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The Body in Resurrection: Science and Scripture on the "Spiritual Body" (1 Cor 15:35-58)

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AT FIRST GLANCE, IT MIGHT APPEAR THAT SCIENCE AND SCRIPTURE HAVE ALMOST nothing to do with one another. Natural science seeks a disciplined, experimental, and rational investigation of the physical universe in all of its depth and breadth. Scripture is the written deposit of God's revelation to the prophets and apostles, which has the purpose of making us wise unto salvation. What can they have in common?

Despite real and apparent differences, I believe the sciences and biblical studies have much in common, at least when both are pursued within the context of Christian faith. In terms of their practice, in terms of their collegial relationship within a Christian worldview, and in terms of hermeneutics, there are interesting parallels between them. Both are academic disciplines that seek the truth about very different domains within human communities of inquiry and human traditions of rationality. Both are motivated by similar virtues and passions to discover new things and communicate these ideas for the benefit of others. Both seek data and use evidence and reason to propose and criticize theories (or in the case of biblical studies, interpretations of the text). So perhaps the study of science and the study of Scripture are not as far apart as might appear prima facie.

Understanding the science of Paul's day helps us understand his comments on the resurrected body. Understanding the science of our day helps us proclaim the resurrection coherently to our own world.

It is not only in the practice of these academic investigations that science and Scripture are similar. The confession of faith in the Triune God and of Jesus as Lord is the foundation for a quest for wisdom and knowledge that integrates science, art, and theological disciplines within a faith context. Let us call this quest "the development of a Christian worldview."[1] In the development of a Christian worldview, theology and science should work together to help shape a contemporary vision of the truth that can guide our mission, vocation, practice, and worship as the body of Christ. In such a quest for a scientific and spiritual worldview, we need both excellent science and outstanding theology, along with fine art, moral values, and all the domains of truth and beauty. Such a Christian approach to life and faith provides the intellectual atmosphere in which scientists, pastors, and theologians alike practice their vocations. Christian faith can and does provide presuppositions and values that are necessary to both science and theology.[2]

Finally, there is a growing recognition that science does not interpret itself any more than ancient texts do. The results of the practice of natural science need to be interpreted and explained, and sometimes this is best done by amateur scientists rather than the specialists themselves. Interpretation takes place in a broad horizon of commitments and concerns. This realization has created new interest in the "hermeneutics of science."[3] We need Christian scholars who can help us interpret the sciences within a Christian context based upon Christian presuppositions about God, the world, and the meaning of life. Because these larger worldview issues are grounded in the word of God, for the believer Scripture has a role to play in any Christian hermeneutics of natural science. It helps to shape the horizon within which the results of science will be interpreted and employed.

In the same way, the sciences have a role to play in the interpretation of Scripture. Since we believe the Bible to be true, we do not want to interpret it in a way that makes the Scriptures obviously false. This is hardly a new idea, but one advocated by Galileo and Augustine, among others, in the history of Christian thought. For example, in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, Augustine warned against interpreting the text in a way that contradicted the scientific knowledge that the nonbeliever knows through reason and experience. "If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead?"[4] Likewise, other Christian theologians have argued that the Bible can and should be interpreted in the light of what we can

[1]The term "a Christian worldview" is very common now among Christian colleges and universities in North America. See John Orr, *A Christian View of God and the World* (New York: Scribner's, 1897), for an early statement of this theme.

[2]This paragraph summarizes some of the themes from my book *Science and the Study of God: A Mutuality Model for Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

[3]See, e.g., Dimitur Ginev, *A Passage to the Hermeneutics of Science* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), or the collection, *Hermeneutics and the Natural Sciences*, ed. R. P. Crease (Boston: Kluwer, 1997).

[4]Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 1.19, trans. by J. H. Taylor as *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (New York: Newman, 1982) 1:43.

learn about God through creation. Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin are prominent examples of this position, and there have been numerous others. In the very beginning of his great *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas writes:

> Accordingly there is nothing to stop the same things from being treated by the philosophical sciences when they can be looked at in the light of natural reason and by another science [i.e., theology] when they are looked at in the light of divine revelation.[5]

In a similar manner, but with his own emphasis, Calvin can teach in the *Institutes* that "the knowledge of God set forth for us in Scripture is destined for the very same goal as the knowledge whose imprint shines in his creatures."[6] The truth we know through nature also comes to us from the divine word, through whom all things have been created. Science should provide part of the horizon within which we receive and live out the word of God, since all creation has as its goal the knowledge and glory of the Creator.

My purpose in this essay is a variation on this theme of the integration of science and Scripture. There has been much speculation and misunderstanding regarding what Paul is up to in 1 Cor 15, especially the character of the resurrection body. My first claim is that paying attention to ancient physics and astronomy in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle can help clarify the apostle's viewpoint on the "spiritual body" (σῶμα πνευματικός). Secondly, this text is a good example of the need to interpret the teachings of Scripture in the light of modern science. Paul's view of the world is not our own, and his outmoded physics and astronomy means that we must rethink the meaning of this passage for our world today. This study, then, is an example of the larger claim that the history of science can often be useful in the interpretation of the Bible, and that modern science must be part of the horizon within which we interpret the word for today's world. Attention to the history of Greek natural philosophy can provide us with a more sober understanding of Paul's use of body language in 1 Cor 15. I will conclude by suggesting some ways in which this passage might be reinterpreted for today's world.

I. Science in the World of Paul

We often think that science is a modern invention, but such is not the case. The roots of science lie deep in western culture and can be traced back through the Middle Ages to the classical age.[7] In the areas we are interested in, namely physics (or natural philosophy) and astronomy, both Plato and Aristotle wrote very important and influential works. Plato's dialogue *Timaeus* proved to be one of the

[5]Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a, question 1, article 1, ad 2; in vol. 1, *Christian Theology*, trans. Thomas Gilby (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1964) 9.

[6]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1:98.

[7]For an excellent survey, see David Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

most influential cosmologies of the ancient world. Building upon this work, and that of others before him, Aristotle laid the foundation of all future work in natural philosophy, cosmology, and astronomy.

In his work *On the Heavens* (*De caelo*), Aristotle sets forth his cosmology, based upon astronomy as he knew it. The universe is eternal, and the farthest heavenly bodies, moving in majestic cycles, are likewise eternal and unchanging. Influenced by geometry and astronomy, both Plato and Aristotle understood the universe to be a gigantic sphere (actually, for Plato, it is a dodecahedron). At the center of the sphere is the earth, a place of change, generation, death, and corruption. The earth is at rest in its center and spherical in shape. Following the natural philosopher Empedocles, both Plato and Aristotle taught that all things on earth are made up of four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water. But not everything exists on the earth. Above the earth is the sphere of the moon, which is in between earth and heaven. Beyond the moon is the sphere of the stars, the highest heavens, which are eternal and incorruptible. For Aristotle, this implies that they must be made of an unknown fifth element: the quintessence or ether, which fills the heavens. Aristotle thought of this heavenly stuff in very different terms from the elements on earth. It is divine (θεῖος), eternal, immutable, and incorruptible (ἀφθαρσία).[8] Heaven and the quintessence have circular motion as their natural movement, and they undergo no change, decay, or generation. This natural philosophy became the common stuff of hellenistic culture, and the foundation for the development of Greek, Roman, and medieval science (including Islamic science). The greatest classical astronomer, Ptolemy, held an Aristotelian cosmology.

Aristotle finished his work almost four hundred years before Paul. By the time of Jesus, this Greek cosmology was the common stuff of the intellectual world. Of course there were opponents, such as the Epicureans, but they did not gain the imagination of the majority. Jews and Christians added to this basic Greek cosmology a further heaven, the "heaven of heavens" or "highest heaven" or simply "the highest" where God and the angels dwell.[9] But their cosmology below the highest heaven was much the same as that of the Greek natural philosophers.

This ancient world-picture should be kept in mind when we interpret what Paul has to say about heaven and heavenly bodies in 1 Cor 15. We should remember that for the New Testament authors heaven is a real place, beyond the farthest stars. This is the place where Jesus ascended after his resurrection (Acts 1:9-11; Phil 2:9, 10) and where God and the angels dwell. This world-picture is so different from our own that it takes a sustained act of sympathetic imagination to place ourselves back into the cosmology of the ancient world, a picture of the universe that C. S. Lewis once called "the discarded image."[10]

[8]Aristotle, *On the Heavens* 1.3.270a-b, trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960) 20-22.

[9]Deut 10:14; 1 Kgs 8:27; Ps 148:4-6; Sir 16:18; Luke 2:14; 19:38; Rev 4:1-2; cf. Luke 10:18; 2 Cor 12:2-4.

[10]C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

II. The Physics of the Resurrection Body

We now turn to the interpretation of Paul's text in 1 Cor 15:35-58.[11] Paul begins with a question that gets at the heart of the Corinthian problem with the notion of resurrection of the dead: "How are the dead raised, and what kind of body (σῶμα) do they come with?" This question sets up the entire passage, and is the focus of Paul's argument. He is concerned with the nature or "physics" (φύσις) of the resurrection body.

The word for "body" that Paul uses (σῶμα) can be used for more than just the human body. It can refer to the body politic (the state), to the body of an army, to the body of an argument, and even to plants and stars (as Paul will soon use it).[12] Aristotle specifically refers to sun, moon, stars, and the heavenly sphere as "bodies."[13] Paul's use here, then, is quite literal. Since Paul uses the word "body" for plants, seeds, and humans, it must mean something like "material object," as it does in Aristotle. Paul's point in vv. 36-38 is that there are different kinds of bodies that God has created, not just one kind. He sets up a parallel with the world of plants. A seed is planted, and has one kind of body, but after it dies it grows into a different body, the body of the plant. God has given the plant a different substance or body than the seed had, one that is fitted for its new environment.[14] There is also a continuity between seed and the plant that grows from it. This parallel is similar to what he wants to say about our mortal bodies and the new resurrection body. In both cases, there is continuity and difference.

To press home his point, Paul then moves to the animal world. Here he can use the word "flesh" (σάρξ), since that word describes the kind of body that animals have. God has created many types of flesh, many living animals, not just one type. Paul lists the different types of animal according to the domain in which they live: human beings and land animals, animals of the air (birds), and animals of the sea (fish). This is simply the reverse order of Gen 1:20-30. On the fifth day God made the animals of the sea and of the air. On the sixth day God made the land animals and human beings. All of these types of "flesh" have been created by God: Why should we think there is only one kind? And each kind of flesh is well suited for life in its proper environment.

When Paul moves to the heavens (day four of Gen 1), he must return to the word "body," since the stars are not made of flesh. Paul notes that there are earthly bodies and heavenly bodies. Heavenly bodies are made of a different element, a different substance, than earthly ones. This was common knowledge in Paul's day and

[11]I cannot display in this short space the complete exegetical argument for the reading I have adopted, but can only summarize the results of my research.

[12]See σῶμα, in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, third ed. (BDAG), rev. and ed. F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 984, esp. §3. Some commentators assert that "body" is equal to "form"—an error which leads to misunderstanding this passage (see further comments below).

[13]Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, 1.9.278b, trans. Guthrie, 86-88.

[14]See Ralph Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 133.

did not require further comment. Paul and the Corinthians knew that these were made of different substances. That is why the "glory" of the heavenly bodies is different from the glory of the earthly body. With his later argument in mind, Paul plays on the different meanings of the word "glory" (δόξα). With the heavenly bodies, their glory is their radiance or brightness. Later, Paul will contrast glory with dishonor (v. 43), a different sense of the term altogether, but he sticks with the same word because of his parallel between earth and the heavens here, and the earthly and heavenly body a little later on. When dealing with the stuff of the heavens, Paul notes that the stars even differ from one another in their "glory" or brightness, giving off different amounts of light. The main point is clear: God has created different types of bodies, or material objects, and not all bodies are alike in their substance and function. Each is fitted for the realm in which it exists.

"And thus it is with the resurrection of the dead," the apostle now claims (v. 42). Paul sets up a series of antitheses that describe the different kinds of bodies we have in this life and in the resurrection. Our mortal bodies are corruptible, dishonorable (especially as a dead corpse), weak, and "soulish" or physical. Our resurrection bodies will be glorious, powerful, "spiritual," and incorruptible (ἀφθαρσία, the same word Aristotle used for the heavens).[15] They will, in fact, be heavenly bodies, as the next section proves. Of course, the metaphor of planting goes with Paul's insistence that we *ourselves* are raised ("those who belong to Christ"), and our bodies are transformed from one kind of substance to another (v. 52). In the resurrection of the dead there is both continuity and discontinuity. The very same person has a new and transformed body, fit for heavenly and immortal existence.[16]

In the next section, Paul contrasts the soulish and the spiritual bodies by comparing the first Adam with the last Adam, that is, Jesus. "The first man," he tells us, "was of the earth—dust" (v. 47). The point here is what the soulish body is made of, what kind of substance it is formed from: the answer is "dust." God then breathed a soul into this dust (Gen 2:7), hence, this body is "soulish." The second

[15]A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 1272, insists that this word ἀφθαρσία has a fuller meaning of "progressive, purposeful flourishing in fullness of life," in other words, the precise opposite of decay or corruption.

[16]A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (New York: Scribner's, 1916) 371-375; J. Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief*, 2d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910) 371-373; G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 786-795. While understanding that the issue is what kind of body one will have in the resurrection, both Weiss and Hans Lietzmann, *An Die Korinther*, 4th rev. ed., ed. W. G. Kümmel (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1949) 84, push Paul into believing that the resurrection body will have light or "glory" as its substance—a quite improbable reading of the text, based more upon other religious texts than upon Paul. They are followed in part by Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, trans. J. W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 282, who (like Lietzmann and Thiselton) asserts that a "body" is not a substance, but rather a "form." Yet body is neither form nor substance! Body is not substance, of course, but a concrete object that is composed of some kind of substance. Body is always form plus substance (as even Conzelmann eventually notes), never form itself nor substance itself. In which case, however, a body *has* a substance, which is the main point. In the case of the spiritual body, the substance is "of heaven," but that does not permit us to assume that it is made of "light" or "glory."

Adam is "a man of heaven" (ἐξ οὐρανοῦ). This phrase does not indicate that Jesus was *from* heaven, as many commentators have assumed.[17] The point of this entire passage is about the nature of bodies, not the place where they come from. As A. T. Lincoln correctly argues, the issue is the nature of the body of the resurrected Lord (and therefore of our bodies in the resurrection).[18] The second Adam's body (which is the pattern for our own resurrection, vv. 48-49) is made of heavenly stuff.[19] He is "of heaven" in the sense that he is made of the very stuff of the heavens, just as Adam was made of the stuff of the earth (dust). Just as in this life our bodies are made of the same elements as the first Adam, so in the next life our bodies will be made of the same heavenly substance as the second Adam. That is why the resurrection body is glorious, immortal (v. 53), and incorruptible: it is made of the very essence of the heavens themselves. Paul presses home his point in v. 50: flesh and blood (the substance of our mortal bodies) cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Only heavenly bodies are fit to live in the heavens! Paul's point is this, in terms of the science of his day: the resurrection body is made of quintessence, the stuff of the stars. Only a heavenly body is fit to live forever with God in the highest heaven. This idea is hardly new with Paul. In fact, we find already in Dan 12:3 the idea that the resurrected saints will "shine like the brightness of the sky" (cf. Paul's "glory" of the spiritual body and of the stars), and they will be "like the stars, forever and ever." *2 Baruch* 51:10 likewise tells us that the righteous will be "equal to the stars." That Paul would have such an idea is hardly strange; on the contrary, it fits well with both the religious and scientific thought of his dual heritage in Israel and Rome.

Now I am not suggesting any direct influence from Aristotle to Paul. Rather, the general "common sense" astronomy of Paul's day was derived from the popularization of Aristotelian natural philosophy, among Stoics and others. It was part of the thought-world of the apostle and his times. He did not have to make a special study of it, any more than the Corinthians did. Nevertheless, the basic Aristotelian picture of the cosmos is what lies behind Paul's idea of the nature of the resurrection body.

[17]E.g., John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1976) 638; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 375; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1286-1288.

[18]A. T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 39-42. See also R. H. Gundry, *SOMA in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), who notes against Bultmann that the spiritual body "is a physical body renovated by the Spirit of Christ and therefore suited to heavenly immortality" (165f.). Yet Gundry goes on to assert that "heavenly" has "nothing to do with substance," an opinion he contradicts on the same page by asserting that "sw'ma in and of itself implies materiality." Yet this means a heavenly *body* is composed of a material substance! In Greek thought and language a heavenly σῶμα is composed of a kind of substance.

[19]Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1276-1277, objects to this theory on grounds that cannot be sustained by careful attention to the text. He focuses in his objection only upon (a) the negative terms of vv. 42-43, and (b) the word "spiritual," which (rightly) does not mean the body is made up of "spirit." But these so-called objections ignore the purpose and tenor of the passage as a whole, which most certainly is about what the body is composed of, i.e., what kind of body it is.

III. Paul and Modern Physics

We have seen the importance of the history of science for biblical interpretation. What, then, of current science? How shall we understand and apply this message within the horizon of modern astronomy and physics? Contemporary science has a negative role to play, at least to begin with. We can see immediately that many of Paul's assumptions will have to change. The earth is not the center of the universe; there is no such thing as ether or quintessence; heaven is not a place far off in the sky; and the stars are made of the same chemicals as earthly things. Paul's cosmology and his physics are completely out of date and must be replaced by modern science. But this change undermines his "physics" of the resurrection body. Since we no longer believe in ether, how can we accept today this idea of a heavenly, resurrected body?

For some scholars, the change is just too great. They reject any literal meaning for this passage today. The resurrection is a metaphor or an existential message about life in the midst of death or a "symbol" of hope. I find this perspective rather too hasty. We should not give up on the unified teachings of the New Testament and the creeds about a real, bodily resurrection, at least not on these grounds alone. Yet now we feel pressing against us once more the question, "What kind of body does it come with?"

Upon sober reflection, we can see that Paul's basic point can remain the same, even in our day. Bodies are fitted by the will of the Creator to their proper environment. Birds, fish, people, and stars all have the kind of body they need for the world they inhabit.[20] So it will be in the next world, for us. God will provide us with the kind of body, a genuine material body, which is fitted for eternal life with God in the new heavens and the new earth. Today we have no idea what material substance is best fitted for that future, eternal life. It might be the same kind of matter we now know from science, but transformed so as to live forever in glory. It might be something else entirely, a very different type of matter indeed. The main point is that we will be the same person, but with a new and glorified body.[21] In that new, material body we will live in peace and harmony with Christ and all of redeemed humanity. Nothing in modern science has altered this eschatological promise, based as it is upon the power of the Almighty to create and recreate anew. Such a hope is beyond science.[22]

[20]Today we would insist that for living things on this planet, God works through the process of evolution, but that is a minor matter in the current discussion.

[21]This position has been recently defended by Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

[22]After identifying the soul as the "information-bearing pattern" of the body/brain, John Polkinghorne writes, "it seems to me a perfectly coherent hope that the pattern that is me will be remembered by God and recreated by him in some new environment of his choosing in his ultimate act of resurrection." John Polkinghorne, *Beyond Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 100.

The resurrection of Jesus, then, is a fully eschatological event.[23] A human being named Jesus has been granted a transformed, glorified, material body like the one God will give to us only in the future, only in the new heavens and earth. The resurrection of Jesus is a down payment, the "first fruits" (v. 20) of victory over death and God's transformation of our bodies in life eternal. Instead of heaven being above us in space, then, *heaven is before us in time*: the resurrection body is the stuff of the future, the very stuff of eternal life. ⊕

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[23]Many theologians would make this same claim, e.g., Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, trans. H. J. Stenning (New York: Revell, 1933); Jürgen Moltmann, *A Theology of Hope*, trans. J. W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); or W. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. L. L. Wilkens and D. A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968).