

Thesis and the Resurrection:

Identity, Matter, and the Logic of Reassembly

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the metaphysical and theological coherence of bodily resurrection in light of ancient philosophical puzzles like the Ship of Theseus. Drawing from Scripture, early church fathers, and philosophical reasoning, it defends the continuity of personal identity in resurrection without requiring material atom-for-atom preservation. The study affirms that Christ's resurrection is both the historical anchor and metaphysical key to Christian hope, integrating insights from the author's broader theological models.

I. INTRODUCTION

The bodily resurrection is often dismissed in modern discourse as philosophically incoherent. Its challenges range from biological impossibilities to metaphysical paradoxes. A compelling illustration of such a paradox is the ancient Ship of Theseus thought experiment, which asks whether a ship remains the same if all its parts are gradually replaced. This thought puzzle parallels questions surrounding the resurrection: if the atoms of a body are scattered or reused, can it truly be the same body that rises? Early Christian thinkers faced these very questions and offered profound insights that are often overlooked today.

II. THE SHIP OF THESEUS AND RESURRECTION IDENTITY

The Ship of Theseus, as recorded by Plutarch, explores the paradox of identity over time. If every plank of a ship is replaced, does it remain the same ship? And if the original planks are reassembled elsewhere, which is the true ship? Philosophers like Thomas Hobbes later added complexity to the dilemma, but the central issue remains: how is identity preserved through change? Applied to resurrection, the question becomes: if a body's matter is entirely replaced, scattered, or absorbed into other organisms, can it still be said to rise as the same body?¹ This ancient concern foreshadows modern challenges to the resurrection's credibility.

¹ Plutarch, *Lives*, vol. 1, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 75–77.

III. EARLY CHURCH ENGAGEMENT WITH RESURRECTION AND IDENTITY

Early Christian writers did not shy away from addressing material and metaphysical concerns. Gregory of Nyssa, relaying the insights of his sister Macrina in **On the Soul and the Resurrection**, describes the soul's awareness of the 'elements' of the body, even after death. She taught that the soul retains a form of recognition over the particles that once constituted its flesh, trusting in God's providence to reunite them in the resurrection.²

Tertullian, in his **On the Resurrection of the Flesh**, took a more materialist view, insisting that the very same flesh must rise. This was partly in response to Gnostic denial of the body's value.³

Origen, by contrast, emphasized the transformation of the body into a spiritual reality, likening it to the seed-to-plant metaphor Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 15.⁴ While he was later criticized for overly spiritualizing resurrection, his contributions highlight the diversity of early Christian metaphysical reasoning. Yet all these views held in common the belief that God ensures the continuity of the individual.

IV. PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RESURRECTION IDENTITY

Resurrection identity raises deep metaphysical questions: What makes a person the same over time? Is it the continuity of matter, the persistence of consciousness, or the

² Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 439–466.

³ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 545–595.

⁴ Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 152–165; see also *Against Celsus*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, trans. Frederick Crombie, 395–399.

retention of form or structure? Philosophers have long debated whether personal identity is tied to physical substance or psychological continuity. Christian theology navigates these categories with a unique claim: the soul remains the organizing principle of the person, and God guarantees the preservation and restoration of the person as a whole.⁵

The Ship of Theseus metaphor thus becomes a helpful analogy—but with limitations. Christian resurrection is not simply the reassembly of parts, nor a replacement of the old with the new, but a divine act of restoration where continuity is guaranteed not by the material components, but by the sovereign power of God. This makes the identity problem solvable, not through metaphysics alone, but through theology.⁶

V. THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST AS THE ANCHOR

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of Christian hope and apologetics. Unlike mythological cycles of dying and rising gods, Jesus' resurrection is rooted in historical claims: an empty tomb, physical appearances, and the transformation of frightened disciples into bold witnesses. These events occurred in a verifiable place and time, supported by early creeds such as 1 Corinthians 15:3–7, which scholars widely date to within a few years of the crucifixion.⁷

⁵ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 335–341.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), I, Q. 76–77; Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), XXII.4–22.

⁷ Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 45–61; William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 333–361.

C.S. Lewis famously argued that in Jesus, myth became fact.⁸ The archetypes of sacrificial death and rebirth found in ancient stories were fulfilled, not in poetic imagery, but in space-time history. Christ's resurrection was not symbolic—it was embodied. And as Paul insists, if Christ has not been raised, our faith is in vain (1 Cor 15:14).

Because Jesus rose, He becomes the prototype and guarantee of our own resurrection. His resurrected body was both continuous with His former self and gloriously transformed. This serves as the theological pattern for what our own bodily resurrection will entail.⁹

VI. ORTHODOX BOUNDARIES AND HERESIES

What the Resurrection Is—and Is Not

To remain within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, one must affirm the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ as a historical, physical, and glorified event. The resurrected Christ did not return as a mere spirit or vision; He rose in the same body that was crucified—transformed and glorified, but identifiably the same.¹⁰ This doctrine is not optional; it is foundational. The early church treated denial of bodily resurrection as heretical, a departure from apostolic teaching.

The bodily resurrection affirms the goodness of creation, the unity of the human person, and the hope of redemption for both body and soul. It stands against both ancient

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 66–67; see also *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 54–56.

⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 710–728.

¹⁰ Luke 24:39; John 20:27, *English Standard Version*.

and modern distortions. Among the earliest false teachings was Docetism, which claimed Christ only appeared to suffer and rise. Gnosticism similarly denied the resurrection of the body, insisting that salvation was purely spiritual. Both were condemned by the early Church.¹¹

In modern times, Jehovah's Witnesses deny the physical resurrection of Christ, teaching instead that He was raised as a spiritual being and merely manifested a body when needed. This view is inconsistent with the testimony of Scripture, which affirms an empty tomb and the tangible, bodily presence of Jesus after the resurrection.¹² Moreover, Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus' physical body was dissolved, and that he returned to being Michael the Archangel—only retaining the memories of Jesus. Thus, the one who rose is not truly Jesus of Nazareth, but Michael under the borrowed name of Jesus. This is not resurrection but re-creation, and it breaks continuity of both person and nature.

Orthodox doctrine, rooted in Scripture and affirmed in the creeds, proclaims that Christ rose bodily and that all who are in Him will likewise be raised bodily. The resurrection body is sown perishable and raised imperishable (1 Cor 15:42), but it is still a body—real, personal, and glorified. To deny this is not merely an alternative interpretation; it is to abandon the core of the Christian faith.¹³

¹¹ 1 John 4:2–3; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 315–320.

¹² Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2005), 76–77.

¹³ 1 Cor. 15:42–44.

VII. INTEGRATION WITH THE INTEGRATED HYPOSTATIC UNION MODEL (IHUM)

The resurrection of Christ affirms not only the promise of future resurrection but also the integrity of His divine-human personhood. According to the Integrated Hypostatic Union Model (IHUM), the consciousness of Christ is unified—divine and human natures interact within one personal subject. This unified consciousness persisted through death and was glorified in resurrection, demonstrating continuity of identity.¹⁴

In the resurrection, Jesus did not become a different person or spirit; He remained the same 'I' who was crucified. This supports the theological claim that resurrection does not require preservation of every atom but preservation of personhood. God reconstitutes the body according to His sovereign will, and Christ's glorified state becomes the model for ours. This integration also refutes Nestorian-like separations in post-mortem speculation.¹⁵

VIII. APOLOGETIC STRENGTH: RESURRECTION AS COHERENT AND HOPEFUL

The resurrection stands not only as a historical claim but as a defensible philosophical position. Naturalistic objections—such as the swoon theory, hallucination

¹⁴ D. Gene Williams Jr., *The Integrated Hypostatic Union Model: Addressing Christological Coherence A Proposal for a Unified Framework in Understanding & Navigating the Dual Natures of Christ through Kenosis and Selective Communication*, accessed April 2025, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html>.

¹⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, *Third Letter to Nestorius*, in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 78–81.

hypothesis, or mythic reinterpretation—fail to account for the full scope of the data. The resurrection explains the empty tomb, transformed disciples,¹⁶ and the explosive birth of the Church better than any competing hypothesis.¹⁷

Philosophically, when anchored in divine omniscience and power, the resurrection avoids the pitfalls of materialism or vague dualism. It offers a coherent account of human identity and destiny that addresses the longing for justice and restoration embedded in human consciousness.¹⁸

Hope in resurrection is not escapism but a call to embodied faithfulness. Just as Christ was raised bodily, so too shall we be. This affirms the value of creation and the dignity of the human person in God’s redemptive plan.¹⁹

IX. CONCLUSION: THESEUS, CHRIST, AND THE RESTORATION OF ALL THINGS

The Ship of Theseus illustrates the philosophical difficulty of identity over time and change. The resurrection of Christ—and the promise of our own resurrection—

¹⁶ This paragraph reflects not only the logical strength of the resurrection claim but also its personal impact. For me, the resurrection became the central reason to believe in Jesus—not just because of historical claims, but because of the transformation seen in the behavior of those who followed Him. Sean McDowell’s careful treatment of the martyrdom of the apostles in, *The Fate of the Apostles*, influenced my thinking. He did not overstate the evidence but demonstrated that even a few strong cases are enough to show the unique nature of their conviction. They died not for something they merely believed, but for something they knew to be true or false. That distinction mattered to me.; Sean McDowell, *The Fate of the Apostles: Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest Followers of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2024), xix–xxii.

¹⁷ Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 561–602; Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 99–115.

¹⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 26–33; Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 122–14.

¹⁹ Rom. 8:11; Phil. 3:20–21, ESV.

resolves that difficulty through divine agency. We are not the same because we retain atoms, but because God knows, restores, and glorifies our identity.

Christ's resurrection affirms that personal identity, grounded in divine knowledge, transcends material decay. In Him, we find not just restoration, but transformation. And through Him, the restoration of all things has already begun.²⁰

——— *If it's weird, it's important. What you know may not be so.* ———

²⁰ Rev. 21:5; see also Rom. 8:18–23; Acts 3:21, ESV.

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