

The Body Reborn

[AARON BRAND]

To say that our bodies bear the weight of our experience is, perhaps, an understatement. Our lives are inscribed on our skin indelibly, though we may often wish it were otherwise. For early Christian theologians, this relation to our bodily form was a question of deep significance. Whether our physicality was cast off once we ascended in a resurrected state was no foregone conclusion, and it was this idea of the discarding of the body that so incensed Jerome and inspired Augustine. Both theologians differ in minute details, but neither is comfortable letting the body be entirely left behind upon our ascension. In this essay, I will explain Jerome and Augustine's view of the centrality of bodily resurrection and how this informs their understanding of the body as the repository of difference. After a brief overview of the sources in question, I will review Origen's position on the physical continuity of the resurrection, and then exposit Jerome and Augustine's view on the importance of the resurrection of the flesh. I will then discuss both theologians' treatment of the perfect body, which will be followed by an examination of Jerome and Augustine's views on the minimum necessary physical continuity for the preservation of identity. I close with an overview of the body's essential role in differentiation for both authors, and an inspection of the relative importance of identity and God.

Before treating the question of Jerome and Augustine's views on the resurrection, I will provide a brief overview of the texts in question. Both theologians were active in the late fourth and early fifth centuries CE, writing after the conversion of Constantine during which Christianity came into a favored status in Rome. Both Jerome and Augustine are foundational thinkers in Christian theology, with Jerome having written the "Vulgate" Bible which was the primary translation of the document until the Protestant Reformation, and Augustine being the most influential theologian of Latin Christianity, who in addition to his "Enchiridion" wrote "The City of God"

and his deeply personal “Confessions.” Jerome approaches the question of resurrection from a deeply ascetic tradition, which is evident in various particulars of the text. His position on the resurrection of the body is outlined in his letter to Pammachius, wherein he rails against another theologian, Origen, through the proxy of John of Jerusalem. Jerome represents a rival school of thought to Origen (and John of Jerusalem) regarding the form in which resurrected bodies will rise after death. Due to this antagonism, Jerome’s summary of Origen must be read warily, as he is by no means a sympathetic reader of the latter. However, Jerome does apparently quote Origen verbatim at numerous points in the text and is further committed to providing an adequate refutation of Origen in order to convince followers of Jerome’s (perceived) correct view of the miracle of resurrection. The second text treated in this examination is a selection from Augustine’s “Enchiridion,” which he published as a handbook for the appropriate way of living life as a Christian. Augustine is writing to sort out various doctrinal questions of Christian theology, and as such is concerned primarily with addressing a contemporary Christian audience that is largely aware of important theological questions. Along these lines, Augustine and Jerome were contemporaries who, though by no means identical, agreed in large part in their interpretation of the resurrection. The texts utilized thus provide an important response to Origen’s particular interpretation of bodily resurrection, with Jerome writing directly against him and Augustine treating Origen’s doctrine peripherally.

Origen interprets the resurrection as being fundamentally a transfiguration into a spiritual body, one which shares identity with the physical body but is nonetheless wholly changed. The reasons for this (as related by Jerome) are twofold: one resulting from the perceived physical nature of bodies, the other from a practical consideration of capabilities. Regarding the former, Origen claims that the physical end of the body necessitates a change in form, wherein the composite matter is irrevocably mixed and cannot be “altogether the same that they were.”¹ As to Origen’s latter consideration, he claims that the body after resurrection must be “a different body, spiritual and ethereal,” and not merely a continuation of the flesh.² For Origen, conceiving of the resurrected body as being fundamentally the same as before resurrection is nonsensical. Indeed, he posits that if “our bodies are to be the same [as before resurrection],” it would follow that the same physical needs and wants would plague those in Heaven as they did those on Earth.³ This, to Origen, is an absurdity that no theologian would posit, since none would suggest that the angelic host is beset by the demands of the flesh. Rather, the body must be transfigured, must become something ultimately incorporeal to ascend to its rightful place.

Contra Origen, the resurrected body for both Jerome and Augustine is meaningfully our own original body, with its physical properties intact. The preservation

1 Jerome, “Letter to Pammachius against John of Jerusalem,” cc. 23-37, in Jerome, ed. and trans. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, volume 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1892), 436.

2 Jerome, 437.

3 Jerome, 437.

of physical continuity is paramount for Jerome, who views the denial of the flesh as a denial of the continuity of resurrection. It is with this consideration in mind that Jerome states that the “true confession of the resurrection declares that the flesh will be glorious, but without destroying its reality.”⁴ Later, Jerome reads Job as lamenting the possibility that “all his sufferings would be in vain,” that is, that the travails of the body would be rendered some discarded virtue upon ascending.⁵ Though without the ascetic tinge, Augustine echoes this sentiment in stating that our bodies will be restored “out of the whole of the matter of which [they were] originally composed,” and will not be something of a fundamentally changed nature.⁶ For both theologians, the prospect of the resurrection without the resurrection of the flesh is meaningless, Jerome going so far as to state that “the reality of a resurrection without flesh and bones, without blood and members, is unintelligible.”⁷ Augustine likewise states that “no Christian should have the slightest doubt,” as to bodily resurrection.⁸

For Jerome and Augustine, the natural disposition of the physical body will be transcended in the miracle of resurrection. Though the body will be physically continuous with that of the individual before resurrection, it will nonetheless be its perfected form. This is made evident when Augustine treats the question of various “monsters” that he claims will be raised “in an amended nature and free from faults.”⁹ Similarly, Jerome notes that even without resurrection, one who is graced by God has “the stripes of his offences” healed with “immortality.”¹⁰ Further, Jerome and Augustine distinguish the natural and supernatural dispositions of the body, both of which are united in the resurrected flesh. Thus, Jerome states that the flesh instantiates both the sin and the salvation of Jesus, being “mortal according to nature, eternal according to grace.”¹¹ Augustine echoes this sentiment when, speaking on the question of the age at which one will be resurrected, he says “nature [...] will be cheated of nothing apt and fitting” but in the same breath states that nothing will remain disfigured “which time has wrought.”¹² In this way, the two authors suspend the resurrected body between nature and miracle, careful not to let the gross obscure the divine.

Though the body retains its physicality in resurrection, in the view of both Jerome and Augustine, inessential elements are not incarnated. That the flesh need not be brought back in total fidelity to its original state is somewhat unexpected given the emphasis on continuity in both author’s accounts. However, this apparent inconsistency gives way when both theologians are understood as placing the importance of

4 Jerome, 438.

5 Jerome, 439.

6 Augustine, *Enchiridion*, c. 23, in *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, ed. and trans.

Albert Cook Outler, *The Library of Christian Classics* (London: Westminster John Knox, 1955; reprinted 2006), 392.

7 Jerome, 440.

8 Augustine, 390.

9 Augustine, 391.

10 Jerome, 441.

11 Jerome, 441.

12 Augustine, 390.

bodily continuity as the site of witness to God. Thus, Jerome yields that, in addition to the fact that there will be no need of barbers in Heaven, infants and the old will be resurrected to a state of “mature manhood,” in clear defiance of the inscription of time and woes on the body.¹³ Since babes and those hobbled in old age cannot attest to the glory, their physical continuity is dismissed. Augustine likewise dismisses the “wholly unbecoming image” that results from speculation that the nail clippings removed in life will be returned to the resurrected body.¹⁴ Further, Augustine claims that saints will rise “free from blemish and deformity,” which stands against the possibility of the martyrs bearing the marks of their pious suffering.¹⁵ In mirror to the priority of glory over physical identity, Augustine seems unperturbed by questions of the bodies of the damned and whether they will “rise again with all their faults and deformities”: rather, all that matters is that “their damnation is certain and eternal.”¹⁶ Though both authors subordinate the identity of the body to the glory of God, the relative inconsequentiality of the body in Augustine stands in tension with Jerome’s conception of the body, and identity, as the physical locus of salvation.

The physical body provides the source of differentiation between entities in the state of resurrection. Though both authors speak to this point, it is Jerome who most clearly locates the identity in the physical state of the body. Far from being a mere vessel for the soul, Jerome witnesses the miracle through the pain of the flesh. It is in this vein that we must understand him when he speaks of Job as singularly speaking to the question of resurrection.¹⁷ For Jerome, Job’s flesh “shall see God” and is the conduit whereby that blessed man is borne to salvation.¹⁸ The manner in which the flesh/body conveys the individual to witness God is precisely the opposite of the way in which “our senses are not to be relied on, especially sight.”¹⁹ To deny the flesh is to “do away with what constituted Job,” but beyond this, for Jerome it is to deny the only reliable means with which Job, in his suffering, can be said to have perceived God.²⁰ However, Augustine is here much more ambivalent as to the firmness of physical identity than Jerome. Though Augustine takes care to point out that God, as artist, will show fidelity to the matter of His original creation, the important aspect is that the “Artist takes care that nothing unbecoming will result.”²¹ With an emphasis more upon the reflection of God’s perfection in the resurrected body than upon the importance of identity of itself, Augustine equivocates on whether the resurrected will be differentiated. Thus, he states that “if this is in the Creator’s plan,” mankind will be brought back such that each shall retain his “special features” with which they are differentiated.²² Further,

13 Jerome, 440.

14 Augustine, 391.

15 Augustine, 392.

16 Augustine, 393.

17 Jerome, 439.

18 Jerome, 439.

19 Jerome, 443.

20 Jerome, 439.

21 Augustine, 392.

22 Augustine, 392.

when comparing the resurrected bodies in their possible “intelligible inequality,” he says that they will be brought back in such a way as to complement each other like a harmonious choir.²³ Augustine’s regard for the body as site of identity is here belied by his disregard for that which does not reflect the magnificence of God.

In some metaphysical conceptions, the physical and the spiritual’s happy coincidence become uncoupled upon our deaths. For both Jerome and Augustine, the centrality of physical continuity denies the possibility of ascension without the flesh. However, for neither scholar is every mark and blemish integral to the central identity of the individual, as we will rise (in some form or another) a greater version of that physical object that we had been consigned to in life. For Jerome, the deep lessons transcribed in the flesh are more integral in forming an identity, though that identity itself is sublimated in the experience of God which was its ultimate purpose. It is likely that his asceticism informs his interpretation of resurrection, wherein the labors and lessons undergone in the service of God would be translated into a holy body upon rebirth. Augustine is seemingly less concerned with his identity than with God’s perfection, wherein He may, according to His will, instantiate the most perfect version of us (his imperfect mirrors) in Heaven. Augustine thus allows that God may, or may not, preserve this or that difference upon our resurrection.²⁴ Despite these distinctions, both Jerome and Augustine locate our bodily identity in the service of God, either through our specific worldly actions, as with Jerome, or in our reliable translation of His perfection. As Jerome says, our bodies are the site wherein the life of Christ “is manifested,” and ought to be conducted accordingly.²⁵

23 Augustine, 392.

24 Augustine, 392.

25 Jerome, 441.