

# The Resurrection of the Body in Greek Patristic Thought

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*If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. . . . When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. . . . So it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. —1 Cor. 15:13–44*

Eastern Christian theology developed at the crossroads between the embodied, earthy, reality-based theology of Semitic Judaism and the philosophical and noetic speculation of Greek philosophy, especially Platonism and its progeny, Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism. Nowhere is the tension between these two strands more evident than in questions regarding the body, especially the resurrection. Both Platonism and its later variants saw the body essentially as a physical cage imprisoning the rational soul and confusing it with bodily and emotional passions. Plato's allegory of the cave, with his notion of the physical world (the cave) as nothing more than a shadow of the true reality (the

world of forms, noetic ideals of that which exists in the physical world) denigrated our embodied reality and became a major component of most gnostic worldviews. Conversely, Judaism conceived the human being as essentially embodied: contrary to Platonism's notion of death as liberation from the prison of the body, death in traditional Jewish thought led to the shadowy half-existence of the souls in Sheol. It was only in the Hellenistic period, within the theological circle of the Pharisees, that a belief in the bodily resurrection developed, perhaps in an effort to provide the potential for a restored full humanity. (The more traditionalist Sadducees, however rejected this new-fangled notion—hence their attempt to trap Jesus by asking him to whom a woman married consecutively to seven brothers would be married in the resurrection.)

Much of Latin Christianity, insofar as it pondered the question of the nature of the resurrection body, tended toward a literal resurrection—or, rather, resuscitation of almost exactly the same body as the original one, albeit “glorified.” Jerome, for example, posited that we would still have the same biological constitution of flesh, blood, muscles, and sinews, and the same genital organs, even though they would no longer have any purpose. The Greek fathers were more nuanced

in their approach. Across the board, whether it was the great Alexandrian theologian Origen—whose views were frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted, especially in this area—or the Cappadocians, or even the most renowned of the Antiochenes, John Chrysostom, the Christian theologians of the Greek East affirmed the reality of the resurrection while simultaneously denying that the eschatological body would be the same as (or even particularly similar to) our current biologically-based bodies.

The distinction between our earthly, mortal body and the eschatological “spiritual body” mentioned by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, quoted above, provided a template for this more complex view of resurrection-as-not-resuscitation. This can be seen in the speculations of the late second- and early third-century theologian (and posthumously-declared heretic) Origen, who, through his student Gregory Thaumaturgos, influenced the theology of the Cappadocians. Origen followed the Platonic notion of the preexistence of souls—one of his views that would later be deemed heretical, though it was not a settled question in Christian thought during his own lifetime. He believed, however, that these preexistent souls existed in a kind of spiritual body (Origen considered only God to be truly bodiless). Origen was well aware of the cogent arguments of pagan philosophers that resurrection-as-resuscitation could not account for decomposition and the cycle of life that recycled the elements of dead beings into the nutrition of living beings. He also argued against the preservation of a type of body that included organs that would be useless in the eschaton, for nutrition, reproduction, and so forth. Finally, he considered Christ’s resurrection body to be



different from that of the average human being because of his unique identity as God-become-human, an identity which showed his physical body to be anomalous even prior to his death, as in the Transfiguration. Moreover, with respect to Jesus’ resurrection body, while it certainly manifested continuity in the persistence of the wounds he had received on the Cross, it also displayed discontinuity in Christ’s sudden appearance to the disciples in a locked room, his vanishing from sight, and his appearing unfamiliar for hours to the two disciples as they traveled together on the road to Emmaus.

Rather than considering the resurrection body to be a simple case of resuscitation, Origen combined the Pauline notion of the dead biological body as a grain of wheat sown in the ground with the Stoic concept of the *spermatikos logos* (the organizing principle of creation disseminated among all living beings). He argued that, while the “spiritual” body of the resurrection is not identical to the former biological body, the same *logos* underlies both, just as, in Paul, the stalk of wheat appears completely different from the grain from which it developed, yet in fact is the developmental culmination of that seed. Considering resurrection in this way rather than as simple resuscitation also avoided the conundrum of resurrection bodies

A Western vision of resurrection as resuscitation: at the moment of Jesus’s crucifixion, three saints rise from their tombs. Enamel on copper, France, 13th c.

which could range from the literally infantile to the geriatric, a problem which the anti-Christian pagan philosophers of Origen's time delighted in exposing.

Where Jerome later disdained the notion of spiritual bodies as not truly *bodies*, Origen's view was adapted and cleansed into a more orthodox, if even vaguer, version by the Greek fathers of the Christian East. In works ranging from encomia on female relatives through discourses on female saints to philological works on theological anthropology and eschatology, the Cappadocians—especially Gregory of Nyssa—held to speculative views of the resurrection body that lay far afield from resuscitation. At root, their eschatological view of the human body and its difference from our current postlapsarian, biological body was rooted in two distinct but interwoven ideas: First, the current, biological form of existence—the “garments of skin” from Genesis 3, as interpreted particularly by Gregory of Nyssa—was intended by God as a temporary and provisional refuge for human nature in its fallen state, both for purposes of reproduction and so that evil might not be perpetuated indefinitely. Second, the body is, in effect, an “image of an image” and therefore, in its resurrected, eschatological form will be more “God-like” or, literally, “God-formed” (θεοειδής) in nature. For this reason, none of the three Cappadocians believed that sexual differentiation would continue to exist in the resurrection, since they considered it purely an aspect of our biological, physical form of existence, and therefore something that would cease to exist in the non-biological resurrection body, especially since none of them believed that maleness or femaleness had any existence in human nature beyond the physical.

Likewise, Gregory of Nyssa, in his treatise *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, has his interlocutor Macrina opine—in a manner similar to Origen over a century earlier—that the eschatological body would no longer need a digestive tract, since we would be sustained directly by God. (As with the question of how much is Socrates and how much Plato in the latter's writings regarding his teacher, debate surrounds how much may rightly be attributed to Gregory's oldest sister, Macrina, and how much directly to Gregory himself.) Underlying the pragmatic question of what bodily characteristics of our current existence need be carried over into our eschatological life, Gregory saw a spiritualized, non-biological body as a kind of circular return to the human nature God had originally created and, even more, originally *intended* (which he did not see as identical to the prelapsarian humanity God created).

While it is not surprising that the Cappadocians, influenced by the speculative Alexandrian theology of Origen, should consider the resurrection body to be radically different from the physical bodies we currently have, it is perhaps startling to see a somewhat similar attitude in John Chrysostom, the greatest theologian to come out of the more pragmatic, embodied theology of the Antiochene school. Chrysostom, in scattered comments among his exegetical sermons as well as in hortatory expositions on virginity and continence, noted that God did not originally intend our biological form of procreation but rather an angelic one (rhetorically asking, in his treatise *On Virginity*, when anyone had heard of successive ranks of angels coming about from previous ones). He also noted that “woman” would no longer exist in the resurrection, although he clearly did not mean that

women would not be resurrected. Part of what informed Chrysostom was no doubt a common Antiochene vision of prelapsarian human nature—both physical and spiritual—as only *potential*, not perfect, somewhat like a child in relation to an adult. There would therefore be no reason to reify our current mode of existence, since it is only part of a progression in human physical and spiritual development, and a detour at that.

Where Gregory of Nyssa, in his anthropological treatise, downplayed the significance of the pagan idea of humanity as a microcosm in order to emphasize our greatness as beings created according to the image of God, the great seventh-century monk and theologian Maximos the Confessor extolled humanity's existence as a microcosm as a vital component informing its vocation as *mediator*. This function is realized most perfectly in the person of Jesus Christ, who overcomes in his person as the incarnate Son of God the ultimate dichotomy, that between creation and its Creator. Yet, even for Maximos, for whom the human body's participation in the created world is essential to its vocation as mediator, it was not necessary to propose extending our current, biological form of existence into the resurrection. As with the Cappadocians three centuries earlier, he saw no need for sexual differentiation to exist permanently in human nature (although it is a bit curious, in his case, since the dichotomy of male and female is one

that he believed humanity overcomes through its microcosmic nature). Humanity's nature as a microcosm combining elements of the physical and spiritual world was crucial to Maximos's theological anthropology; the retention of our current, biological form of bodily existence was not.

Thus, in varying ways, Greek theologians from around the eastern half of the Mediterranean over a half-dozen centuries in the early life of the Church maintained the same position, rooted in Pauline eschatology. Belief in the resurrection of the body is essential to Christianity because the human person is intrinsically an embodied soul for which death is the abnormal condition, not a soul that is trapped in a body and is freed by death. At the same time, none of the Greek fathers appears to have viewed resurrection as a simple resuscitation of the body in which we died, because none saw our current, biological form of existence as what God initially and ultimately intended for humanity. Rather, the eschatological body is in some way connected to the biological body that died (perhaps through the *spermatikos logos*) but appears substantially different from it. The postlapsarian, biological form (the "grain" or seed) will be superseded by a more perfect—though currently unknown—"spiritual body," which will be the seed's developmental culmination, freed of the limitations of the postlapsarian body and fulfilling God's original plan for humanity in its fullness. ✽



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