

THE DEAD ARE RAISED— BUT HOW AND WHY?

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE CHURCH'S FATHERS AND MOTHERS OF THE FIRST FIVE CENTURIES

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“Even though fire destroy all traces of my flesh, the world receives the vaporized matter; and though dispersed through rivers and seas, or torn in pieces by wild beasts, I am laid up in the storehouses of a wealthy Lord. And, although the poor and the godless know not what is stored up, yet God the Sovereign, when He pleases, will restore the substance that is visible to Him alone to its pristine condition.” —Tatian, *To the Greeks*

Among the first five centuries of the Christian church, theologians' explanations of death, resurrection, and—as N. T. Wright puts it—life after life after death, are not monolithic, though there are common threads and themes that wend their way through these centuries. And though emphases and themes varied from time to time (such as less attention to millennial expectations as history moved farther from New Testament predictions), the list of questions which begged for answers was

perennial. Augustine's recitation in the *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*¹ nicely summarizes the questions that preoccupied the preceding theological discussions, the most difficult of which was "When someone's body has been eaten by another man, who turns to cannibalism on the compulsion of hunger, into whose body will it return?" Augustine made the answer more difficult by arguing, contrary to what some had insisted upon, that what is consumed does not simply pass through the body but is ingested to supply nutrients to the consumer.

Though cannibalism might not be at the forefront of *our* questions about death, resurrection, and what lies beyond, what is called "chain consumption" might be something about which we might wonder, and certainly most of the other concerns discussed in the early centuries are precisely those of thoughtful Christians today.

So, even though there is not always unanimity of agreement in the answers, it would be instructive to enter into a conversation with several of these early church fathers—or mothers, in the case of Gregory's sister Macrina²—as if they were our contemporaries, a conversation about a range of topics that have to do with the resurrection of the body.

Though the nature of the resurrected body was often disputed in the early church,³ the affirmation of bodily resurrection was as strong as the Apostle Paul's insistence in 1 Corinthians 15 of Christ's resurrection. The apologist Justin asked, "Why did He rise in the flesh in which He suffered, unless to show the resurrection of the flesh?"⁴ He then records Gospel accounts of Christ proving his resurrected flesh to the disciples, and that it was not impossible for flesh to "ascend into heaven." Justin's reprimand for unbelief follows: "If, therefore, after all that has been said, any one demand demonstration of the resurrection, he is in no respect different from the Sadducees, since the resurrection of the flesh is the power of God, and, being above all reasoning, is established by faith, and seen in works."⁵ A few decades earlier, Ignatius had pointed out that those who pierced Christ would not be able to see the one they had pierced and that they would "mourn for themselves" if Christ returned without a body.⁶

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Besides answering objections such as those who say the salvation of the flesh is disadvantageous because it is the cause of our sins and infirmities, as well those who say that the flesh is imperfect if it does not rise with all its parts, Justin joins others who were out to refute the heresy of Docetism: “maintain[ing] that even Jesus Himself appeared only as spiritual, and not in flesh, but presented merely the appearance of flesh.”⁷ Tertullian will be even more adamant, accusing those who deny the resurrection of repudiating the flesh’s creator *and* denying or changing the flesh’s existence in Christ, “corrupting the very Word of God Himself, who became flesh, either by mutilating or misinterpreting the Scripture, and introducing, above all, apocryphal mysteries *and* blasphemous fables.”⁸

But it is not merely the example of Christ’s incarnate flesh and resurrected body that ensures the believer’s bodily resurrection. As Tertullian makes clear, it is also Christ’s present mediatorial role in his incarnate nature at the right hand of the Father that guarantees our future resurrection: “He keeps in his own self the deposit of the flesh which has been committed to him by both parties—the pledge and security of its entire perfection. For as “He has given to us the earnest of the Spirit,” so has He received from us the earnest of the flesh, and has carried it with him into heaven as a pledge of that complete entirety which is one day to be restored to it.”⁹

That God has sufficient power to raise dead bodies is, as Athenagoras puts it, “shown by the creation of these same bodies.”¹⁰ And the pledge of our everlasting continuance is based on God’s purpose in creating humans, which was *not* to fill any need of or usefulness for the Creator, but to make an intelligent creature who could become a spectator of God’s grandeur and “of the wisdom that is manifest in all things”—the contemplation of which God desires that humans always continue.¹¹

Justin joins the chorus and insists that God would no more neglect his work and allow it to be annihilated than would a sculptor or painter, nor is it beneath this divine artist to raise flesh made of earth and “full of wickedness” since God created humans in his own image from dirt

in the first place (Genesis 1:26).¹² Indeed, argued Irenaeus, if God does not raise the dead, then God lacks power; if God cannot impart life to bodies, then God's power and benevolence are restrained by something more powerful.¹³ Augustine later insists that this applies even to bodies that have been consumed by wild beasts, burned up by fire, disintegrated into dust and ashes, dissolved in liquid, or evaporated into the air; nothing can "elude the notice or evade the power of the Creator of all things."¹⁴

Of course, our conversation partners tell us that we should not be surprised at the Creator's ability, since there is evidence of resurrection everywhere we look in God's handiwork. They point to the cycle of seasons, the night that turns to day, trees that produce fruit, the waxing and waning of the moon, recovery from illness, awakening from sleep, and the generation of humans "from a little drop of moisture."¹⁵

And then there is the seed metaphor, which Caroline Walker Bynum says is emphasized out of proportion to its use in the early church, but which is indeed prevalent in the conversation as Paul's analogy from 1 Corinthians 15:36–45 is reiterated many times.¹⁶ And what is most significant about it is that the analogy—moving from the *dissolution* of what is sown to the plant that springs up—raises questions about continuity, identity, and integrity that occupy a good share of the discussion of resurrection. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, used the seed metaphor to illustrate how resurrection worked. He explained that just as a seed grows into a plant, so when we are resurrected we will not be the same, but not entirely different either. We will have "great and splendid additions."¹⁷ This comment, however, generates some concerns as well.

He seems to recognize the issues this raises because he finds a similarity to the resurrected human in the seed that leaves behind some of its aspects while not leaving and losing itself; in the same way, he says: "The human being deposits in death all those peculiar surroundings which it has acquired from passionate propensities; dishonor, I mean, in corruption and weakness and characteristics of age; and yet the human being does not lose itself. It changes into an ear of corn as it were; into

incorruption, that is, and glory and honor and power and absolute perfection; into a condition in which its life is no longer carried on in the ways peculiar to mere nature, but has passed into a spiritual and passionless existence.” Of course, Gregory was by no means the first to admit that the resurrected body is different than what preceded it. The second-century apologist Athenagoras had recognized that the resurrection is “a species of change, and the last of all, and a change for the better of what still remains in existence at that time,” especially since what is resurrected to immortality is a mortal body, the continuation of which was interrupted by “the dissolution of its parts.”¹⁸

What Gregory, Athenagoras, and a host of others were aware of are the difficulties that a Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection entails. If what is sown is a biodegradable body and what is raised is a body that is incorruptible and immortal, how is that the same body? In fact, since our bodies are always changing from conception to death, which “body” is raised? And if we suffer amputations, inequalities, deformities, or deficiencies, are those retained in the resurrected body, and, if not, again, how is the resurrected body the same as that body? And, then, there is Augustine’s “most difficult” question about “chain consumption” or cannibalism, which raises the more general concern about the scattered parts of a human body that must somehow be reassembled into the original at the resurrection. In the end, the issue is really about identity, especially for Christians who disavow the transmigration of souls.¹⁹ Or, to put it in the words of the Apostle Paul, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” (1 Corinthians 15:35) The early theologians were preoccupied with this question. Bynum even admits that the “basic conclusion” of her study of resurrection in the first fourteen centuries of the Western church is that “a concern for material and structural continuity showed remarkable persistence even where it seemed almost to require philosophical incoherence, theological equivocation, or aesthetic offensiveness.”²⁰ However, Bynum also points out that, though continuity was the issue, *identity* was not yet an *explicit* issue in the late first and early second centuries: “Neither in philosophical argument nor in image

is the question yet raised: What would account for the ‘me-ness’ of the ‘me’ that returns?”²¹

These theologians were agreed that if the body that is raised is not the very same that died, then that individual who had died did not rise again.²² Still, Gregory wonders about earthly bodies that are wracked by old age, disease, injuries, or death in infancy. He agrees with everyone else, but it leaves him with a question: “It comes then to this: that, if our bodies are to live again in every respect the same as before, this thing that we are expecting is simply a calamity; whereas if they are not the same, the person raised up will be another than he who died. . . . How, then, will the Resurrection affect myself, when instead of me some one else will come to life?” An adult is raised who died as a baby, a vibrant young man is raised who died an aged old man, and so on. And then Gregory states succinctly and poignantly:

For who has not heard that human life is like a stream, moving from birth to death at a certain rate of progress, and then only ceasing from the progressive movement when it ceases also to exist? This movement indeed is not one of special change; our bulk never exceeds itself; but it makes this advance by means of internal alteration; and as long as this alteration is that which its name implies, it never remains at the same stage from moment to moment; for how can that which is being altered be kept in any sameness? . . . Just, then, as it is impossible for one who has touched that flame twice on the same place, to touch twice the very same flame, a thing of the same kind is found to be the case with the constitution of our body. . . . Then, a particular man is not the same even as he was yesterday, but is made different by this transmutation, when so be that the Resurrection shall restore our body to life again, that single man will become a crowd of human beings, so that with his rising again there will be found the babe, the child, the boy, the youth, the man, the father, the old man and all the intermediate persons that he once was.²³

To further complicate matters, Gregory asks about those who have been both chaste and promiscuous, who have been both tortured for their faith and shrunk from it, or who first sin and then are cleansed by repentance and then relapse into sin again: “Which body, then, is the profligate to be tortured in? In that which is stiffened with old age and is near to death? But this is not the same as that which did the sin. In that, then, which defiled itself by giving way to passion? But where is the old man, in that case? This last, in fact, will not rise again, and the Resurrection will not do a complete work; or else he will rise, while the criminal will escape.”²⁴

What is bothering Gregory and others is how we can speak of change *and* identity. And it doesn’t help that Gregory says at one point that “if the same man is to return into himself, he must be the same entirely, and regain his original formation in every single atom of his elements.”²⁵ And those atoms must be composed around the same soul; otherwise, atoms mingle indiscriminately “with no distinct natural order,” resulting in a blend and confusion that permits no distinctions of one thing from another. Humorously, if that be the case, Gregory says a man might gather flowers, hunt birds, or see humanity in hemlock or cut down corn but is really doing violence to fellow countrymen.²⁶

So, to avoid such confusion, how do the “atoms” of a person who dies find each other, as it were, and come together at the resurrection? We can find a typical response if we turn to the East and the West.

Turning to the former, at one point Gregory of Nyssa speaks of the soul as if it were that which provides the stability for the constituent parts of the body that are in constant flux and change. The “form” that remains in the soul is a seal that impresses itself like a stamp on that which grows and diminishes and changes, so that what corresponded to the soul in the beginning, stamped by the form, properly belongs to the individual and will return to it “from the common source.” The soul is “disposed to cling to and long for the body that has been wedded to it”—such “a close relationship and power of recognition” that dispersed atoms stream back together from wherever nature has arranged them

when the signal is given by God, so that “following this force of the soul which acts upon the various atoms, all these, once so familiar with each other, rush simultaneously together and form the cable of the body by means of the soul, each single one of them being wedded to its former neighbor and embracing an old acquaintance.” Gregory finds examples of this in mercury, in the plant that comes from the seed, and in the way an artist can reproduce a blend of dyes the same as before.²⁷

Turning to the West, Augustine is not as elaborate as Gregory, but he can sound much like Gregory when, in his catechism, he assures his readers that “the earthly matter out of which the flesh of mortal man is created does not perish” and that regardless of what has happened to it—even if it has become food for beasts or even changed into the flesh of a cannibal—“in an instant it returns to that soul which first animated it so as to make it become a human being and to make it live and grow.”²⁸ In a similar vein, he speaks of a “design implanted in the body of each person” or “a kind of pattern already imposed potentially on the material substance of the individual . . . like the pattern on a loom” or like the potentiality that is latent in a seed. He speculates that in the resurrection the body will be what it would be if it had attained maturity, though Augustine will not take issue with anyone who insists that every person is raised with “the precise stature he had when he departed this life,” as long as it does not result in any ugliness, weakness, sluggishness, corruption, or anything else inconsistent with God’s realm.²⁹

What is implied in this final comment is that even if we speak of atoms coming home to roost, it may not be the case that all of them come home or, even if all do, that they come home reassembled as they once were. Indeed, Augustine does not take the biblical promise that “not a hair will perish” to mean that all nail and hair clippings will be preserved—especially if they all ended up producing deformity. He uses the analogy of an artist—a sculptor or a potter—to suggest that when the resurrection occurs, “those elements which disintegrated and were changed into this or that shape and form of other things” do return to the same body from which they were separated, but not necessarily to

the very same body parts to which they originally belonged. Like the statue that is melted down or crushed to powder and like the pot that is reduced to a lump, *all* the material can be used to reconfigure a new statue or a new pot. Hairs need not return to hairs nor nails, to nails. But nothing will perish that is essential to the nature of a particular body, and anything in it that was deformed will be restored “in such a way as to remove the deformity while preserving the substance intact,” for “in his Providence the Artist sees to it that nothing unseemly results.”³⁰

Likewise, the divine artist will also ensure that what is reconfigured is beautiful and harmonious with no deficiencies: “What was not yet complete would be made whole, just as what has been marred will be restored.”³¹ What about miscarriages, undeveloped fetuses, or births that are considered monstrosities due to the wrong number of appendages or missing body parts? Augustine argues that they “will at the resurrection be restored to the normal human shape.” Even in the case of conjoined twins each will have its own body whole.³² And, using the seed analogy again, Augustine says that even little children who die will instantly rise again not with tiny bodies but with the maturity they would have attained over time, for we have been conceived and born with what he calls a “limit of perfection”—a potentiality latent in the seed.³³

Will there be inequalities in the resurrection life as there are in the present life? For instance, will the thin be thin and the fat, fat? Not necessarily, though God who created *ex nihilo* will preserve individuality and recognizable likeness, and even if there will be a “well-devised inequality,” nothing will be “unseemly,” for, says Augustine, physical beauty depends on harmony between the parts of the body.³⁴ The bodies of the saints will be raised free from any defect, deformity, corruption, encumbrance, or hindrance: “their freedom of action will be as complete as their happiness” with “the spirit quickening the subordinated flesh,” and this is what is meant by “spiritual” bodies—but bodies nonetheless, of the same substance as the flesh of Jesus Christ even after his resurrection.³⁵ In a nutshell, Augustine says, “Thus there will be no ugliness, which is caused by such disharmony, when distortions have been

corrected and unpleasing deficiencies supplied from resources known to the Creator, and unprepossessing excesses reduced without loss of essential substance.”³⁶

We should mention two caveats before considering the issue Augustine considered the most difficult. First, Augustine does say at one point that, though all human bodies will rise again with a body of the same size as they had or would have had in the prime of life, if it *is* the same kind of body (infant or old) one had when he or she died, no weakness will remain in body or mind.³⁷ Second, note that what was said in the previous paragraph Augustine said was true of “saints,” for at one point he says that we should not care what happens to those who will be eternally damned with regard to whether their physical defects and deformities will continue or not.³⁸

And now, what about those whose bodies have been consumed by animals or, worse, who have been eaten by cannibals (such as occurs among the “Greeks and barbarians”)? This issue of “chain consumption” was addressed often by these early church apologists and theologians. Among them, Athenagoras discusses this at length and several times in his treatise on the resurrection. He argues that God has the power and skill “to separate that which has been broken up and distributed among a multitude of animals of all kinds” and “unite it again with the proper numbers and parts of members.” True, he says, some parts of bodies are vomited or defecated, but even if what is digested gets changed into some aspect of the consuming body, it does not matter, “For the bodies that rise again are reconstituted from the parts which properly belong to them, whereas no one of the things mentioned is such a part, nor has it the form or place of a part; nay, it does not remain always with the parts of the body which are nourished, or rise again with the parts that rise, since no longer does blood, or phlegm, or bile, or breath, contribute anything to the life.”³⁹ In other words, for Athenagoras the resurrected body is different from the present body. He assumes that it is against nature for like to consume like, so that even if a human consumes another human, the parts would not “stick”: Athenagoras states that no matter

what has happened to the body, whether “burnt up by fire, or rotted by water, or consumed by wild beasts,” it will be able to successfully reunite itself at resurrection.⁴⁰

Much of what we have dealt with above has to do with the attempts to ensure that the body that is raised is somehow constituted by the very same body that died. Yet, we *have* noted from time to time an admission that the body does change, even in this life, let alone with its transitions from mortality to immortality. These early Christians sometimes struggled to explain how that which changes could be the same.⁴¹ How can that which in Pauline idiom is “sown a different body” be the same body as that which is resurrected? Again, to some extent we are harking back to the seed analogy in 1 Corinthians 15.

Early on, Tertullian handled this well by arguing that the resurrected body is not a different body if one thinks of it this way: what springs up from a grain of wheat is not barley, but wheat. But what makes the stalk another body from God is the way in which the decayed grain has been fortified by cultivation and enriched, so that the change is “not by abolition, but by amplification”: “Cleave firmly then to the example, and keep it well in view, as a mirror of what happens to the flesh: believe that the very same *flesh* which was once sown *in death* will bear fruit in *resurrection-life*—the same in essence, only more full and perfect; not another, although reappearing in another form. For it shall receive in itself the grace and ornament which God shall please to spread over it, according to its merits.”⁴²

The difference is one of glory, not of substance. Tertullian amplifies his argument in a masterful way as he explains the difference between nonexistence and change:

Now, things which are absolutely different as mutation and destruction are, will not admit mixture and confusion; in their operations, too, they differ. One destroys, the other changes. Therefore, as that which is destroyed is not changed, so that which is changed is not destroyed. To perish is altogether to cease to be what a thing once was, whereas to be changed is to exist in another condition. Now,

if a thing exists in another condition, it can still be the same thing itself; for since it does not perish, it has its existence still. A change, indeed, it has experienced, but not a destruction. A thing may undergo a complete change, and yet remain still the same thing. In like manner, a man also may be quite himself in substance even in the present life, and for all that undergo various changes—in habit, in bodily bulk, in health, in condition, in dignity, and in age—in taste, business, means, houses, laws and customs—and still lose nothing of his human nature, nor so to be made another man as to cease to be the same; indeed, I ought hardly to say another man, but another thing. This form of change even the holy Scriptures give us instances of [in the changed hand and the changed face of Moses (Exodus 4, 34), Stephen (Acts 6–7), and Jesus’s Transfiguration (Matthew 17)]. So likewise changes, conversions, and reformations will necessarily take place to bring about the resurrection, but the substance *of the flesh* will still be preserved safe.⁴³

As if to reinforce his perspective, Tertullian addresses the objection that if the selfsame body is raised, then will the blind, lame, and diseased be raised the same? He answers: “If we are changed for glory, how much for integrity! Any losses sustained by our bodies is an accident to them, but their entirety is their natural property. In this condition we are born.” In other words, our natural condition is the life that is bestowed by God, so “to nature, not to injury, are we restored; to our state by birth, not to our condition by accident, do we rise again. *If God raises not man entire, he raises not the dead.*” This unimpaired integrity is what Tertullian takes Paul to mean when the apostle writes, “the dead shall be raised incorruptible.” Tertullian then offers an analogy: If a slave is manumitted with the same flesh that had been whipped, is it right for him to undergo the same sufferings? Instead, he is honored with the white robe, a gold ring, and the name and tribe and table of his patron. “Give, then, the same prerogative to God, by virtue of such a change, of reforming our condition, not our nature, by taking away from it all sufferings, and surrounding it with safeguards of protection. Thus our flesh shall remain

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even after the resurrection—so far indeed susceptible of suffering, as it is the flesh, and the same flesh too; but at the same time impassable, inasmuch as it has been liberated by the Lord for the very end and purpose of being no longer capable of enduring suffering.”⁴⁴

Gregory of Nyssa would applaud Tertullian’s reasoning, but he couches his argument in the context of the Orthodox tradition’s emphasis on God’s original design to create humans in God’s image and its emphasis on the destructive nature of the passions (such as we find in Gregory’s contemporary, Evagrius Ponticus). Gregory insists that the resurrection is “the reconstitution of our nature in its original form.” In that form there was no age, infancy, sufferings, nor any bodily afflictions. God did not author these; these are the result of the Fall. If we travel through ice, we get chilled, through hot sun, we get burned. But if the cause is removed, the effect is gone. So it follows that our nature has to deal with passion, “but when it shall have started back to that state of passionless blessedness, it will no longer encounter the inevitable results of evil tendencies. Seeing, then, that all the infusions of the life of the brute into our nature were not in us before our humanity descended through the touch of evil into passions, most certainly, when we abandon those passions, we shall abandon all their visible results. No one, therefore, will be justified in seeking in that other life for the consequences in us of any passion.”⁴⁵

Granted, then, that though our bodies will be changed, they remain *our* bodies, a further question arises about the nature of these bodies in that these early Christian thinkers wondered what we will do with our bodies if we do not marry, engage in sexual intercourse, conceive, eat, defecate, grow, age, work, disease, and die. (These are all assumptions Gregory makes about the life after life after death.) Presumably we will have no need for teeth, heart, lungs, stomach, genitals, and feet. Gregory understands that it is logical to assume that our bodies would not include such parts if there was no need for their functions, but he also realizes that then there would not be a true resurrection of our *bodies*,

so he leaves it up to “the hidden treasure-rooms of Wisdom” for the time being.⁴⁶

Others were not as agnostic. A couple centuries before Gregory, Justin wondered whether bodies will have wombs in the case of resurrected females, and penises in the case of resurrected males. He concluded that they will, but that they did not have to function as they do now, something that is obvious in present circumstances among barren women and those who choose virginity. Contrary to Gregory’s thought, food, drink, and clothing will still be necessary, as they are conditions of the flesh, but this is not so with sexual function.⁴⁷

Tertullian strikes a similar chord. He recognizes that there will be no more use for stomachs, genitals, and limbs, but he cites voluntary eunuchs, virgins espoused to Christ, the fasts of Moses and Elijah, and sterile men and women to make the case that even though the functions and pleasures of body parts might be suspended, we might still have desires when our salvation is secure. A shipowner might repair a ship that has crashed and choose not to take it on any future voyages, but that does not mean it is useless; it still exists, so it might still have something to do, just as there will be no idleness in the presence of God. And Tertullian adds this: although our body parts will be freed from their services and no longer wanted, they must be preserved for the sake of judgment, “that everyone may receive the things done in his body.” For the judgment seat of God requires that man be kept entire.⁴⁸

Augustine might agree with Justin in one respect. Arguing that our essential nature will be preserved though defects will be removed, he concluded that females will no longer have a need for intercourse and childbirth, but the female organs will be “part of a new beauty, which will not excite the lust of the beholder . . . but will arouse the praises of God for his wisdom and compassion, in that he not only created out of nothing but freed from corruption that which he had created.”⁴⁹

Such a comment might not be Augustine’s finest hour when it comes to his discussion of the removal of “defects” in the resurrected body, but he does better when he discusses with eloquence defects with

regard to the martyrs. Their bodies will be whole, but they will retain the scars of their martyrdom as badges of honor.⁵⁰

Universally,⁵¹ Christians say that all the dead will be raised in the resurrection, but to what? On the one hand, it would be tempting to say that they are raised to divine judgment because there is a concern for divine justice and faithfulness. But there is at least one exception. Athenagoras has a somewhat strange argument that justice is not the primary reason for the resurrection. He argues that, although all who die rise again, the cause of the resurrection is not the Judgment, for not all who rise again *are* to be judged: “For if only a just judgment were the cause of the resurrection, it would of course follow that those who had done neither evil nor good—namely, very young children—would not rise again; but seeing that all are to rise again, those who have died in infancy as well as others, they too justify our conclusion that the resurrection takes place not for the sake of the judgment as the primary reason, but in consequence of the purpose of God in forming men, and the nature of the beings so formed.”⁵²

Athenagoras later argues that God’s judgment—reward or punishment—for the way humans have lived their lives “derives its force from the end of their existence.” This we expect from God’s oversight for creation, “for all created things require the attention of the Creator, and each one in particular, according to its nature and the end for which it was made.”⁵³

Tertullian speaks more stridently of judgment, it seems. And he definitely dismisses any notion of annihilationism. At one point he asserts, “If, therefore, anyone shall violently suppose that the destruction of the soul and the flesh in hell amounts to a final annihilation of the two substances, and not to their penal treatment (as if they were to be consumed, not punished), let him recollect that the fire of hell is eternal—expressly announced as an everlasting penalty.”⁵⁴

So reward or punishment is the normal answer. But not all agree that we are raised to eternal judgment. Notably, Gregory of Nyssa argues that, based on the amount of the “ingrained wickedness of each,” God

will compute the duration of the cure, which cannot be achieved apart from excruciating conditions.⁵⁵ At one point, working with the analogy of the temple and its regulations in the Old Testament, Gregory refers to a time in the resurrection when

all the further barriers by which our sin has fenced us off from the things within the veil are in the end to be taken down . . . [and] all the inveterate corruption of sin has vanished from the world, then a universal feast will be kept around the Deity by those who have decorated themselves in the resurrection; and one and the same banquet will be spread for all, with no differences cutting off any rational creature from an equal participation; for those who are now excluded by reason of their sin will at last be admitted within the holiest place of God's blessing this, and will bind themselves to the horns of the Altar there, that is, to the most excellent of the transcendent powers.⁵⁶

This all makes sense to a theologian who has insisted that God created us in the first place for incorruption, honor, power, and glory. And God's plan will not be thwarted. So when the healing process has been worked out by the fire, and sin and evil have been utterly purged, "then every one of the things which make up our conception of the good will come to take their place; incorruption, that is, and life, and order, and grace, and glory, and everything else that we conjecture is to be seen in God, and in His image, man as he was made."⁵⁷

So whatever judgment there is must involve *both* body and soul. For instance, the way Athenagoras explains it is that humans were made body and soul, so their nature requires food and sex (to propagate the race) *and* judgment (reason) so that "food and posterity may be according to law." We are accountable for the inclinations of the body having to do with food and pleasure, but the body is not to be blamed for not being able to make distinctions, which is the function of the soul. So we are to be judged as *both* body and soul.⁵⁸ And this is to be expected because there is a chorus of voices insisting on a psychosomatic unity

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of the human as God has created it and as it will be resurrected.⁵⁹ As Athanagoras pointed out, if we are not raised *both* soul *and* body, we are not raised: “Man, therefore, who consists of the two parts, must continue forever. But it is impossible for him to continue unless he rise again. For if no resurrection were to take place, the nature of men as men would not continue. And if the nature of man does not continue,” then all that humans are as soul and body is in vain. “But if vanity is utterly excluded from all the works of God, and from all the gifts bestowed by him, the conclusion is unavoidable, that, along with the interminable duration of the soul, there will be a perpetual continuance of the body according to its proper nature.”⁶⁰

At this point one might ask how these early Christian thinkers can affirm a *bodily* resurrection when the Apostle Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 15:50 that “flesh and blood” do not inherit eternal life. There is consensus among many of these that Paul was not speaking of bodily flesh but of the *works* of the flesh. Tertullian puts it well: “For not that is condemned in which evil is done, but only the evil which is done in it. To administer poison is a crime, but the cup in which it is given is not guilty. So the body is the vessel of the works of the flesh, whilst the soul which is within it mixes the poison of a wicked act.”⁶¹ As he says elsewhere, “Flesh and blood are excluded from the kingdom of God in respect of their sin, not of their substance.”⁶²

Two remaining topics deserve to be mentioned.

It has been suggested that millenarian expectations waned as the centuries retreated from the New Testament church’s expressed hopes. But they were very much alive in the first two centuries of discussions about death and the resurrection. Irenaeus provides a good example as he describes the millennial kingdom—the renewed creation—in *Against Heresies*. This has nothing to do with “supercelestial matters” but with this earth and the new Jerusalem descending from above, of which the former Jerusalem is an image in which the righteous are disciplined before incorruption.⁶³

In this manner, the Church inherits what was promised to Abraham—namely, the creation. The sequence and description is outlined by Irenaeus:

[The] resurrection of the just, which takes place after the coming of Antichrist, and the destruction of all nations under his rule; in [the times of] which [resurrection] the righteous shall reign in the earth, waxing stronger by the sight of the Lord: and through Him they shall become accustomed to partake in the glory of God the Father, and shall enjoy in the kingdom intercourse and communion with the holy angels, and union with spiritual beings; and [with respect to] those whom the Lord shall find in the flesh, awaiting Him from heaven, and who have suffered tribulation, as well as escaped the hands of the Wicked one. For it is in reference to them that the prophet says: “And those that are left shall multiply upon the earth.”⁶⁴

Finally, we must mention that these same earlier theologians teach something of an interim location of those who have died and await the resurrection. Irenaeus teaches that just as Christ descended to the place of the dead before his resurrection and ascension, so his disciples will go away into the “invisible place allotted to them by God, and there remain until the resurrection.” At the resurrection they will receive their bodies and come into the presence of God.⁶⁵ For Tertullian, this future resurrection is also the time of the Final Judgment; in the meantime, the flesh departs for awhile, “absorbed once more, as it were, by [mother earth’s] secret embraces, ultimately to stand forth to view, like Adam when summoned to hear from his Lord and Creator the words, ‘Behold, the man is become as one of us!’” only this time escaping the evil and acquiring the good.⁶⁶ Curiously, in another place Tertullian makes a distinction between the resurrection of the flesh and its *subsequent* rendering to be fit for the kingdom of God. In other words, first the flesh changes into “something else”—the incorruptible and immortal body which God gives it—and *then* it will obtain the Kingdom of God.⁶⁷

Regarding this intermediate period, though, Bynum notes that early Christians thought of the resurrected body as the person, sleeping in the dust between death and resurrection. Only later did late antiquity Christians believe the soul continued to exist while the body was what fell and must rise again. This evolution of thought makes sense: as the expected millennial kingdom seemed further off in the distance, Christians began to realize that that body that *was* the person had to wait longer for vivification in the resurrection, encouraging the need for something to remain in the meantime—namely, that immortal component called “soul.”⁶⁸

NOTES

1. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Betenson (New York: Penguin Books, repr. 1984), 22.12.
2. Macrina’s voice is actually heard in Gregory of Nyssa’s treatise on the resurrection to which we will be referring. I will simply attribute what is in the treatise to Gregory, though it is assumed that Macrina is often the speaker.
3. This point is made several times in Joanne E. McWilliam Dewart, *Death and Resurrection: Message of the Fathers of the Church*, vol. 22 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1986).
4. Echoing Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15, Tertullian concludes, “If, therefore, we are to rise again after the example of Christ, who rose in the flesh, we shall certainly not rise according to that example, unless we also shall ourselves rise again in the flesh.” *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 48. **[Please consider adding a general citation for the church fathers here.]**
5. Justin, *On the Resurrection*, 9.
6. Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrneans, 3.
7. Justin, *On the Resurrection*, 2.
8. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 63. Typically for Irenaeus, he uses theme of recapitulation to insist that the Word took upon himself flesh of the same substance as ours in order to save *our* flesh. *Against Heresies*, 5.14.
9. Tertullian, chapter 51, in *On the Resurrection of the Flesh (AnteNicene and Nicene Fathers)*, 3. Elsewhere, Tertullian says, “And so the flesh shall rise again, wholly in every man, in its own identity, in its absolute integrity. Wherever

it may be, it is in safekeeping in God's presence, through that most faithful "Mediator between God and man (the man) Jesus Christ," who shall reconcile both God to man and man to God; the spirit to the flesh, and the flesh to the spirit." Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 63.

10. Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 3.
11. Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 13.
12. Justin, *On the Resurrection*, 7–8.
13. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.4.2. "But that He is powerful in all these respects, we ought to perceive from our origin, inasmuch as God, taking dust from the earth, formed man. And sure it is much more difficult and incredible, from non-existent bones, and nerves, and veins, and the rest of man's organization, to bring it about that all this should be, and to make man an animated and rational creature, than to reintegrate again that which had been created and then afterwards decomposed into earth, . . . having thus passed into those [elements] from which man, who had no previous existence, was formed. . . . And, therefore, since the Lord has power to infuse life into what He has fashioned, and since the flesh is capable of being quickened, what remains to prevent its participating in incorruption, which is a blissful and never-ending life granted by God?" Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.2, 3. At one point, Irenaeus appeals to the Valley of Dry Bones passage in Ezekiel 37 to make his point; see *Against Heresies*, 5.15.1. Tertullian makes nearly the same argument as Irenaeus: "For if God produced all things whatever out of nothing, He will be able to draw forth from nothing even the flesh which had fallen into nothing; . . . And surely He is most competent to re-create who created, inasmuch as it is a far greater work to have produced than to have reproduced, to have imparted a beginning, than to have maintained a continuance. On this principle, you may quite sure that the restoration of the flesh is easier than its first formation." Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 11.
14. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.20.
15. For example, see 1 Clement 24–26; Justin, *On the Resurrection*, 5; Tatian, *To the Greeks*, 6; Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 16; Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 12–13. As do others, Tertullian (in chapter 58) also reminds us of biblical examples that inspire us, including Jonah, Enoch, Elijah, and the three Hebrews in the fire. Theophilus includes many of the examples we have mentioned, and even a seed that a bird swallows

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- and leaves through defecation so that a tree grows up. See Theophilus to Autolyclus, 13.
16. For example, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.7.2; Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 5.10; Origen, *De Principiis*, 2.10.3; Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 16; Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 446, 466–68. While she recognizes that the seed is the oldest and continuously present Christian metaphor for the resurrection of the body, Bynum insists that “the seed metaphor is not the major image in patristic and medieval discussions of eschatology.” See Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 3, 6, 13.
 17. For this and what follows, see Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 466–68.
 18. Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 12, 16.
 19. Gregory of Nyssa argues against those who teach reincarnation or transmigration of souls, such as the Pythagoreans, later Platonists, Origen, or the *Phaedo* teach.
 20. Bynum, *Resurrection*, 11; also 112–13.
 21. Bynum, *Resurrection*, 24–25.
 22. Citing the three resurrections Jesus performed (Mark 5:22; Luke 7:12; and John 9:30), Irenaeus makes this point in *Against Heresies*, 5.13.1 Athenagoras is just as insistent; see *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 25.
 23. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 463.
 24. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 463.
 25. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 448.
 26. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 454–59. In these pages he also argues against what is essentially Gnosticism, chiding those who practice it by suggesting that “evil controls the creation of all beings,” especially in the Spring when “the large majority of the brute creation copulate,” so that souls have bodies into which to drop; then, if humans refuse to have intercourse, the souls end up being vagabonds, wandering around “houseless.” He thinks that soul and body come into being and grow simultaneously, though he refuses to speculate how the soul comes into being; and he believes there is a plentitude of humans that will be reached at some point.
 27. The above is taken from Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 27.2–5 and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 445–46. In the latter (on page 446),

Gregory uses a common analogy from broken vessels and the potter: “the individual is as such a vessel; he has been moulded out of the universal matter, owing to the concourse of his atoms; and he exhibits in a form peculiarly his own a marked distinction from his kind; and when that form has gone to pieces the soul that has been mistress of this particular vessel will have an exact knowledge of it, derived even from its fragments; nor will she leave this property, either, in the common blending with all the other fragments, or if it be plunged into the still formless part of the matter from which the atoms have come; she always remembers her own as it was when compact in bodily form, and after dissolution she never makes any mistake about it, led by marks still clinging to the remains.”

28. Augustine, *Faith, Hope and Charity*, 23.88.
29. See Augustine, *City of God*, 22.14, 20.
30. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.19; *Faith, Hope and Charity*, 23.89. Augustine was not the first nor the only to use this analogy. It was used much earlier, for example, by Justin who found confirmation even among Platonists, Stoics, and Epicureans that just as an artificer can remake something of clay or wax or mosaic tiles collected from the very same composition as before, “shall not God be able to collect again the decomposed members of the flesh, and make the same body as was formerly produced by Him?” Justin, *On the Resurrection*, 6.
31. Augustine, *Faith, Hope and Charity*, 23.85.
32. Augustine, *Faith, Hope and Charity*, 23.87. Justin bases his claim that resurrected bodies will not have the defects that they have had in this life by referencing Jesus’s miracles: “For if on earth He healed the sicknesses of the flesh, and made the body whole, much more will He do this in the resurrection, so that the flesh shall rise perfect and entire” Justin, *On the Resurrection*, 4.
33. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.14.
34. Augustine, *Faith, Hope and Charity*, 23.90; *City of God*, 22.19.
35. Augustine, *Faith, Hope and Charity*, 23.92.
36. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.19.
37. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.15–16.
38. Augustine, *Faith, Hope and Charity*, 23.92.
39. Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 7.

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40. Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 8. Tertullian argues, “But the beasts and the fishes are mentioned in relation to the restoration of flesh and blood, in order the more emphatically to express the resurrection of such bodies as have even been devoured, when redress is said to be demanded of their very devourers.” Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 32. And on this same subject matter, Augustine states: “And this man’s flesh, which starvation had stripped from him, will be restored to him by the one who can bring back even what has been exhaled into the air. Indeed even if that flesh had completely disappeared, and none of its material had remained in any cranny of the natural world, the Almighty would reproduce it from what source he chose.” Augustine, *City of God*, 22.20.
41. Bynum deals with this issue quite a bit in her book *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*.
42. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 52.
43. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 56. Gregory makes a similar argument: “You will behold this bodily envelopment, which is now dissolved in death, woven again out of the same atoms, not indeed into this organization with its gross and heavy texture, but with its threads worked up into something more subtle and ethereal, so that you will not only have near you that which you love, but it will be restored to you with a brighter and more entrancing beauty.” Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 453.
44. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 57.
45. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 464.
46. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 464.
47. Justin, *On the Resurrection*.
48. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 60–61.
49. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.17.
50. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.19. See Irenaeus’s comments on the resurrection of those who have been slain because of their love of God in *Against Heresies*, 5.32.1. Gregory of Nyssa’s treatise *On the Soul and the Resurrection* is written presumably on the occasion of Basil’s death and his and Macrina’s grief. Interestingly, Bynum remarks that the early third-century AD understanding of the body seems to owe much to the context of persecution; see *Resurrection*, 58.
51. For example, see Augustine, *Faith, Hope and Charity*, 23.84.

52. Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 14.
53. Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 18.
54. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 35.
55. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 465.
56. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 461.
57. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 468. Origen expressed the view that, while the “fire” may not be temporary, it can’t destroy the resurrected body: “even the body which rises again of those who are to be destined to everlasting fire or to severe punishments, is by the very change of the resurrection so incorruptible, that it cannot be corrupted and dissolved even by severe punishments.” Origen, *De Principiis*, 2.10.3.
58. Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 18. See also Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 7, 14–16, 18, 34, 40, and 45, where he argues for traducianism.
59. Tertullian expresses this psychosomatic unity beautifully when he writes: “Both natures has He [Christ] already united in his own self; He has fitted them together as bride and bridegroom in the reciprocal bond of wedded life. Now, if any should insist on making the soul the bride, then the flesh will follow the soul as her dowry. The soul shall never be an outcast, to be had home by the bridegroom bare and naked. She has her dower, her outfit, her fortune in the flesh, which shall accompany her with the love and fidelity of a foster-sister. But suppose the flesh to be the bride, then in Christ Jesus she has in the contract of His blood received His Spirit as her spouse. . . . Why, then, soul, should you envy the flesh? There is none, after the Lord, whom you should love so dearly; no more like a brother to you, which is even born along with yourself and God. You ought rather to have been by your prayers obtaining resurrection for her: her sins, whatever they were, were owing to you.” *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 63.
60. Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 15. See also Justin, *On the Resurrection*, 8; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.6.1 (the “commingling and union” of flesh, soul, and spirit all constitute the “perfect man”); Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 445.
61. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 5.10. See a similar interpretation in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.9.1–4, and in Augustine, *Faith, Hope and Charity*, 23.91.
62. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 46.

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63. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.36.1–2. Also see 5.26–35. Compare 1 Clement 23–24.
64. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.35.1.
65. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.31.2.
66. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 63; see also 22–25.
67. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 5.10.
68. Bynum, *Resurrection*, 13–14.