

Resurrection Revisited

– The Significance of a Spatial Perspective

A Resurrection of the Flesh?

In the mainstream of Western theological tradition, faith in resurrection and eternal life has not just been a core issue; it has also been conceived of in solid, material terms as a resurrection of the flesh [Bynum 1995, 5–17]. While death and decay have not been ignored, resurrection of the flesh has rather been seen as an affirmation of the (re)creative power of God and also of the material world, the physicality of existence, i.e. as principally good. The future and/or heavenly life has been perceived as paradise regained, a world not too different from this, but without pain,

grief or struggle. The polemic front has primarily been over against an alleged dualistic understanding, where a certain human capacity such as the “soul” is regarded as immortal and survives the death of the physical body, yes, by this process it is released from the bondage of flesh [Jørgensen 2000]. This has resulted in a terminological usage where

“flesh” and “body” misleadingly appear to be interchangeable.

In the CAS-project *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Taxonomies and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity* we contest such a doctrinal solidification. Early Christianity appears to have accommodated a complex interaction of different ideas about resurrection and the afterlife, and displayed an amazing flexibility in the conceptual blending even of seemingly mutually exclusive positions. This short article is only a trailer of a more full fledged presentation of the insights gained through the project in a forthcoming 2008 publication.

Apocalypticism

The concept of resurrection belongs to a wider conceptual framework called apocalypticism which concerns revelations or disclosure of divine secrets. This is a tradition which Christianity inherited from Judaism. The apocalyptic perspective may be linear and temporal (eschatological), or it may be cosmological and spatial (heavenly travel). Eschatology reveals what will happen at the end of this *aeon* – a Greek term used to signify both the known world (spatial) and time. It involves a certain set of stage props, and resurrection is a collective event.

Also the heavenly travel or ascent, sometimes in the form of a vision, involves certain scenery. In heaven – or in one of seven heavens – the traveler becomes privy to secrets to be revealed upon his return to earth. Indeed, the purpose of the travel is the revelation (the apocalypse), even if it may also develop in a distinctly mystical direction, like rapture into



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a sphere where unspeakable words or things that are not to be told are heard and seen. The spatial perspective allows to a greater extent than the temporal for individual mobility, resurrection and even immortality. Jewish tradition, out of which Christianity grew, some figures from the past were said not to have died, such as Enoch (the father of Methusalem) whom “God took”, and the prophet Elijah, who ascended to heaven on a chariot of fire, and also Moses whose grave was not known

As a general observation, a conceptualization which draws on the idea of immortality leads to less interest in eschatological chronology. It rather invites spatial categories and ideas about transfer and exaltation from an earthly to a heavenly sphere. In pre-modern times, however, the two perspectives were not mutually exclusive but spatial categories interchanged with temporal in ways that for a modern worldview are disturbing and inconceivable. The resurrection of the dead was not just transposed into an ever more remote future; it might equally well be conceptualized in individual terms of immortality and ascent into a heavenly realm.

Ascent, resurrection and taxonomy

It was not unusual in antiquity to describe heavenly bodies in terms of brightness and light, and by means of categories such as air, *pneuma* (spirit) or ether [Martin, 1995, 117–120]. These are all in various ways noticeable substances, yet without any tangible, carnal solidity. They mark difference rather than corporeal continuity and individual recognisability. In his teaching about the resurrection, another New Testament writer, Paul of Tarsus, explains this in his first letter to the Corinthians by drawing on an ancient Greek taxonomy, that is a classification or orderly arrangement of all objects/bodies which helped them not just describe but also comprehend reality [Asher 2000, 129–143]. This divided the cosmos into two opposite spaces of habitation, the terrestrial and the celestial. The genus of body (in Greek *soma*) was divided into two opposite species (heavenly bodies and earthly bodies) and under each species further subdivisions, sharing the same basic quality might be distinguished. The quality of all earthly bodies was carnal even if they do not share the same kind of flesh, whereas the heavenly bodies were characterized by their radiance (in Greek *doksa* which in Jewish tradition represents a divine quality). A certain kind of body belonged to a particular space; it had its own habitat. Within such a cosmological order, a transposition from an earthly existence to a heavenly was not conceivable without bodily transformation from flesh to glory. In order to move across this fundamental divide, radical change or transformation was necessary: “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Cor 15:50).

The resurrected Jesus

The belief that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected is a root cause of the Christian preoccupation with resurrection. The way in which the resurrected body of Jesus was accounted for in the narratives about his post-mortem appearances to his disciples, has been taken to show the nature of a resurrected body. Prominent accounts of these appearances, such as those in Luke 24 and John 20–21 seem to emphasise corporeal continuity and recognisability. The risen Jesus is presented as the Jesus the

disciples used to know, again present among them. In some stories there is even a probing for proof of his continuous carnality, which is poignantly captured by Caravaggio in his painting of “the doubting Thomas” referring to the episode in John 20.24–29.



Figure 1. “The Incredulity of Saint Thomas” by Caravaggio.

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The resurrected body of Jesus therefore substantiates that resurrection is not only a rescue operation of the spirit or the soul, but a restoration of the corporeal, carnal person which also entails individual recognisability. However, one should take into account that, according to the appearance stories themselves, the physicality applies only to a limited time span when Jesus is still with them “on earth”. His earthly existence is prolonged beyond death but not forever. The closure of Jesus’ earthly existence is in the two-volume work ascribed to Luke (Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles), narratively explained by way of a spatial transfer from earth to heaven [Seim 2004]

Jesus’ departure to heaven is told twice (Luke 24.50–53 and Acts 1.9–11) in remarkably simple terms compared to many similar stories at the time. The narrative perspective is that of the disciples: he is taken out of their sight and away from their earthly existence. There is no speculation about the different spheres he may have to pass in his ascent; it is not portrayed as a symbolic conquest of the cosmos and there are no indications that he is transformed as he travels. Does this mean that the taxonomy of difference so important to Paul is of no consequence in New Testament writings such as Luke-Acts? However, in the following narrative of Acts, when Jesus on some rare occasions actively interacts with earthly humans, his identity is clearly maintained but not his bodily form. In the reiterated story of how he surprises Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9, 22 and 26), his presence is marked by a bright blinding light and compelling words. Indeed a striking contrast is established between the reference to the speaker being Jesus of Nazareth and the lack of any bodily appear-

ance by which he might be recognized. The heavenly body of Jesus is perceived as different in its matter, it is characterized not by flesh and bone, but by splendour and light.

Concluding remarks

Meaning and truth claims are to the so-called modern mind often intimately attached to a kind of scientific or empirical factuality which pre-modern presentations cannot possibly meet. Since a pre-modern cosmology no longer is regarded as scientifically sustainable, Christian theology has tended to submit and take refuge to the future as the last unknown. The temporal, eschatological perspective has therefore become all-predominant and “mythological” stories about spatial mobility between heaven and earth are left behind as embarrassing for



Figure 2. “The Resurrection Isenheim Altarpiece” by Matthias Grünewald.

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an age which no longer scientifically conceives of a heaven “up there”. Nevertheless, one cannot possibly understand and certainly not draw doctrinal conclusions of early Christian ideas about the resurrection without appreciating the diversity of positions and addressing the significance of space.

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