

## Paul's Idea of the "Spiritual Body"

### How Are We to Be in the Afterlife?'

#### Zusammenfassung

Wie sieht das Leben nach dem Tod aus? Oder, um es mit Shakespeare zu sagen, wie werden wir im Jenseits sein oder nicht sein? In der Vergangenheit gab es zahlreiche Antworten auf diese Frage und die konzeptionellen Modelle, die diesen Antworten zugrunde liegen, waren von unterschiedlicher Überzeugungskraft und Logik. Daher möchte ich mich auf eine bestimmte Antwort auf meine Frage konzentrieren: Die Antwort, die Paulus von Tarsus im ersten Jahrhundert n. Chr. im ersten Brief an die Korinther gab. Aufgrund seiner Bedeutung für das Studium des Christentums des ersten Jahrhunderts haben sich nicht nur, aber vor allem Neutestamentler:innen intensiv mit Paulus befasst. Eine der wichtigsten Fragen, die es zu beantworten gilt, ist, ob Paulus vorwiegend aus jüdischer oder eher aus griechisch-römischer Sicht zu interpretieren sei. Wie die neuere Paulusforschung gezeigt hat, reicht es angesichts der unterschiedlichen und miteinander verwobenen Lebenskontexte des Paulus nicht aus, diese Fragen nur auf eine Weise zu beantworten. Um eine angemessene Antwort auf diese Frage zu geben, wird es notwendig sein, dies von Fall zu Fall – und nicht nur global – in Bezug auf die verschiedenen Motive und Themen innerhalb der paulinischen Briefe zu tun. Daher sollten Interpretationskategorien wie „jüdisch“ oder „griechisch-römisch“ mit größerer Vorsicht verwendet werden, wenn es um bestimmte Elemente in der Denkweise des Paulus geht.

#### Abstract

What does life after death look like? Or, to say it with Shakespeare's words, how are we to be, or not to be in the afterlife? Historically, answers to this question have been legion, and the conceptual models undergirding those answers have been of different persuasive power and rationality. Therefore, there is one specific answer to my question that I would like to focus on: The answer Paul of Tarsus gave in the first century CE in the first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor). Because of his relevance to the study of first century Christianity, Paul has been focused on intensively, not exclusively, but

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1 | In memory of my dearest father Bernard Heinrich Gers-Uphaus and my true friend Thomas Rudolf Karmann who both passed away unexpectedly and way too early in their lives. May God grant them both a σώμα πνευματικόν!

especially, by New Testament scholars.<sup>2</sup> One of the most important questions to answer is whether Paul ought to be interpreted predominantly by Jewish or rather Greco-Roman perspectives.<sup>3</sup> As recent Pauline scholarship has shown, given Paul's different and interwoven life contexts, answering these questions in just one way is not sufficient.<sup>4</sup> In order to give an appropriate answer to that question, it will be necessary to do this on a case by case basis – and not just in a global way – concerning the different motifs and topics within the Pauline letters.<sup>5</sup> Thus, interpretation categories like “Jewish” or “Greco-Roman” should be used more carefully when speaking about certain elements in Paul's thinking.<sup>6</sup>

### Schlüsselwörter/Keywords

Leben nach dem Tod; Paulus von Tarsus; erstes Jahrhundert n. Chr.; 1 Kor; Neutestamentliche Forschung; jüdische Sicht; griechisch-römische Sicht  
Life after death; Paul of Tarsus; first century CE; 1 Cor; New Testament Research; Jewish perspectives; Greco-Roman perspectives

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- 2 | Oda Wischmeyer, Einleitung in Teil I, in: Ead./Eve-Marie Becker (Ed.), *Paulus. Leben-Umwelt-Werk-Briefe*, Tübingen 2021, 21 sq., 21, speaks of Paul being part of “große[r] Verstehens- und Deutemuster.”
- 3 | Cf. e.g. Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics*, Edinburgh 2000; John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, Oxford 2000 (repr. 2002); Tor Vegge, *Paulus und das antike Schulwesen. Schule und Bildung des Paulus (BZNW 134)*, Berlin/New York 2006; Martin Hengel/Ulrich Heckel (Ed.), *Paulus und das antike Judentum (WUNT 58)*, Tübingen 1991; for the debate in 1 Cor 15 cf. also Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, New Haven (CT)/London 1995. For a critical discussion of this twofold question in general cf. Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Introduction. *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, in: Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Ed.), *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, Louisville (KY), 2001, 1–16; Dale B. Martin, *Paul and the Judaism/Hellenism Dichotomy. Towards a Social History of the Question*, in: Engberg-Pedersen (Ed.), *Paul*, 29–61. 265–272.
- 4 | Cf. e.g. Gager, *Paul* (as note 3), 16; Vegge, *Paulus* (as note 3), 487–492, who *ibid.* 488 underlines that to divide Paul either according to Tarsus or Jerusalem is relatively useless.
- 5 | However, as Vegge, *Paulus* (as note 3), 487, criticizes, determining these different motifs and topics only by “reine[r] Herkunftsbestimmung” is not enough. Instead of this, he *ibid.* proposes to understand those “Themen und Motive als in einem dynamischen, plurikulturell geführten Dialog eingelagert.”
- 6 | Cf. Engberg-Pedersen, Introduction (as note 3), 4. Cf. also Martin, *Body* (as note 3), 110 sq., who argues for a more differentiated perception with regard to this Pauline topic, particularly with respect to 1 Cor 15.

## “No Resurrection of the Dead!” (1 Cor 15,12). Paul's Fundamental Conflict in Corinth

The debate Paul enters into in 1 Cor 15, with certain people in Corinth is particularly about the question whether there will be a resurrection of the dead or not at the end of time – and, if so, how it will take place (cf. 1 Cor 15,35). According to Paul himself, the answer to this fundamental question is not without substantial relevance for life insofar as, without the doctrine of the resurrection, the Christian faith would be without substance (cf. 1 Cor 15,14). However, one must first be careful in describing the position of the Corinthians: Did they literally deny the resurrection<sup>7</sup> or is it possible that their denying has been arranged by Paul himself for rhetorical purposes? Scholarship has often tried to describe this Corinthian group in more detail: Are they pagans denying the resurrection due to their cultural background?<sup>8</sup> Or are they even Jews who did not deny all forms of post-mortal existence, only a *bodily* one?<sup>9</sup> What other “concepts” of the afterlife within Judaism might have been the reason for that?<sup>10</sup>

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## “How Are the Dead Raised?” (1 Cor 15,35). A Basic Question about Anthropology

While we cannot be certain what the Corinthians thought about the afterlife (because what we know arrives filtered through Paul's speech), we can be more certain about Paul himself. Paul describes the resurrected body ( $\sigma\tilde{\omega}\mu\alpha$ ) in its anthropological details and tries to explain its existence not only theoretically but also practically (cf. 1 Cor 15,35–41.42–49).<sup>11</sup> Concerning his use of the word  $\sigma\tilde{\omega}\mu\alpha$  in 15,35–49, scholars like Rudolf Bultmann have argued that this paragraph is an exception: Paul here is acknowledging the arguments of his opponents and, thus, using this term in an unusual

7 | Cf. e.g. Dieter Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (KEK 5), Göttingen 2010, 454, speaking of the “Leugner der Auferstehung.”

8 | Cf. *Id.*, *Studien zu Philo und Paulus* (BBB 165), Göttingen 2011, 140. Cf. for the whole debate *ibid.* 129–141.

9 | Cf. e.g. Gerhard Sellin, *Der Streit um die Auferstehung der Toten. Eine religionsgeschichtliche und exegetische Untersuchung von 1 Korinther 15* (FRLANT 138), Göttingen 1986, 290: “wegen ihres *leiblichen* Charakters” (italics in the original).

10 | The underlying problem has been described correctly by Jonathan Klawans, *Josephus and the Theologies of Ancient Judaism*, Oxford et al. 2012, 93: “When a source tells us that a given group denies resurrection, that may or may not mean that the group denies all forms of afterlife.”

11 | Cf. e.g. Holger Kaiser, *Die Bedeutung des leiblichen Daseins in der paulinischen Eschatologie. Vol. I: Studien zum religions- und traditionsgeschichtlichen Hintergrund der Auseinandersetzung in 2 Kor 5,1–10 (und 1 Kor 15) im palästinensischen [sic!] und hellenistischen Judentum*, PhD Heidelberg 1974, 2, who makes the difference between “Möglichkeit” and “Tatsächlichkeit.”

way<sup>12</sup> compared with his other writings. But does *σῶμα* in this case really only refer to the “shape” or “form” of different kinds of substances (fleshly or spiritual) as Bultmann consequently supposes?<sup>13</sup>

My answer is “No.” Being a *σῶμα* for Paul is necessarily connected with human existence in this life as well as in the afterlife. Though the body’s quality will change from being perishable, earthly, and physical to being imperishable, heavenly, and spiritual (cf. 1 Cor 15,40.42.44), the basic aspect of being a *σῶμα* remains. Thus, the resurrected body will again be a body (*σῶμα*), albeit not the same body, but another one (in German this corresponds to: not “derselbe,” but “der gleiche”). As Bultmann has pointed out, a human being does not only *have* a body in the afterlife, but *is* one.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the quality of this future body – the *σῶμα πνευματικόν* – finally indicates that this body is related to the divine spirit (*πνεῦμα*).<sup>15</sup> But what does Paul mean by this special term which looks like an *oxymoron* at first glance? And how are these two bodies related?

### Paul’s Unique Idea of the “Spiritual Body” in Context. “Umweltanalyse”

Karlheinz Müller already acknowledged in 1985 in a footnote<sup>16</sup> that pursuing a traditio-historical analysis of this Pauline view in 1 Cor 15,35–49 against the background of the Jewish tradition is a highly desirable research goal – and his statement remains valid. In particular, one can ask: Where did Paul get his idea of the “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15,44)? Because of Paul’s indebtedness to the Hebraic anthropology, Greco-Roman traditions have been deemed unconvincing when taken exclusively as explanations of Paul’s view of the resurrection.<sup>17</sup> Thus, we have to ask: Is Paul’s statement due to the context of the debate with his “opponents” (so used *ad hoc*) or is he referring to something common in Judaism? Wolfgang Schrage’s hypothesis that there is no evidence for the term “spiritual body” – *σῶμα πνευματικόν* – in the whole literature of the ancient world prior to Paul (therefore a *hapax legomenon*),<sup>18</sup> does not contradict a traditio-historical approach to answer that question: The expression itself may be a

12 | Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (durchg. u. erg. von Otto Merk), Tübingen 91984, 193: “in einer für ihn sonst nicht charakteristischen Weise.”

13 | Cf. *ibid.*

14 | Cf. *ibid.* 195. However, Bultmann himself sees this passage as an exception in Paul.

15 | Cf. e. g. Zeller, *Brief* (as note 7), 512.

16 | Cf. Karlheinz Müller, *Die Leiblichkeit des Heils. 1 Kor 15,35–58*, in: Lorenzo De Lorenzi (Ed.), *Résurrection du Christ et des Chrétiens (1 Co 15)* (SMBen.BE 8), Rome 1985, 171–281, 253, ann. 283, for this important statement.

17 | Cf. Albert L. A. Hogeterp, *Expectations of the End. A Comparative Traditio-Historical Study of Eschatological, Apocalyptic and Messianic Ideas in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (STDJ 83), Leiden/Boston 2009, 318 sq.

18 | Cf. Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther. 1 Kor 15,1–16,24* (EKK 7/4), Zürich et al. 2001, 300.

Pauline innovation<sup>19</sup>, but the broader "concept" of the resurrection lying behind it comes "primarily from a Jewish notion of the resurrection"<sup>20</sup> as Paul Brown points out.<sup>21</sup>

## So, How Are We to Be in the Afterlife? An Ultimate Remark on Identity

Paul provides a description of the mortal body *as it is* and of the immortal body *as it will be* (not *as it should be*). These two realities are connected somehow since in both cases it will be again a body. However, there is still something undiscovered and undefined: What about the identity between those two bodies? Although Paul does not mention it explicitly in 1 Cor 15, the question has been brought up after him. Moreover, it arises from a systematic point of view: Who or what guarantees identity of the two bodies in this case?

It is remarkable that ongoing metaphysical debates in philosophy are dealing with the same "Shakespearean" question as Paul when they define what the necessary conditions are for being human. Thomas Schärfl points out, for instance, that being human requires not having a physical body but being embodied.<sup>22</sup> For Schärfl, this means that in the long run the realization of the body *post mortem* does not have to be the same thing as what it is at the moment<sup>23</sup> – provided there is some means of identifying an individual person.<sup>24</sup> Again, the German language offers helpful terminology for this distinction: While "Leib" describes an experienced body, "Körper," in opposition to this, refers to the physical body.<sup>25</sup> Thus, saying it in other words but with Paul in mind, humans will probably have a "Leib" in the afterlife, but not a "Körper" as in this life. Life after death will necessarily be "leiblich," but not "körperlich." As I have aimed to show, Paul, in writing 1 Cor 15, has a strikingly similar idea in mind when discussing

19 | Cf. e.g. Robin J. Scroggs, *The Last Adam. A Study in Pauline Anthropology*, Oxford 1966, 65, ann. 17.

20 | Paul J. Brown, *Bodily Resurrection and Ethics in 1 Cor 15. Connecting Faith and Morality in the Context of Greco-Roman Mythology* (WUNT II 360), Tübingen 2014, 64.

21 | Thus, an analysis of Paul's "Umwelt" would have to avoid looking only for exact parallels or source citations between Paul and his surrounding Jewish environment (cf. also Alexander J. M. Wedderburn, *Adam and Christ. An Investigation into the Background of 1 Corinthians xv and Romans v 12–21*, Cambridge 1970, 246 [with regard to Rom 5,12–21]). – In general, one should basically admit that Paul is not only adopting certain traditions, but also able to reread them on his own. In my view, his singular use of "spiritual body" is a good example for that.

22 | Cf. Thomas Schärfl, *Bodily Resurrection: When Metaphysics Needs Phenomenology*, in: Georg Gasser (Ed.), *Personal Identity and Resurrection. How Do We Survive Our Death?*, Farnham/Burlington (VT) 2010, 103–125, 124.

23 | Cf. Thomas Schärfl, *Beyond Dualism? The Track-Switch Model of Resurrection*, in: Benedikt P. Göcke (Ed.), *After Physicalism*, Notre Dame (IN) 2012, 335–368, 362.

24 | Here one might think of his or her genes (theologically speaking, they are in each case an individual, unique creation), but also of the marks of a concrete life as they are inherent in a person's memory and – as recent researches support – even, again, in his or her genes. To say it in an anthropomorphic way, it must be something very well known to the Creator.

25 | Cf. Schärfl, *Beyond Dualism?* (as note 23), 348.

the resurrection. Thus, it will be fruitful to enter into critical discussions with philosophers, especially metaphysicians and phenomenologists, and systematic theologians about this topic of identity,<sup>26</sup> given the fact that some theologians still consider the physical body to be necessarily included in any kind of resurrection,<sup>27</sup> whereas others, following a broad tradition, want to make us believe that Scripture teaches the immortality of human souls.<sup>28</sup> I would like to conclude by emphasizing that “bridging the gap” between Paul’s view and these contemporary debates in philosophy will be a fruitful way to evaluate the quality and relevance of a traditio-historical approach to the topic of the Pauline resurrection.<sup>29</sup>

26 | Thus, I look forward to reading Schärtl’s forthcoming book: “Die Auferstehung Jesu denken. Vorschläge zur ontologischen Rekategorisierung des Osterereignisses” (working title).

27 | Cf. *Id.*, *Bodily Resurrection* (as note 23), 125.

28 | Therefore, it should be asked why this view of Plato on the immortality of the soul later became so important within the Christian tradition (cf. e.g. *Gisbert Greshake/Jakob Kremer*, *Resurrectio mortuorum. Zum theologischen Verständnis der leiblichen Auferstehung*, Darmstadt 1992, 165–368). Cf. for this discussion *Folker Siegert*, *Von der Sterblichkeit der Seele zur Leiblichkeit der Auferstehung. Neutestamentlicher Einspruch gegen den kirchlichen Platonismus*, in: *Thomas Söding/Uwe Swarat* (Ed.), *Gemeinsame Hoffnung – über den Tod hinaus. Eschatologie im ökumenischen Gespräch* (QD 257), Freiburg 2013, 50–70.

29 | Apparently, in 1 Cor 15 one encounters both continuity and discontinuity, plus transformation (for the latter phenomenon in the ancient world in cases not dealing with resurrection, cf. *M. David Litwa*, *Posthuman Transformation in Ancient Mediterranean Thought. Becoming Angels and Demons*, Cambridge/New York [NY] 2021 [however, Paul clearly has something different in mind than the kinds of transformations Litwa discusses]). – I especially thank Prof. John T. Fitzgerald (University of Notre Dame) for this reference and for his helpful comments on the final version of this article. Furthermore, I owe a debt of thanks to Dr. Arnaud H. Zimmern (*ibid.*) who made invaluable suggestions about its content based on an early draft.