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Reflections On The Resurrection Frame: With What Body Do They Come?

RICHARD W. THOMAS

Contemporary sceptics continue to express doubts about the resurrection event or even the prospect of an afterlife. Scepticism on this score is not just a product of the modern scientific outlook. In their day, the Sadducees, confirmed monotheists as they were, dismissed the idea of resurrection as an 'unscriptural innovation'. Six centuries later the illiterate animists of Mecca ridiculed the eschatological warnings given by Muhammad, with sample queries like: 'When we die and turn to dust and bones shall we be raised again?'¹ More recently a doubter exclaimed, 'Life after death, how is it that no one has returned to tell us about it?' Back came the reply, 'They found it so pleasant up there; they haven't wished to return.'

Someone has come back from the dead to settle the issue once and for all. The biblical data on Christ's resurrection is not meant to satisfy our curiosity as to detail, but to show us the certainty of our hope. There were instances in the Gospels of dead people being brought to life. Yet those whom Jesus resuscitated during his earthly ministry remained subject to death. We cannot turn to their experience for answers. Jesus' resurrection stands on a totally different plane, and serves as the model for our reflections on the resurrection body. Moreover, analogies derived both from Nature and Science may help us to see the reasonableness of this central doctrine of the Apostles' Creed. Archbishop Ramsey has warned us that the analogical method has its limits, and that God's action 'outruns human analogies and understanding'.² Nevertheless, Christ's own parabolic pattern in describing the mysteries of God's Kingdom allows us to venture along the analogical path.

Scripture indicates that man is neither a bodiless soul destined only for psychical survival, nor that he is a soul-less body doomed to eventual annihilation. He is body-soul created in the divine image, formed out of the earth, but with eternity set in his heart. The term psychosomatic has a specific application in modern medicine and psychiatry. However, it is a useful epithet in a discussion of this sort.

Man could rightly be described as a psychosomatic entity. The Pauline challenge, 'present your bodies a living sacrifice to God', testifies to the value placed on the σῶμα while Christ's haunting question, 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the world and lose his soul', underlines the infinite worth of the ψυχή.

In his essay, 'What is the Soul?' Bertrand Russell proposed a nihilistic disposal of body and mind. 'Mind is an emanation of body, and body is an invention of mind. What we have hitherto called our body is really an elaborate scientific construction not corresponding to any physical reality'. It appears that body and mind stand or fall together. Russell is resigned to their falling; the Christian is convinced they are inseparable, and will stand forever. By invoking the second law of thermodynamics, Russell arrives at his 'gloomy conclusion' that the human race cannot hope to survive.³

In Acts 3:21 Peter sets forth an alternative principle of restoration, ἀποκατάστασις whereby God is able to reverse the process of decay and death within planet earth. Wernher von Braun, the aeronautics pioneer, puts the case for ultimate survival more trenchantly than a non-scientist can: 'Science has discovered that nothing can vanish without trace. Nature does not know destruction, only transformation. Now if God makes use of this fundamental principle where it is a matter of the smallest and most insignificant part of the Universe, is it not logical to assume that he will also apply this principle where the masterpiece of his creation, man, is concerned?'⁴

For some Greeks, as for most Hindus, the body was the tomb in which an immortal soul lay imprisoned, σῶμα σῆμα. Freeing the captive soul from its prison-house thus becomes man's chief end. Paul voiced a longing for a comparable release: 'Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' (Rom 7:24). Deliverance, he knew, was to be had, but surely not in a disembodied existence. At death, the Hindu *atman* passes directly into another material frame, on to another bout of earth-bound existence. It whirls around in an endless circle, *samsara*, hoping against hope that it will finally go off at a tangent, freed from its *karmic* course to enjoy the bodiless bliss of *moksha*.

For theists, there must be a better way, a surer expectation. Bismarck shared Melanchthon's view that without a firm faith in immortality it would be almost impossible to bear up against the sorrows of an earthly state.⁵ 'If in this world only we had hope we are of all men most miserable'. But the afterlife must be of a different order from the one we know, while preserving the personal identity, whereby we recognise ourselves and others, and acknowledge that the judge of all the world has done right. Like Paul we long to be clothed with a heavenly frame, so as not to find ourselves floating naked and bodiless beings, invisible, inaudible, and intangible.

Zoroastrianism and Judaism

Parallels between the varied items of Zoroastrian and Jewish eschatology have been noted and discussed at length. A Saviour, *Soshyans*, will appear and raise the dead. Men will recognise one another, and see their deeds on display. There is to be a time of final rehabilitation. D.S. Russell remarks that most Christian scholars, while admitting the similarities between the two sets of end-time scenarios agree with W.F. Albright 'that the value of Iranian influence on Judaism and Christianity has been greatly overstated'.⁶ Indeed, Eichrodt argued that there was no Zoroastrian influence on the Jewish concept of the resurrection. The two religions regard the objectives differently. For Zoroastrianism resurrection facilitates judgment, whereas for Judaism it establishes God's victory over evil.⁷

Reputable Avestan and Pahlavi scholars would perhaps disagree with this verdict, and the arguments remain inconclusive. But whether the influences were fundamental, formative or minimal, the conclusion has little bearing on the question that concerns us: 'With what sort of body do they come?' (1 Cor. 15:36). Nevertheless, we cannot fail to be impressed by the evidence that a markedly ethical religion came up with such a remarkable solution for the unresolved tangles of earthly existence—a reconstituted body experiencing deserved bliss or enduring condign penalties.

The Jewish doctrine of resurrection emerged gradually, and is rarely mentioned in the Old Testament. T.H. Gaster, for one, regards Dan.12:1–2 as the only clear-cut Old Testament reference to resurrection.⁸ 'Many who sleep in the dust shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt'. There are oblique references to resurrection elsewhere in the Poetic and Prophetic books (Ps. 16; Ps. 17; Job 19; Isa. 26), verses which express the deeper yearnings of the human heart for survival beyond the grave and for unending fellowship with the God whose presence goes with his people throughout this life.

An issue that some might find intriguing relates to the marital state of those who populate the new earth that the chosen await (Isa. 65). A few commentators went to the absurd length of suggesting that women in that earthly paradise would bear babies daily. In the Zoroastrian paradise the risks of overpopulation are reduced by the promise of continued married happiness, 'but no children will be born to them'.⁹ We have to turn to the Gospels for the safest plan of all—'the children of the resurrection do not marry; they are like the angels and cannot die'. (Luke 20: 35–36).

Immortality in the Testaments

Immortality is not a term that occurs in the Old Testament. Semitic languages lack the prefixes to construct negative nouns or adjectives.

though modern Arabic affixes a *la* (no) to appropriate neologisms to meet increasing lexical demands. Even in the New Testament immortality is a rare word occurring only in the epistles (Rom. 2:7; I Cor. 15:53, 54; 1 Tim. 6:16; 2 Tim. 1:10). Immortality in the English versions renders two Greek nouns, *ἀθανασία* and *ἀφθαρσία*—deathlessness and incorruption. From the two references in the Pastorals we learn that God alone possesses inherent immortality, but he as the source of life and incorruption can impart an imperishable life to men, whose nature is corrupt and corruptible. Apart from divine intervention human existence would be no more than vapour soon to disappear (James 4:14). God has intervened royally in the Incarnation of his Son, in whose death and resurrection immortality has been brought to light for all to see and seek.

Not one of these verses links immortality with the soul. Edmond Jacob notes that ‘popular Judaism compromised between beliefs inherited from the Old Testament and the Greek or Greco-Iranian ideas’ by speaking for instance of dead souls in Sheol, having an independent existence. ‘Jesus’ Jacob adds, ‘passes over Judaic beliefs, and insists on the omnipotence of the living God in speaking of life after death, and so rejoins the fundamental assertions of the Old Testament’.¹⁰

One further point—the biblical instances of individuals being restored to life are more properly described as reanimation. According to Edmond Jacob they ‘are more akin to the cure of the very ill. They occur shortly after death, when the body has not yet been reduced to dust, and they only prolong life’.¹¹ Despite such limitation the raisings intimated the forthcoming event, whereby immortality comes to light in Christ’s resurrection, and pointed to the more distant future, when it will be universally manifest.

‘As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive’ (1 Cor. 15:22). Besides being the axis of the Christian faith, Christ’s resurrection holds the promise of our own. Expounding that theme lies beyond the scope of this article. But why should the fact of his resurrection carry with it the guarantee of our own? We are members of Christ’s body. As his incarnate body rose miraculously at Easter, so the mystical body which consists of his new creation will be raised at the end (2 Cor. 5:17). For lack of a more suitable term we could call the event a miracle. A miracle, wrote Roger Pilkington, ‘is not a celestial conjuring trick, but a demonstration of the permanent reliability of God (which includes the whole arrangement of the universe)’.¹² Paul uses ‘miracle’ and its synonyms sparingly, and never in connexion with the universal raising from the dead. That event, by its very universality will require no witnesses or verification.

‘The Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 14:17). God’s kingly rule will find its full expression in that kingly sphere where we

shall possess the kind of body that is no longer taken up with material needs and worldly cares, but is free to enjoy spiritual benefits. Restoring the whole person with an adequate organ of self-expression and self communication is the hope set before us. Alongside this there will be the experience of endless discovery and self-recovery.

The Renewal of the ψυχή

Psychology has been defined as a 'study of mental life'.¹³ It is in this sense that I want to discuss the renewal of the ψυχή. 'Renew your mind' is an earnest plea, made by Paul for the present; it is also a prospect for the ἀποκατάστασις.

'It is important to note that the Greek doctrine of the soul does not appear at any point. *Nephesh* is the living quality of the flesh. The word can also mean person'.¹⁴ So writes Conzelmann. In the key resurrection chapter (1 Cor. 15), the word σῶμα occurs seven times, ψυχή only once. The correct inference to be drawn from this statistic is not one of relative importance but one of virtual identity. Arthur Koestler's 'neo-holistic view of matter and mind'¹⁵ should be paralleled by an ego-holistic concept of σῶμα and ψυχή. Conzelmann's rule of thumb reads: 'It is not that I have a σῶμα, but that I am a σῶμα. In Paul σῶμα designates not only a part of a man, but the whole man in so far as he is seen under a particular aspect'.¹⁶

So for convenience we shall treat ψυχή as symbolising the mental life—the psychical aspect as distinguished from the visible. A delightful anecdote applies here. Berridge, an Anglican admirer of John Wesley later veered towards Calvinism. On his deathbed he agreed with a friend that they would unite in perfect harmony with Wesley in heaven. 'Ay, ay, that we shall be for sure, for here the Lord has washed our hearts and there he will wash our brains'.¹⁷

This renewal of mind, which will conclude the μετάνοια of regeneration, has at least four benefits for mental wellbeing:

1. Our minds will be at rest. We shall feel none of the weariness of heart and thought that now afflicts mankind. Instead it will be a life of praise, but also of stimulating activity—one that combines work and worship.
2. It will be a life of joy. Each of us has his fair or unfair share of hurts and failures. Heaven will be a place of healing and constant renewing. We shall be fed by the unending vision of God as we wait on him.
3. It will be a life of mental growth without limit. Advance will always be possible.
4. Above all it will be a life of unmixed love. We look back with true satisfaction to moments filled with love for God and humanity. Other times we would rather forget. Philip Brooks viewed it thus: 'We shall see right through one another, and start on a new basis of mutual understanding. Knowing others better still, yet able to

love them with a purer love'.¹⁸

The conjunction of eternal life now with the Christian doctrine of immortality enhances the quality of existence in the present. The chief characteristic of that future condition will be 'perfect and unhindered fellowship with Christ'.¹⁹

The Transfiguration of the σῶμα

σῶμα in Pauline usage stands for the principle of individuation. But to heighten the contrast with ψυχή in the previous sub-title, I shall focus attention on the visual aspects of the spiritual body as delineated in the New Testament. Reinhold Niebuhr cautions us against enquiring too closely into the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell.²⁰ A similar risk of extravagant fantasy attaches to the surface anatomy of the resurrection frame. It is here, however, that analogies ancient and modern provide us with models from which we may draw helpful inferences, if not wholly demonstrative conclusions.

A model could remind us of what we already know, for instance a model aircraft. But the purpose of a model may also be one of discovery. A further purpose for models is explanation, as when the solar system is proposed as the model for the atom.²¹

In Spring we witness a rebirth in nature, where Winter had brought death. In later life, Goethe rode out in a wood to a place he had enjoyed while young. There he observed that one must think of death at times, 'but I'm convinced that our spirit is indestructible. It is like the sun which seems to set only to our earthly eyes, but which in reality shines ceaselessly'. That wood was Buchenwald, the symbol of genocide that led to a nation's birth.²²

The first analogy is a Scriptural one, the seed as used in John 2:24, the sowing in 1 Cor. 15:37. The grain of wheat has to die, otherwise it remains isolated and unproductive. Applied to spiritual germination and growth the analogy teaches us that our full potential is realised only in dying to self. A seed looks tiny; you will not discover how big and beautiful it will become unless you bury it.

Physical death is not in our hands, but in God's, but it holds a similar promise of fruition. Strictly speaking the seed does not die, since the power of germination remains. Even this observation is relevant. Paul has tried to avoid employing the term 'death' when he speaks of departed believers: 'To depart and be with Christ is far better'. Disintegration does not inevitably lead to annihilation. Continuity can be maintained despite dissolution. Arnold Toynbee shows this to be the case in biology,²³ and Paul urges us to believe this to be so in eschatology. Not that the powers of germination reside in the corpse, from which another kind of body would sprout, but that God himself would provide the energy to produce the new life in raising the dead.

We need a further analogy to reinforce the first. The second is an extension of the concept of new birth, hinted at in Isa. 26; an analogy used by Christians and by the Angelic Doctor of Islam, al Ghazzali, that of a baby's emergence from the womb.²⁴ Gustav Fechner, the German physicist, describes the process graphically. He sees man living thrice. The first life is in the womb, in a state of continuous sleep. The second is in our present existence, in a state of partial sleep and partial waking. The third is in the life after death, which will be all waking. The more we reach understanding on earth through concentration on eternal values, the richer and easier will the transition be. Our bodies then are not the tomb that Plato envisaged, but our present lowly state is like that of a baby in the womb compared to what it will become. It needs the womb for nurture, but will shortly be able to do without such nourishment. We too need the bounty of our present environment. As the body surfaces it cries, not realising that life outside the womb is its proper destiny.

An Arabic poem describes the antithesis of mood in the transitions:

You wailed at birth, while folk around you smiled.
Some day, while those around you weep, you'll rise and sing in
Paradise.

The God of the living ensures that there is a continuous personal identity in prenatal and postnatal existence to be carried over into post-mortal life.

Bishop Fulton Sheen approaches the subject from still another angle, the biochemical. 'As chemicals have no right to say that there is no life above them, and the rose no right to say there is life about it, so man has a duty to recognise that there is a Higher Life above the human. Chemicals are taken up into plants, plant life is absorbed by animal life, animal life is incorporated by the human. Shall not the human be lifted to the Divine?'²⁵ In the Incarnation, as Fulton Sheen notes, God came down to us. For the process to be completed God will take up humanity in a way more wonderful than photosynthesis, a way that preserves man's identity, yet transforms the body.

Photosynthesis which makes life possible with the aid of radiant energy is an apt conceptual transition to the next analogy. The three characteristics that will be impressed on the resurrection body are ἀφθαρσία, δόξα and δύναμις, (1Cor. 15:42,43)—that is incorruption, glory and power. In the context, δόξα stands for radiance: the aura of light surrounding God and the heavenly bodies. Bauer gives brightness and radiance as the primary sense of the Greek term.²⁶ There is an allusion in the *Kabbala* to an early Jewish theory that unfallen man in Eden was clothed in a garment of light. A Syriac Gospel has a striking account of the light form or spiritual counterpart of man, which remains in heaven during man's earthly

stay and is reunited to him when he casts off his earthly body and returns to his heavenly home.²⁷ What Paul hints at in 2 Cor. 5:1, 'a house not made with hands eternal in the sort of frame that matches the heavenly environment'.

Arthur Koestler drew attention to the fact that four Nobel Laureates, Einstein, de Broglie, Schrödinger and Heisenberg had by the end of the 1920's effectively de-materialised matter. He speaks of 'a sober mysticism born in the laboratory'. This laboratory mysticism has one of its most striking paradigms in the hologram.²⁸ It is to this paradigm we need to turn for further insights into the radiant body'.

An article in the *National Geographic Magazine* refers to sculpture floating magically in space; three dimensional images emerging from a hologram. This is a new phenomenon in technology and on T.V. An object is illuminated with a beam of laser-light and a pattern is produced by the miracle of laser. So long as we are in the path of light we can see the object. Holographic images appear to be floating out of the wall and even from behind the wall. The Hungarian inventor of the Hologram, Gabor, can still be seen smiling behind his desk, in a three dimensional image of a man who died in 1979.²⁹

Such laser beams can penetrate solid objects, pass through closed doors, appear and disappear at will. So we ought to find nothing incongruous in One who claims to be the Light of the World moving with miraculous freedom in his resurrection form. It is apparently possible to produce a real image which exactly resembles the original subjects in perspective.³⁰ True, this carries connotations differing from what is implied by 'image' in familiar scripture texts like 'man in God's image' or 'image of the invisible God'. But the enduring reality of the Divine likeness is safeguarded by the pledge 'as we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall bear the image of the heavenly' (1 Cor. 15:49). What we would expect in the raised δόξα is not so much a likeness in 'perspective and position' as one in radiance and incorruption.

Two additional analogies will suffice: A scientist speaking as a Christian on the theme of Ascension admitted that the resultant astronomical problems were overwhelming. Not so overwhelming as he feared, in view of what the world has more recently witnessed in areas of space travel and satellite communication.

The body of Jesus floated in space and vanished from sight. So too will our resurrection body experience that uplift as it becomes weightless, given the right physical condition. Weight is a force, not that the gravitational pull of the earth has been turned off. But since a satellite in orbit is in a state of free fall, the astronaut feels no pressure on the body from the satellite floor. The pull heavenward, so to speak, will outweigh the earthward pull.

'Every eye shall see him . . . he comes with the clouds'. How can this occur? The statement would have sounded incredible a century

ago, but last year 2.5 billion people simultaneously watched the Olympic Games, some watched at dawn, others at noon, and still others at midnight. Images are transmitted to a central satellite with its own power source mirror aerial. The inconceivable has become actual through man's God-given inventiveness. The God of the ocean waves, light waves, sound waves, can so arrange it that at the right moment all will see the image of his invisible Being in One who deigned to call himself the Son of Man.

'Reality', wrote J.B.S. Haldane, 'is not only more fantastic than we think, but also much more fantastic than anything we can imagine'.³¹ The aim of this exercise had been to show the reasonableness of some aspects of the resurrection event. Explanations of this sort are bound to sound individually tentative, but cumulatively they give us confidence that the New Testament hope of the corruptible putting on incorruption 'shall come to pass'. The reality of the resurrection seems less fantastic the longer we wait. But beyond the details of time, place and manner of fulfilment we look forward to the unbroken communion of saints in the everlasting vision of God.

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NOTES

1. *Qur'an* 37:16.
2. A.M. Ramsey, *The Resurrection of Christ* (1961) p.108.
3. Bertrand Russell in *Let the People Think* (1941) p.112 ff.
4. In R. Steinpash's *How is it that we live after death?* (1980 by Büro Weirauch) p.2.
5. Quoted by W. Robertson Nicholl, *Reunion in Eternity* (1918) p.106.
6. D.S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalypse* (1964) p.386.
7. Paraphrased by J.R. Hinnels, 'Zoroastrians and the West' Unit 27, p.30 in *Spanning East and West* (1978).
8. In an article on the 'Resurrection', *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962) IV p.39 ff.
9. A summary of the eschatological data is available in R.C Zaehner's *The Teaching of the Magi* (1957) p.145 ff.
10. Edmond Jacob's article on 'Immortality' in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962) II p.690.
11. *Ibid.*, p.689.
12. Roger Pilkington, *World without End* (1961) p.115.
13. The sub-title of R.S. Woodworth's standard work, *Psychology* (1948).
14. Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (1976) p.179.
15. In his contribution to *Life after Death*, (1976), an essay entitled 'Whereof one cannot speak . . . ?' p.253.
16. *Op. cit.* p.176.
17. Related by Rupert Davies, *Methodism* (1976) p.68.
18. In W. Robertson Nicholl. *op. cit.* p.234.
19. C.A. Anderson Scott, *Christianity according to St. Paul* (1966) p.240.
20. Quoted in A.M. Hunter's *Christ and the Kingdom* (1980) p.87.

21. From an entry 'Model' in *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (1977) p.394.
22. From *TIME* (April 29, 1975) p.9.
23. Arnold Toynbee's introductory article to *Life after Death* (1976) p.5.
24. Discussed in *Ihya' 'Ulum id. Din* (no date) V p.2915.
25. In a tract, *The True Meaning of Christmas* (1955).
26. Arndt-Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1957).
27. From *Zohar* ii p.2296 and the Syriac *Acts of Judas Thomas* quoted in *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church* (1918) II p.326.
28. *Op. cit.*, pp.243, 248.
29. An illustrated description of 'The Wonder of Holography', in the *National Geographic Magazine* (March 1984) pp.364-367.
30. More information is available in *Light Fantastic: A Short Guide to Holography* (1982).
31. Quoted by Koestler, *op. cit.*, p.258.