Paul’s Gospel of the Empty Tomb: The Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15

This paper builds upon, and interacts with, previous work in this consultation. Mark Goodacre’s paper delivered at the Boston meeting in 2008, “Dating the Crucial Sources for Early Christianity,” highlighted the critical importance of Paul’s letters as our earliest datable sources for early Christianity. Jeffrey Peterson’s 2008 essay, “Haggadic Concord and Halakhic Conflict in the First Christian Generation,” called attention to the evidence which Paul’s letters provide, not only for Paul’s own proclamation, but also for that of pre-Pauline Christianity, the primitive Jerusalem community, and the earliest apostles and eyewitnesses. In this paper, and in a previously published essay, “The Extent of Christian Theological Diversity: Pauline Evidence,” Peterson called particular attention to 1 Corinthians 15:1-11.¹ There is virtually unanimous scholarly agreement that 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 contains a carefully preserved tradition (originating, most would agree, in the Jerusalem community), received by Paul within two to three years of the founding events.² Peterson argued that Paul’s rehearsal of this foundational gospel, far from being consistent with an originally pluriform Christianity, rather provides striking evidence for an original “apostolic consensus” focused upon Jesus’ death and resurrection as “the foundation of apostolic proclamation and Christian communal identity.”³ Similarly, Jerry Sumney, in an examination of preformed traditions in Paul’s letters in his 2008 essay, “Paul and Other Christians,” found evidence in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 for a kerygmatic foundation, shared in common by the first generation of Christ followers, resting upon Jesus’ death and resurrection. In light of the treatments of Sumney and Peterson, the historian cannot help but be impressed by the striking way in which this core apostolic kerygma of Jesus’ death and resurrection in 1 Corinthians

15:3-5, although formed independently of the canonical gospels, nonetheless coheres with the central proclamation of these narratives, each of which culminates with an extended account of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection.

But how much coherence in fact exists between the passion narratives in the canonical gospels and 1 Corinthians 15:3-5? The key issue is the understanding of Jesus’ resurrection in these texts. As Nikolaus Walter points out, the traditional formula in 1 Corinthians 15, unlike the synoptics and John, does not explicitly mention the empty tomb, nor say anything specific regarding what kind of body the risen Lord had. And according to one influential reconstruction, Paul and other early Christ followers understood Jesus’ resurrection as a spiritual event rather than an event involving Jesus’ body of flesh and bones. On this view, belief in Jesus’ physical resurrection from the grave, such as we see reflected in the gospel accounts of the empty tomb, and of the disciples encountering, touching, and eating with the risen Jesus, was a later development, unknown to Paul and the earliest Christ followers.

A classic formulation of this thesis was provided by Hans Grass’ study Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte. In Grass’ reconstruction, Paul had “freed himself entirely from the vulgar Jewish conception of the restoration to life of the old corporeity.” In the resurrection faith of Paul and the earliest apostles, Jesus’ fleshly body lay moldering in the tomb, yet in a new, heavenly body he was now exalted to the right hand of God. Mark’s legend of the empty tomb first introduced the concept of a physical resurrection of Jesus, later augmented in Matthew, Luke, and John by further legendary accounts of Jesus’ realistic bodily appearances to the disciples. Adela Yarbro Collins, who presented an excellent paper on Mark’s passion narrative at the consultation’s second session in New Orleans in 2009, proposes a somewhat different version of this hypothe-

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6Grass, Ostergeschehen 171.
7Grass, Ostergeschehen 146-73.
8Grass, Ostergeschehen 173-248.
sis. In Collins’ view, 1 Corinthians 15 reveals that “for Paul, and presumably for many other early Christians, the resurrection of Jesus did not imply that his tomb was empty.” Rather, Paul’s understanding of ‘resurrection’ involved the bestowal of a new, spiritual body discontinuous with the earthly, physical body. Like other early Christ followers, “Paul’s understanding of the resurrection of Jesus did not involve the revival of his corpse.” Some time afterwards, Mark composed a fictional story about an empty tomb to express his belief that, after his death and burial, Jesus’ body had been immediately translated from the grave to heaven. Only at a later stage do we encounter Matthew, Luke, John, and Acts transmitting accounts of the physically risen Jesus walking the earth and meeting with his disciples, reflecting their relatively new belief that “Jesus’ resurrection entailed the revival of his earthly body.” Although differing on a number of points, Grass and Collins are agreed that the earliest Christ followers regarded Jesus’ resurrection as a spiritual, non-bodily event, with belief in a physical resurrection of Jesus a later development, accompanied by legendary accounts of an empty tomb and ‘realistic’ bodily appearances. On this reconstruction, the good news summarized by Paul in 1 Cor 15:3-5, and the good news narrated by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are different gospels indeed, for they are fundamentally at variance regarding what is, on any reading, the central claim of that good news: Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

The primary piece of evidence undergirding this account of Christian origins is Paul’s purported teaching of a spiritual resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15. One is immediately struck by the extremely slender evidence base for this reconstruction. Belief in a physical, fleshly re-

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10 Collins, “Empty Tomb” 111-114.
11 Collins, “Empty Tomb” 111.
surrection of Jesus involving an empty tomb is amply attested in many documents within the New Testament. These include not only the synoptic resurrection narratives (Mt 28:1-20; Mk 16:1-8; Lk 24:1-53), but also the resurrection narratives in John’s gospel (Jn 20:1-21:25). The speeches of the disciples in Acts presuppose the empty tomb (Acts 2:22-32; 10:39-41; 13:29-33), assert that the body of Jesus was raised without undergoing decay (2:25-31; 13:34-37), and describe the risen Jesus as eating and drinking with his disciples (10:40-42; cf. 1:3-4). Passages elsewhere in Paul’s letters seem to require an understanding of the resurrection as involving the revivification and redemption of the mortal body (Rom 8:9-11; 8:23; Phil 3:21). By contrast, the major documentary evidence for the claim that the earliest Christ followers did not understand Jesus’ resurrection as involving his entombed body is a particular—and contested—interpretation of one text, Paul’s discussion of the resurrection of believers in 1 Corinthians 15. It is evident that this mountain hangs upon a rather slender thread.

At the same time, the logical force of this argument should not be minimized. As is universally agreed, Paul believed the resurrection bodies of the faithful would be made like Christ’s resurrected body (Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 6:14; Phil 3:21). The historian is therefore on solid ground in inferring Paul’s conception of Jesus’ resurrection from his discussion of the future resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. Moreover, Paul’s discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58, although postdating the astonishingly early formula at the heart of 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 by approximately two decades, is hardly irrelevant for our understanding of that formula or the earliest apostolic preaching. After all, Paul, who had extensive contacts with Peter, James, John, and others within the apostolic circles (Gal 1-2), insists in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 on the identity of his kerygma with the kerygma of the Twelve from the very beginning. Paul also informs us (corroborated on this point by Acts) that at the Jerusalem council his gospel was carefully examined and approved by Peter, James, and John (Gal 2:1-10; cf. Acts 15:1-35). Paul’s treatment of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 is thus of crucial relevance for reconstructing the proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection, not only by Paul, but also by the very earliest apostles.
The exegetical claim that Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 envisions a resurrection of Jesus that left his body in the tomb has had an interesting reception history. In an essay published in 1986, Ben F. Meyer sketched an outline of the history of research on the resurrection in Paul during the previous one hundred years. In Meyer’s sketch, the influential monograph of Ernst Teichmann, published in 1896, looms large. In this study Teichmann argued for a spiritualized notion of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, as a key step in the development of Paul’s eschatology from the Jewish concept of the resurrection of the body to a hellenistic concept of immortality. However, as Meyer notes, Teichmann’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15 was subject to sharp critiques by Albert Schweitzer and, much later, by Joachim Jeremias. As a result, Meyer in 1986 could write that Teichmann’s interpretation of Paul’s thought as involving the annihilation rather than the transformation of the physical body, was “a dead letter for the vast majority today.”

However, an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15 largely along the lines suggested by Teichmann—which Meyer twenty-five years ago could describe as virtually a “dead letter”—has in recent years gained an increasing amount of scholarly support. Today a number of interpreters argue, as did Teichmann, that Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 envisions a heavenly or ‘spiritual’ body which excludes participation of the earthly, mortal body in final salvation. Perhaps the most influential case for this understanding of resurrection in Paul, and in my view certainly the most

16 Ernst Teichmann, Die paulinische Vorstellungen von Auferstehung und Gericht und ihre Beziehungen zur jüdischen Apokalyptik (Freiburg/Leipzig: Mohr, 1896).
learned and suggestive, is Dale Martin’s exposition of 1 Corinthians 15 in chapter five of his monograph *The Corinthian Body*. Martin’s valuable work has served to clarify the discussion in important ways, two of which call for particular mention. First, in contrast with hazy and unfounded hypotheses about a “realized eschatology” mindset among the Corinthians, Martin argues persuasively that “everything we know about the position of the strong [i.e. those who denied the resurrection of the dead] can be accounted for by recourse to popular philosophy,” in particular a pervasive body/soul dualism which exalted the spiritual and disparaged the body.

Second, Martin points out that the sort of dualism to which many held within the ancient world, and which may have underlay the rejection of the resurrection by some at Corinth, is not simply commensurate with our modern Cartesian contrast between matter and non-material spirit. On ancient views, soul as well as body was commonly conceived as material or substantial, albeit the body of a lower, grosser form of matter, and the soul of a higher, finer sort.

How does Paul respond to those at Corinth who challenged the resurrection, according to Martin? Martin argues that, on one level, Paul overturns these dualistic assumptions of the strong at Corinth by insisting on the future resurrection of the body. However, on another level, he compromises with these assumptions by *redefining* the body which is raised—not the mortal body of flesh and bones, but “a heavenly body composed of pneuma.”

“Paul, for his part, rejects the notion of a resurrection of corpses or of flesh and blood.” Paul reenvisions the risen body in this way, Martin surmises, “so as to make it [i.e. the body] an acceptable category for...”

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23Martin, *Body* 108-123.

24Martin, *Body* 120. On *pneuma* or spirit as the “substance” of which the resurrection body is “composed,” cf. 126, 128-29, and 276, n. 82.
immortality according to philosophical physiology.” The correspondences between Martin’s exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15 and the thesis of Teichmann are striking. Meyer summarizes Teichmann’s analysis of Paul’s teaching on the resurrection in this chapter as follows: “he [Paul] affirmed the annihilation of everything earthly, including the earthly body, and the appropriation of a new, spiritual body—still, however, to take place at the Parousia.” The correspondence between this summary of Teichmann’s reading of 1 Corinthians 15, and the following capsule of Paul’s teaching from Martin is obvious:

According to Paul, the raised body is stripped of flesh, blood, and soul (psychē); it has nothing of the earth in it at all, being composed entirely of the celestial substance of pneuma. However, Martin’s important study does not simply bring us back full circle to the thesis of Teichmann. Martin’s more cogent exploration of the likely philosophical background to the dispute at Corinth, especially his crucial reminder that ancient disparagement of the body did not necessarily include rejection of matter, permits us to focus the question more sharply. The question is not, as it is often posed, whether Paul envisioned the risen body as “material” or “non-material,” but whether Paul conceived of the risen body as a body of flesh and bones, in material continuity with the mortal body laid in the tomb. James Dunn defines the question, in light of Martin’s study, with precision: “The real debate is whether Paul conceived of the resurrection body in terms of a reconstitution of the flesh.” In other words, did Paul’s understanding of resurrection entail an empty tomb, or did it not?

In addressing this question, I will seek to give focus to my efforts by interacting principally with Martin’s valuable work. Martin argues, as did Teichmann more than a century ago, that Paul’s conception of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 excludes participation of the

25 Martin, Body 130. Elsewhere Martin speaks of Paul’s “conscious rejection” of “the resurrection of the flesh” (123).
26 Martin, Body 130.
28 Martin, Body 129.
29 Dunn, “1 Corinthians 15” 16.
fleshly body in final salvation. I wish to ask: is this view supportable in light of exegetical analysis of 1 Corinthians 15, or does it involve a misreading of the text? I will focus on the crux of Paul’s exposition of the resurrection body, 1 Corinthians 15:35-58. Of course, a full exegesis of this lengthy and complex passage is well beyond the limits of this essay. Rather, I shall focus on the key exegetical issues relating to the debate on the resurrection in Paul.

The Mortal Body and the Risen Body: Identity or Non-Identity?

As has been frequently noted, Paul’s exposition in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 is structured by a series of contrasts between the ante-mortem body and the risen body.30 Another important contribution of Martin’s study is his demonstration of the importance of this series of oppositions within the structure of Paul’s argument.31 For Martin, this sequence of contrasts establishes an ontological distinction between the mortal body and the risen body which rules out their numerical identity:

Paul reaffirms the resurrection of their bodies; but to convince Christians influenced by philosophy, he admits that he himself does not believe in a resurrection of this body.32

The transformation expected at the eschaton will cause the Christian body to shed the lower parts of it current nature and be left with the purer, transformed part of the pneuma. Christians will have bodies without flesh, blood, or soul—composed solely of pneumatic substance—light, airy, luminous bodies.33

Similarly for James Dunn, Paul’s series of contrasting pairs (e.g. corruption/incorruption, dishonor/glory, etc.) underline the impossibility that “the physical body, weak and subject to corruption and death” should share in resurrection life.34

I agree with Martin and Dunn on the importance of this series of oppositions between the mortal and risen body within Paul’s argument. However, I am convinced that the structure of Paul’s argument can be set forth with greater precision than has been done previously, and I

31 Martin, Body 127.
32 Martin, Body 130.
33 Martin, Body 132.
34 Dunn, “1 Corinthians 15” 16.
would argue that, when this sequence of contrasts is examined within the context of Paul’s larger argument, a very different picture emerges than assumed by Dunn and Martin. Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15:36-54 is structured by *twelve* paired verbs denoting death and resurrection in vv. 36-49, followed by *seven* verbs denoting resurrection in vv. 50-58. The hinge point appears to be the revelation of the mystery in 15:51 (“we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed”). Paul employs contrasting pairs of verbs denoting death (or the mortal state) and resurrection (vv. 36, 42-44, 49) up until 15:51, but from that point forward only verbs denoting resurrection or transformation (vv. 51, 52, 53-54). This structure may be set out as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Mode of Existence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36 ὃ σπείρεις (that which you sow)</td>
<td>ἀποθάνῃ (dies)</td>
<td>_________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ζυοποιεῖηαι (is made alive)</td>
<td>_________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 τὸ σῶμα [the body]) (cf. 39-41, 44)</td>
<td>σπείρεται (is sown)</td>
<td>ἐν φθορᾷ (in decay)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>εγείρεται (is raised)</td>
<td>ἐν ἀθανασίᾳ (in incorruption)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>σπείρεται (is sown)</td>
<td>ἐν ἀθανασίᾳ (in dishonor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>εγείρεται (is raised)</td>
<td>ἐν δόξῃ (in glory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>σπείρεται (is sown)</td>
<td>ἐν ἀθανασίᾳ (in weakness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>εγείρεται (is raised)</td>
<td>ἐν δυνάμει (in power)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>σπείρεται (is sown)</td>
<td>σῶμα ψυχικόν (a body given life by the soul)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>εγείρεται (is raised)</td>
<td>σῶμα πνευματικόν (a body given life by the Spirit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49 ἡμεῖς (we)</td>
<td>ἐφορέσαμεν (we were clothed)</td>
<td>τὴν εἰκόνα τοῦ χῶρος (with the image of the man of dust [Adam])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>φορέσομεν (we will be clothed)</td>
<td>καὶ τὴν εἰκόνα τοῦ ἐποικισμοῦ (also with the image of Christ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 πάντες (all)</td>
<td>ἄλλαξαν (we will be transformed)</td>
<td>_________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52 οἱ νεκροὶ (the dead)</td>
<td>ἐγερθήσονται (will be raised) ἀφθαρτοί (imperishable)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>τὸ φθαρτὸν τὸῦτο (this perishable body)</td>
<td>δεῖ ἐνδύσῃ (must be clothed with)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>τὸ θνητὸν τοῦτο (this mortal body)</td>
<td>δεῖ ἐνδύσῃ (must be clothed with)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even a cursory overview of the diagram, I would argue, reveals that the analyses of Martin and Dunn fail to adequately reflect the relationships between the contrasts in Paul’s argument. Three observations are crucial. First, the subject of the verbal pairs within 15:36-49 is one and the same both for verbs denoting death, and those denoting resurrection. The subject of the verbs in 15:36-49 denoting resurrection thus can hardly refer, pace Martin, to some “immortal and incorruptible part” of the body, but rather refer to the mortal, corruptible body which dies, but in resurrection is given new life. This pattern is evident throughout the entire section 15:36-49. In 15:36 the seed, representative of the present mortal body, “dies” but “is made alive” again by God. In 15:42-44 the subject remains the mortal, perishable body, which is “sown” (ζειπεῖαι) in death, but “raised” (ἐγείρεται) to imperishable life. The identity of subject between these two verbs receives further stress through the pointed assonance of the paired verbs (ζειπεῖαι/ἐγείρεται, four times in vv. 42-44).

In 15:51-58, as we have seen, Paul shifts from paired verbs denoting death and resurrection to verbs denoting solely resurrection or transformation. However, here too it is the present perishable body which is the subject of the transformation (15:51, 15:52, 15:53-54). The section 15:53-
54 (in which the unexpressed subject, evident from the neuter adjectives, is σῶμα) forms a striking counterpoint to Martin’s claim that Paul “does not believe in a resurrection of this body,” for in 15:53-54, the subject which undergoes transformation is precisely the corruptible (φθαρτός) and mortal (θνητός) body of flesh and bones. Indeed, the fourfold repetition of “this” (τούτο) emphasizes that it is this mortal, perishable body which the subject of the transformation. “The subject persists throughout the radical change.”

Throughout 1 Corinthians 15:36-54, the subject of the verbs Paul uses to describe the resurrection event is the corruptible body of flesh laid in the tomb. It is this body which is raised and transformed.

Our second observation is closely related to the first. The verbs which Paul employs in this chapter for the resurrection event correspond to this reality—that the subject of the resurrection event is the physical human body. In Martin’s exegesis, the resurrection event in Paul is frequently described in terms of divestment and annihilation of the mortal flesh. In striking contrast, the five verbs which Paul employs in 1 Corinthians 15:36-54 for the resurrection event each express, in different ways, not the annihilation or divestment of the mortal body, but its revival and transformation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ζωοποιέω</td>
<td>‘make alive’</td>
<td>15:36, 45 (cf. 15:22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἐγείρω</td>
<td>‘raise to life’</td>
<td>15:42-44, 52 (cf. 15:3, 12-17, 20, 29, 32, 35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>φορέω</td>
<td>‘be clothed’</td>
<td>15:49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἀλλάσσω</td>
<td>‘transform’</td>
<td>15:51, 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἐνδύω</td>
<td>‘clothe’</td>
<td>15:53, 54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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37 In Paul’s view of resurrection, according to Martin, “the raised body is stripped of flesh, blood, and soul” (129); the mortal body must “shed the lower parts of its current nature” (132), with both flesh and soul “sloughed off along the way” (126). [all italics mine]
Clearly, the verbs Paul employs express the transformation of the mortal nature, not its extinction. A third important feature of the structure of Paul’s argument is made evident by the diagram. The complements of these verbs (see the right hand column of the diagram on pp. 9-10), which describe the new state of the risen body, do not refer to a change or alteration of substance, but to a new mode of existence, in which what was once perishable, dishonored, weak, and mortal is endowed with imperishability, glory, power, and immortality. The modern heirs of Teichmann’s approach regularly point to this range of contrasts between the mode of existence of the ante-mortem body and the resurrection body to argue that Paul excludes the mortal, perishable body from participation in final salvation. But, as should now be clear, such an argument misses the central point of Paul’s argument, which is to show how the perishable body, through eschatological resurrection, will partake of imperishable life.

Importantly, the structure of Paul’s argument, evident in the diagram, also fixes the meaning of the key terms ἀφθαρσία and ἄφθαρτος (vv. 42, 52, 53, 54). Used in contrast with φθορά in 15:42 and 15:53-54, which is used with specific reference to the decay of a dead human body, its cognate noun ἀφθαρσία in this context must have it specific sense of “freedom from decay” (rather than its general sense of “immortality”). The important implication is that the terms ἀφθαρσία (“imperishability”) and ἄφθαρτος (“imperishable”) do not refer, within Paul’s argument, to some aspect of humanity which is immortal by nature, but rather to a bodily state of corruption (ἐν φθορᾷ, 15:42; τὸ φθαρτὸν τοῦτο, 15:53-54) which is transformed to a bodily state of freedom from corruption (ἐν ἀφθαρσίᾳ, 15:42; ἄφθαρτοι, 15:52; ἀφθαρσίαιν, 15:53-54). As Andrew Johnson remarks:

In this rhetorical unit (vv. 42, 52, 53, 54), cognates of corruption (φθορά) and incorruption (ἀφθαρσία) uniformly refer to the bodily state of the dead (i.e. corruption, decay) versus the bodily state in which they are raised (i.e. incorruption, non-decay).

38 Johnson, “Resurrected Body” 300.
39 Johnson, “Resurrected Body” 305.
Paul’s language is the language, not of annihilation, but of transformation, and has in view most centrally this change whereby the corruptible body is made incorruptible and immortal.

The Function of Paul’s Seed/Plant Analogy in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Another aspect of the structure of Paul’s argument is evident from our diagram (pp. 9-10): Paul follows through on the analogy of the seed (15:36-41) throughout the section, as is evident from Paul’s repetition of the language of “sowing” (σπείρω, 15:42-44; cf. ὁ σπείρεις, 15:36) and of “clothing” (φορέω, 15:49; ἐνδύω, 15:53-54; cf. ἐνδύματα κόκκος, 15:37). This would suggest the importance of the analogy for grasping Paul’s overall argument.40 1 Corinthians 15:36-41 appears to function as a single analogy, with three distinct phases. In the first phase, Paul compares the death and burial of the ante-mortem body to a seed planted in the ground, and the resurrection body to the plant which emerges (15:36-38). This analogy points at once to two distinct aspects of the resurrection event: both the material continuity between the mortal and risen body, and the transformation of the mortal body which occurs in eschatological resurrection. Like the seed, the identical mortal body which “dies” will be “made alive” by God (15:36). But like the seed, this body will be resurrected to a new, transformed existence (15:37-38). As we have already seen, Paul’s application of the analogy in his subsequent argument will show that the transformation he has in mind is the body’s change from perishability and mortality to immortality and imperishability (15:42-44, 15: 52-54).

The second (15:39) and third (15:40-41) phases of Paul’s analogy are crucial. In 15:39-41 Paul follows up the theme of the seed’s transformation in 15:36-38, and prepares his hearers for the theme of the body’s transformation throughout the subsequent section (15:42-54). By reminding his hearers of the various types of flesh (15:39), bodies (15:40), and bodily splendor (15:40-41), Paul continues to press his audience to imagine a transformed embodiment, an em-

40 On 1 Cor 15:36-41 and the function of these verses within the chapter, see Normand Bonneau, “The Logic of Paul’s Argument on the Resurrection Body in 1 Cor 15:35-44a,” Science et Esprit 45 (1993) 79-92; Johnson, “Resurrected Body” 296-99.
bodiment freed from mortality, weakness, and decay. The structure of the contrasting pairs within Paul’s full analogy may be set out as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Seed</th>
<th>Plant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15:36</td>
<td>Seed</td>
<td>Plant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:37-38</td>
<td>Present Body</td>
<td>Transformed Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:39</td>
<td>Present Flesh</td>
<td>Transformed Flesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:40-41</td>
<td>Glory of the Present Body</td>
<td>Transformed Glory of the Risen Body</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is often ignored is the critical significance of verse 39 within this analogy for our understanding of resurrection in Paul. Clearly, the function of verse 39 within Paul’s argument reveals that Paul here envisions not only the resurrection of the *body*, but also the resurrection of the *flesh*. The juxtaposition of 15:39 with 15:40-41 show that (at least here) for Paul, as we know was the case for his Greek-speaking audience, σῶμα and σάρξ are synonymous terms for the human body. As Ceslaus Spicq notes, σάρξ in 1 Cor 15:39 is an instance of “the neutral biological meaning, ‘flesh’ as a synonym of ‘body.’”41 This juxtaposition of 15:39 with 15:40-41 precludes Martin’s claim that Paul in verses 40-41 argues that the risen body will be composed of celestial matter. Rather, Paul’s analogy in 15:36-41 assumes both that the risen body will be a *body* (15:37-38, 40-41), and that it will be composed of *flesh* (15:39). Paul’s reminder of the various kinds of bodies and the various kinds of flesh effectively prepares his audience for the depiction of risen, transformed corporeity to follow in 15:42-58, in which the risen body is differentiated from its mortal counterpart not by change of substance, but by its freedom from weakness, mortality, and decay.


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1 Corinthians 15 in Pauline Context

The somatic identity of the mortal and risen body, which we have seen is integral to the structure of Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15, is also evident elsewhere in Paul’s letters. In Philippians 3:21 it is specifically “the body of our lowly state” (τὸ σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως ἡμῶν) which is to be transformed and glorified. In Romans 8:23 Paul describes eschatological resurrection as “the redemption of our body” (ἡ ἀπολύτρωσις τοῦ σώματός ἡμῶν)—the mortal fleshly body is not shed or abandoned, but redeemed by God. As Nikolaus Walter notes, the conception in Romans 8:23 involves “not a redemption from the body or out of the body, but the salvific transformation of bodies.” But if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells within you, the one who raised Christ from the dead (ὁ ἐγείρας Χριστὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν) will also give life to your mortal bodies (ζωοποιήσει καὶ τὰ θνητὰ σώματα ὑμῶν), through his Spirit which dwells within you.

The explanations of these passages offered by those who adopt a Teichmann-like approach to 1 Corinthians 15 are far from convincing. Nikolaus Walter, for instance, opines that Paul taught a resurrection of the flesh to the Romans and Philippians, but a resurrection of a non-fleshly, spiritual body to the Corinthians. Grass argues that Romans 8:11 does not refer to the resurrection after all, but only to present Christian existence. Often these treatments of the resurrection body within the wider Pauline corpus are simply ignored. Another fatal weakness, in my judgment, of the view that Paul proposes a spiritualized concept of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, is the failure of proponents of this view to offer anything approaching a defensible exegesis of these passages consistent with such a view.

42 Walter, “Auferstehung?” 120.  
43 Walter, “Auferstehung?” 119-121.  
44 Grass, Ostergeschichten 165-66.
Does σῶμα πνευματικόν in 15:44 Mean a ‘Body Composed of Celestial Pneuma’?

Those who posit a spiritualized conception of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 claim major support for this view in Paul’s reference to the risen body as a *soma pneumatikon*. The *soma pneumatikon*, it is argued, refers to a “body composed of spirit,” distinct from the body laid in the tomb.\(^{45}\) However, the notion that verse 44 introduces the concept of a new body, distinct in substance from the body sown in death, runs counter to the logic of Paul’s syntax in this verse. For the contrasted pair σῶμα ψυχικόν and σῶμα πνευματικόν are not the subjects of the verbs in verse 44. The subject of these verbs, as we have seen, is the mortal, physical body buried in death (σπείρεται) but thereafter raised to life (ἐγείρεται). The terms σῶμα ψυχικόν and σῶμα πνευματικόν function *predicatively*, and describe two contrasting modes of existence of this body, one prior to the resurrection, the other following the resurrection.

But what is the nature of that new mode of existence into which the body enters following the resurrection? Here the larger context of the letter is helpful, for 15:44 is in fact not the first occurrence of the contrasted pair of adjectives ψυχικός/πνευματικός within the epistle. Rather, like other key themes and vocabulary within chapter 15, these terms are crucially foreshadowed earlier in the letter. In 1 Corinthians 2:14-15 ὁ ψυχικός ἄνθρωπος is contrasted with ὁ πνευματικὸς [ἄνθρωπος]. In this passage the contrast is obviously not between a person composed of flesh and blood, and a person composed of celestial spirit. Rather, ὁ ψυχικὸς ἄνθρωπος is the person who possesses only the natural life of the soul (ψυχή) and is bereft of the holy Spirit, in contrast with ὁ πνευματικὸς [ἄνθρωπος], the person possessing and transformed by the Spirit of God (τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ, 2:11-12).\(^{46}\) Similarly elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, the adjective πνευματικός is uniformly used with reference to persons or things enlivened, empowered, or transformed by the Spirit: flesh and blood human beings (2:15; 3:1; 14:37), manna and water (10:3-4), and a very

46Cf. Jude 19, where ψυχικοί persons are defined as πνεῦμα μὴ ἔχοντες.
material rock (10:4). This adjective in Paul never means “composed only of celestial pneuma,” and such a concept is entirely foreign to his thought.

But the most telling consideration against this interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:44 is the immediate context of the passage, which pairs the terms σῶμα ψυχικόν (with reference to the mortal body) and σῶμα πνευματικόν (with reference to the risen body). For if σῶμα πνευματικόν in this context describes the composition of the resurrection body, as a body composed only of spirit, its correlate σῶμα ψυχικόν must describe the composition of the present body, as a body composed only of soul. Paul, of course, is hardly unaware (and would hardly expect the Corinthians to be unaware) that human bodies are composed of flesh, blood, and bones! The interpretation which regards these adjectives as referring to the body’s composition thus collapses under its own weight. Rather, the term σῶμα ψυχικόν describes the present body as given life by the soul, the life given by the very breath of God (1 Cor 15:45a, ἐγένετο ὁ πρῶτος ἀνθρώπος Λόγος eἰς ψυχήν ἐν τῆς ψυχής [echoing Gen 2:7]), but in Adam subject to mortality and decay (1 Cor 15:21-22). In the same way, the term σῶμα πνευματικόν describes the body which is raised as given life by the Spirit of God, the life given by Christ, the new Adam (1 Cor 15:45b, ὁ ἐξουσιασμένος ἀνθρώπος eἰς πνεῦμα ζωοποιοῦν, and thus bestowing on the body a mode of existence which is immortal and imperishable (1 Cor 15:20-26, 42-43, 46-49, 52-54). The σῶμα πνευματικόν is neither a body without flesh (σάρξ), nor a body without soul (ψυχή), but body and soul given immortal life by the Spirit of the Lord. The expression σῶμα πνευματικόν is unique here in Paul, but the concept—the Spirit as the agent of resurrection life—is evident elsewhere in Paul’s epistles (Rom 8:11; 8:23; Gal 6:7-8).

Does 1 Corinthians 15:50 Preclude the Resurrection of the Flesh?

1 Corinthians 15:50 is often cited, without comment, as obvious evidence of Paul’s exclusion of all that is fleshly, physical, and material from final salvation. Collins, for instance, writes: “The remark in verse 50, ‘flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the pe-
rishable inherit the imperishable,’ implies that the resurrection ‘body’ is not material in the same way that the earthly body is.”

From the discussion above it should be evident that such an interpretation is not consistent with Paul’s larger argument within the chapter. What, then, is Paul’s specific point here, in the context of that larger argument?

Contrary to the scholarly reflex to read this verse as a disparagement of the body, “flesh and blood” does not appear to refer to humanity’s material nature, the substance of flesh, but rather to the frail, transitory nature of the mortal body in its perishability and corruptibility. Several observations point to such a meaning of the term here. First, as we saw, in Paul’s earlier argument he has used σάρξ (15:39) and σῶμα (15:35, 37-38, 40-41) interchangeably to refer to the material body which will be made alive (15:36) and raised up (15:42-44) by God. Second, in the usage of the phrase σάρξ καὶ ἀἷμα elsewhere, this term often bears the specific connotation of mortality and corruptibility:

Like the growth of leaves on a flourishing tree, which drops some and makes others to grow, so is the generation of flesh and blood (σάρκος καὶ αἷμα); one dies, and another is born. Every work decays and disappears, and the one who made it will depart with it. (Sirach 14:18-19)

. . . flesh and blood (σάρκα καὶ αἷμα), who die and perish (οἵηινερ ἀποθνήζκοςζιν καὶ ἀπόλλςνηαι). (1 Enoch 15.4)

Moreover, in 15:50 this sense appears to be required by the parallel clauses of Paul’s formulation:

_Flesh and blood_ (σάρξ καὶ αἷμα) cannot inherit the kingdom of God

What is corruptible (φθορά) does not inherit what is incorruptible (ἀφθαρσία)

In this verse, Paul’s synthetic parallelism functions to identify a single subject of the two clauses: the perishable, mortal body.

To grasp Paul’s point, it is important to note that Paul in 15:50 does _not_ affirm that the corruptible body cannot be _raised_, but that it cannot _inherit the kingdom of God_. As the foregoing

verses have stressed, it is precisely the mortal, corruptible body which will be *made alive* (15:36, 45) and *raised* by God (15:42-44). But to inherit the kingdom, the perishable body must not only (as Paul’s previous argument has shown) be *raised* and *made alive* (“it is sown/it is raised,” 15:42-44), but must also (as Paul’s subsequent argument will now show) be *transformed* so as to share Christ’s indestructible life (“we will be changed,” 15:51). The sequence of thought is as follows:

Human Dilemma: (50) perishable flesh (φθορά) cannot inherit the kingdom

Divine Answer: (51) we shall all be changed (ἀλλαγήσομεθα)

(52) the dead will be raised imperishable (ἐγερθούνται ἁφθαρτοί)
(53) this perishable (φθαρτός) body must be clothed with imperishability (ἁφθαρσία) (cf. 54)

(cf. 42) the body is sown in decay (φθορά), it is raised in imperishability (ἁφθαρσία)

Clearly, the dilemma envisioned in 15:50, as made evident by the solution provided in 15:51-54, is not the physical or fleshly nature of the body, but the mortal body’s perishability and slavery to decay. Accordingly, a shift takes place at 15:50 in Paul’s vocabulary for the resurrection event. In the previous section (vv. 35-49), the verbs Paul uses for the resurrection event stressed the material continuity between the mortal and risen body (one aspect of the seed analogy in vv. 36-41)—the body will be *made alive* (vv. 36, 45) and *raised* (vv. 42-44). In contrast, the verbs Paul uses for this event following 15:50 stress the transformation which must occur whereby the mortal body is made imperishable (the other aspect of the seed analogy in vv. 36-41)—the body will be *changed* (vv. 51, 52b), and *clothed with imperishability* (vv. 53-54). Flesh and blood is unable to inherit the kingdom of God (15:50), not because of its materiality, but because of its corruptibility. And the answer provided in the revelation of the mystery (15:51) is not the annihilation of the mortal flesh, but its resurrection and transformation (15:51-58).
Resurrection in the Context of Creation’s Renewal

Paul’s focus in 1 Corinthians 15:50 on inheriting the kingdom, recalling his fuller exposition of the eschatological kingdom in 15:24-28, highlights another key weakness in the view we are considering. The resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 is a future, eschatological event, occurring at a specific point in time—“in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (15:51). Does not the very concept of a resurrection in time demand that the resurrection as Paul conceived it be a resurrection of the palpable, physical body, which now “sleeps” in death (15:6, 18, 20, 51), awaiting the time when it will be “awakened” to life (15:20, 21, 42-44, 52) at the resurrection? If Paul conceives the resurrection as involving only “the immortal and incorruptible part” (Martin), precisely what does he conceive will be “clothed with immortality” (15:53-54) at the last trump? And why the wait, if it is already immortal? The factor of the resurrection’s occurrence in time, I would argue, is incoherent except within a context in which that which is mortal (the fleshly body) is through resurrection given new, immortal life.

Further, Paul’s focus in 15:50 on the inheritance of the kingdom as the context of the resurrection to come, brings us to what is, in my judgment, a fundamental misapprehension underlying the exegesis of both Teichmann and his modern heirs. Martin, for example, argues that for Paul the body must “shed the lower parts of its current nature and be . . . composed solely of pneumatic substance,” so that the now etherized ‘body’ may be adapted to its dwelling in heaven—“the raised body will have to be thoroughly reconstituted so as to be able to rise from the earth to a new luminous home in the heavens.”48 However, in Paul’s thought the inheritance of the saints is not heaven, but the entire creation, in its physicality and materiality, renewed and transformed by the creator God (Rom 8:17-25; cf. 4:13; 1 Cor 15:23-28).49 Underlying Paul’s description of the kingdom as “imperishable” (ἀθαπτία) in 15:50 is this very conception of the whole physical cosmos “set free from bondage to decay” (φθορά, Rom 8:21) at the parousia.

49 For the renewal of creation as the larger context of the hope of resurrection in Jewish texts, see 1 Enoch 22-27 (esp. 25:6); Testament of Judah 25; 1 Enoch 51.1-5.
The expectation of a numinous body composed of ethereal matter seems, to put it mildly, out of place within the context of a hope of the redemption of the entire physical cosmos. The inheritance of a material but imperishable cosmos would seem to require a physical, fleshly body, raised and transformed to be imperishable—which is precisely the mode of existence, I have argued, which Paul ascribes to the risen body in 1 Corinthians 15.

Conclusion

There is a lack of persuasive evidence that Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 envisions a non-fleshly resurrection body composed of ethereal ‘spirit’ or pneuma. To the contrary, I have argued, numerous considerations tell strongly against and preclude such a view. In 1 Corinthians 15:36-49 Paul employs paired verbs denoting death and resurrection, whose single subject is the mortal, corruptible body. In 1 Corinthians 15:50-58, the subject of the coming transformation is explicitly the mortal, perishable nature. The verbs Paul uses for the resurrection event throughout 15:35-58 consistently denote, not annihilation or divestment, but revivification and transformation. It is this body which will be given life (15:36), raised (15:42, 43, 44, 52), and transformed (15:51, 52, 53, 54). Paul’s analogy in 15:36-41 assumes not only that the risen body will be a body (15:37-38), but also that it will be composed of flesh (15:39). Treatments of the resurrection in the Pauline corpus outside 1 Corinthians 15 also appear to preclude the possibility that Paul envisioned a ‘spiritualized’ resurrection body in this text. In verse 44, the context rules out the notion that σῶμα πνευματικόν means a ‘body composed of celestial pneuma,’ but rather signifies that the risen body will be endowed with life by the power of the Spirit. Finally, the setting of Paul’s resurrection hope within the context of an eschatological expectation of the renewal of the entire physical cosmos would seem to require a physical resurrection of the body as well.

It follows from Paul’s understanding in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 of the resurrection of believers as fleshly and physical that he also understood the resurrection of Jesus in the core kerygma of 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 as the physical resurrection of his mortal body from the tomb. Paul’s
understanding of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 demands an empty tomb in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. Our analysis of 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 illumines this formula in yet another way. Strikingly, several of the elements in 15:35-58 which we saw pointed to a physical revival of the mortal body in the future resurrection, occur also in the description of Jesus’ resurrection in the core apostolic kerygma in 15:3-5. First, just as Paul’s paired verbs denoting death and resurrection had a single subject—the mortal body of flesh laid in the grave—so in the apostolic formula the verbs have a single subject: “Christ died . . . he was buried . . . he was raised” (15:3-5). Second, the verb used in the formula for the resurrection event is ἐγείρω (15:5), the same verb we saw Paul used in 15:35-58 for the mortal body’s physical revival and transformation (15:42, 43, 44, 52). Finally, the formula’s announcement that Jesus was raised “on the third day” (15:5) is of enormous significance. For this proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection at a specific point in time is, like the hope of resurrection at the last trump in 15:51-58, simply incoherent apart from the conception of a physical revival of his corpse. Birger Gerhardsson has argued persuasively that the brief formulaic statement in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and resurrection appearances presupposes a narrative of these events. If so, the language and thought of this astonishingly early formula, as well as its setting within the larger context of 1 Corinthians 15, presupposes a narrative or narratives of the kind we see in the synoptics and John, involving an empty tomb, and encounters with a physically risen Jesus.

In summary, neither Paul’s exposition of the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58, nor the core apostolic kerygma in 15:1-11, are consistent with a ‘spiritualized’ understanding of Jesus’ resurrection which did not involve an empty tomb. In light of the evidence presented in this essay, it is illegitimate to cite 1 Corinthians 15 as evidence for an early Christian understanding of resurrection which left Jesus’ body in the grave. Paul, like all other Christ followers of the first generation known to us, believed that Jesus had been raised on the third day in the flesh, leaving behind an empty tomb.

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50Gerhardsson, “Christ’s Resurrection” 89-91.