted. Note also the terms employed here by Ruef (p. 172), who distinguishes the 'terrestrial' (i.e., zoological) from the 'celestial' (i.e., the astronomical).

¹¹ Barrett (p. 371) laments Paul's use of 'sarx' here rather than 'soma', given the connotations of the former elsewhere in the Pauline corpus.

¹² Ibid.

V42-44a Here we encounter the ‘crescendo’¹³ of this first part of Paul’s diatribe, issued as a sort of ‘antiphonal hymn’¹⁴ of four antithesis illustrative of the nature of the resurrection body. This might be most clearly presented in the following form:

Corruptible :: Incorruptible
Dishonor [i.e., non-glory] :: Glory
Weakness :: Power
Natural :: Spiritual

Following Barth¹⁵, one should from the outset note the radical character of the fourth opposition in its distinction from the preceding three. Unlike the first three, which might all be seen as distinctions within a ‘bios’ or a natural whole, the fourth ‘bursts these limits’ in positing the radical possibility of a non-natural body. In fact, as Collins¹⁶ notes, the grammar Paul uses in the fourth antithesis is different, explicitly stating the subject (i.e., ‘body’) which in the first three had been assumed (a change reflected in the NAB translation).

The first three antitheses, for their part, describe the three iconic characteristics¹⁷ of the resurrection body. (1) It is incorruptible, or immortal¹⁸, (2) it is glorious, and (3) it is powerful. As for the fourth antithesis, Barrett¹⁹ notes the difficulty of translating into English Paul’s terms in the fourth antithesis: ‘natural’ and ‘spiritual’. ‘Natural’ means here, Barrett holds, simply a body animated by a soul, its root being related to the terms

¹³ Collins, p. 565.

¹⁴ Walters, p. 177.

¹⁵ Barth, p. 194. Barth suggests, interestingly, and despite his description of the first three antitheses as falling within a ‘bios’, that these verses (i.e., vv. 42-44a) are more thanatological – having to do with death – than biological.

¹⁶ Collins, p. 567.

¹⁷ Identified as such, by implication, by Collins (p. 565).

¹⁸ Barrett (p. 372) notes that Paul’s use of ‘corruption’ here is similar to his use in Rom 8:21, ‘that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption’. The implication is not mere physical decay, but more significantly death itself.

¹⁹ Barrett, p. 372-3.

for soul or life²⁰. As for ‘spiritual’, the term designates not simply a high mode or aspect of man’s current life, but rather is related etymologically to the term for (Holy) Spirit.

- 44b *If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual one.*
45 *So, too, it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living being,’ the last Adam a life-giving spirit.*
46 *But the spiritual was not first; rather the natural, and then the spiritual.*
47 *The first man was from the earth, earthly; the second man, from heaven.*
48 *As was the earthly one, so also are the earthly, and as is the heavenly one, so also are the heavenly.*
49 *Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one.*

V44b-49 Having (1) established at least the conceivability of a resurrection of the body by analogies to natural processes, and (2) presented some speculations as to the nature of that body, Paul sets out in these verses to show how utterly discontinuous in nature our spiritual body will be from our current, earthly one. As Collins puts it, v. 44b states Paul’s thesis, ‘if there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual one’; a thesis which may, from a logical standpoint, strike his hearers as wanting. However, as Collins continues, Paul’s point is not that, since there is a natural body, *therefore* there is also a spiritual one; rather, Paul is holding that: *just as* there is a natural body, *so also* is there a spiritual one. This strategy is reminiscent of his argument in vv. 37-41 about God’s granting to each thing a body of his choosing. As a thing’s nature changes (from corruptible to incorruptible, etc.) so too here will God provide an adequately changed body.

Verses 45-49 establish for Paul’s hearers what Collins calls an ‘eschatological paradigm’²¹: a first Adam²² demands, according to Paul’s Hebraic, historiographically

²⁰ Grosheide (p. 385) notes here that the term indicates a sort of ‘bare life’, the only life possible for earthly bodies.

²¹ Collins, p. 568.

linear worldview, that there be a last Adam. This ‘last’, Collins is quick to point out²³, is not last *in a sequence*; rather, it is altogether outside the current sequence, wholly discontinuous with it. Harrisville²⁴, again, provides a provocative statement of this difference between the natural body (from the first Adam) and the spiritual body (from the last Adam): that there will be ‘no entelechy, no progression, no continuity in essence or substance, no development’ between the two.

Two questions arise concerning this discontinuity: why? and how? That is: (1) why is it important, logically or rhetorically, that this distinction be so total, and (2) how is the totality of the distinction explicated by Paul? To dispatch rather quickly with the first question, Barrett notes, helpfully, that, for Paul, as for most people today, an understanding of the resurrection as simply the resuscitation of a corpse is ‘unthinkable’²⁵; the doctrine of the resurrection as developed here by Paul is tolerable *precisely because* there are two kinds of bodies²⁶, each created by God.

As for our second question, namely of how the totality of this distinction explicated, the answer seems clear: by an association of the natural man/body with things ‘earthly’, and the spiritual man/body with things heavenly. Yet this calls for some unpacking. Paul stands this opposition, as it was understood in the Hellenistic world of his time, on its head. Philo, in an attempt to synthesize the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2, drew upon his neo-Platonic background in describing the ‘first creation’, in Genesis 1, as that

²² Grosheide (p. 386) and other commentators (e.g., Barrett, p. 373) note that Paul here adds the qualifier ‘first’ and proper name ‘Adam’ to his quotation from Genesis, so that we may think not of man generally (as the Genesis text seems to call for) but rather of this ‘first’ man, ‘Adam’, particularly. Conzelmann (p. 284) notes that Paul adds the eschatological pole of this opposition (i.e., ‘the last Adam a life-giving spirit’) as though it were a continuation of the Genesis passage. Harrisville (p. 570) notes that this rhetorical strategy serves to emphasize the distinction Paul is making.

²³ Collins, p. 569.

²⁴ Harrisville, p. 279.

²⁵ Barrett, p. 373.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

of the ‘heavenly man’, corresponding to the Platonic form of man. This would be Paul’s ‘spiritual man’. The ‘second creation’, in Genesis 2, gave rise to the ‘earthly man’, being the imperfect approximation of its Platonic form. Thus, for Philo as for Plato and most Hellenic and Hellenistic thinkers, the spiritual precedes the natural. Not so, says Paul! As we read in v. 47 – so explicitly, in fact, as to suggest its being posed in direct response to some Platonic challenge – ‘the spiritual was not first; rather the natural, and then the spiritual.’

Why is this important for Paul? According to Paul’s understanding of the saving activity of God through Christ, as implied in these verses, the new life of believers in Christ will not be a return to some prelapsarian state²⁷; rather, it will be the result of a wholly new creative act, yielding a new ‘body’ in the same (radical, creative) way a tree emerges from a seed. As Barrett²⁸ puts it, a new ‘race’ of men with ‘spiritual bodies’, bearing the image of the last Adam, Christ, will emerge in place of the current race, saddled with the image of the first Adam.

The importance that one race *replace* another is brought out, perhaps, by Paul’s language here of ‘image’, understood as designating the principle, or better (S/s)pirit, animating our bodies. As Barth²⁹ argues, the ‘soul’ of the first Adam³⁰ is simply a ‘placeholder’ for the (Holy) Spirit, which, in our spiritual bodies, shall replace our individual soul. There is no sense, for Paul, in which our soul (merely human, merely earthly) is immortal. As human beings, Barth suggests, it is precisely the brute fact of our corporeal-

²⁷ See Ruef, p. 173. It is notable that Paul makes no mention of the Fall in this passage.

²⁸ Barrett, p. 377.

²⁹ Barth, p. 196f.

³⁰ The Hebrew *adam*, notably, means simply ‘man’ or ‘earth creature’. It is not primarily a proper name, and here functions more to designate a representative of one of the poles of Paul’s distinction.

ity which continues through the transformation³¹ What changes, radically and entirely, are all the *predicates* ascribed to this body. As he writes, ‘new life must consist in the *repredication* of his [man’s] corporeality’³². Our resurrection, for Paul and for Barth, is not a transition from a bodily to a (merely) non-bodily existence. Rather, it is precisely our existence *as bodily in some sense* that does not change. What does change is our the ‘image’ we bear; the source of our animation. As natural men, as dust, we are animated by God’s breath (Heb., *ruach*) as described in Genesis 2; a gift God may at any moment retract. As spiritual men, however, it shall be the *Holy Spirit itself* which animates us, a spirit which is not merely *alive* but perpetually *life-giving*. Hence, perhaps, our immortality. The Pauline scandal, here, is that we our individuality and our identity are retained through this transformation *precisely because* we retain our body in some sense; it is the body, not the soul, which ensures this continuity.

Conclusion

Truly this is folly to the Greeks! Yet unmistakably it is the heart of Paul’s message in this passage. One is struck by the incongruity between this Pauline claim, and the common belief among many Christians today that, upon death, one’s (immortal) soul ‘ascends’ from one’s body to heaven. It is worth noting, by way of conclusion, some of the moral implications which, some commentators suggest, may follow from rejecting this view. Grosheide writes that the Corinthians’ rejection of the resurrection of the body, and tacit acceptance of the primacy of the spiritual, gave rise to their notorious (though per-

³¹ Just as the subject, ‘body’, continues through the fourth antithesis in v. 44a.

³² Barth, p. 191. My emphasis.

haps somewhat overblown) sins of fornication³³. Developing this line of thought, Ruef³⁴ suggests that such a reversal (from Paul's standpoint) of the orders of spirit and nature may lead either to (1) a 'strict puritanism', which rejects the body with a Gnostic zeal, or else to (2) a 'self-indulgent libertinism', corresponding to Grosheide's allegation, which sees no need for repentance or redemption. This latter excess perhaps seeks a return to a more idyllic, primordial state through various spiritual practices or, I would suggest by way of extension, through contemporary methods of self-help.

The last word should perhaps belong to Barth, whose work on this passage and on 1 Cor 15 as a whole (his *The Resurrection of the Dead*) is far and away the most comprehensive and original treatment I have found of this Pauline theme. I've perhaps drawn upon it too infrequently in the preceding. The implication of the bodily resurrection, Barth tells us³⁵, is that God is the Lord of *all* life. We are no longer free to imagine that God is Lord only of 'his' world, the world of spirit, whereas somehow we have been left free to rule our own, bodily world. On this picture, God would be *our* Lord only insofar as 'we ourselves also shared in the spirit, but how questionable, at least how narrow and scanty' is that? 'The Spirit, not our pinch of spirit and spirituality, but *God's* Spirit triumphs not just in a pure spirituality, but: it is raised a ... spiritual body, the end of God's way is corporeality'³⁶. An injection of this viewpoint, both Pauline and Barthian, into contemporary discussions of spirituality and the spiritual life would be certainly refreshing and perhaps also fruitful.

³³ Grosheide, p. 387.

³⁴ Ruef, p. 174.

³⁵ The following is a paraphrase of Barth's main points from p. 193.

³⁶ This lattermost quotation taken from *ibid.*, p. 194.

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