

THE NATURE OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS:
ARE THE GOSPELS / ACTS IN CONFLICT WITH
PAUL?

Tony Costa³²⁶

The earliest textual evidence in the NT indicates that the early Christians believed that an extraordinary thing happened to Jesus of Nazareth following his death and they described or declared it as God raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:32; 4:10; Rom.10:9). Bart Ehrman admits that “it is a historical fact that some of Jesus’ followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead soon after his execution.”³²⁷ This was the confession of the early Christian community and it is central to their theological outlook. They saw the resurrection of Jesus as a divine intervention of God, something God did for Jesus and by extension, what he will do to those who believe in him. It has been the contention of a number of scholars to argue that the belief in the resurrection of Jesus underwent a development or evolution in regards to questions about its nature, i.e. was it a bodily or spiritual resurrection? The former would be understood in terms of a physical removal or disappearance of *the body* from the tomb whereas the latter would infer that the body was still present in the tomb and that it was *the spirit* of Jesus that was resurrected or ascended up to God. Thus these two views would correspond respectively to the empty tomb (Jesus’ body is gone) and an occupied tomb (Jesus’ body still lies in the tomb). An example of the latter view is clearly enunciated by Marcus Borg when he states:

Thus, as a Christian, I am very comfortable not knowing whether or not the tomb was empty. Indeed, the discovery of Jesus’ skeletal remains would not be a

³²⁶ Tony Costa has earned a B.A. and an M.A. in the study of religion from the University of Toronto. He is currently a Ph.D candidate with Radboud University of Nijmegen in New Testament studies. www.freewebs.com/tonycosta

³²⁷ Bart Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 231.

problem. It doesn't matter, because Easter is about resurrection, not resuscitation.³²⁸

Borg believes one can be a "Christian" regardless of whether the tomb of Jesus was occupied or empty. It should be noted here that Borg does not view the raising of the body as "resurrection" but as "resuscitation", thus he indicates that resurrection does not necessarily have a bodily referent to it.³²⁹ That Borg views "resurrection" in strictly non-bodily terms is further indicated when he comments that the post Easter Jesus is an "experiential reality... The truth of Easter is grounded in these experiences, not in what happened (or didn't happen) on a particular Sunday almost two thousand years ago."³³⁰ Thus the resurrection of Jesus is "experiential" and thus subjective, not an objective reality. The status of the body of Jesus in Borg's assessment is therefore inconsequential and unimportant to resurrection belief.

New Testament scholars like Borg would argue that the view of a bodily resurrection was not the original view nor was it the earliest Christian conviction. It is argued that the earliest Christian writer Paul did not believe in a physical bodily resurrection of Jesus but rather he held to a spiritual resurrection which did not necessitate the actual removal of the body of Jesus from the tomb.³³¹ The Gospels and Acts however

³²⁸ Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1999), p. 131.

³²⁹ Joachim Jeremias argues however that terms "resuscitation" and "resurrection should be kept as distinctive terms. Joachim Jeremias, "Die älteste Schicht der Osterüberlieferungen," in Edouard Dhonis, ed., *Resurrexit* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1974), p. 194. See also John Dominic Crossan, "The Resurrection of Jesus in its Jewish Context," in *Neotestamentica* 37.1 (2003): 46-48; Raymond E. Brown, *The Virgin Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), p. 73.

³³⁰ Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 135.

³³¹ See Marcus Borg, "The Irrelevancy of the Empty Tomb," in Paul Copan (ed.), *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p. 123; John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper

paint a different picture. They present a very concrete and material presentation of the resurrection of Jesus as a bodily one in which his body was taken out from the tomb by an act of God and that he appeared to his followers and presented tangible evidence of his resurrection body. The charge that is advanced by some scholars is that the Gospels / Acts illustrate a reworking of the early tradition which was held by Paul and other Christians that Jesus was spiritually raised and that his appearances which are catalogued by Paul (1 Cor 15:3-8) were *visionary* in nature and were not concrete bodily appearances.³³² Paul however is not dealing with the general mode of the appearances of the risen Jesus but legitimizing his own experience of the christophany with those of his apostolic predecessors.³³³ Thus it is argued we encounter a tension here between the Gospels / Acts and Paul in respect to the resurrection of Jesus. But is this really the case? Was Paul opposed to the concrete materialistic notion of the resurrection of Jesus as presented in the Gospels/Acts?

I intend to argue in this paper that the alleged distinction between the Gospels / Acts and Paul in regards to the resurrection of Jesus is a false one and that it is presumed rather than proven and furthermore that the weakness of such a position lies in a misuse of terminology that Paul utilizes in

San Francisco, 1991), pp. 404-05; Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 52-53, 68; Irving M. Zeitlin, *Jesus and the Judaism of His Time* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), p. 165.

³³² Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Jesus' Resurrection, Fact or Figment?: A Debate Between William Lane Craig & Gerd Lüdemann* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 61.

³³³ John Dominic Crossan correctly points out: "Paul needs in 1 Cor.15 to equate his own experience with that of the preceding apostles. To equate, that is, its *validity* and *legitimacy*, but not necessarily its mode or manner... Paul's own entranced revelation should not be... the model for all the others." John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), p. 169. See also Karl Martin Fischer, *Das Ostergeschehen* (2nd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), p. 74.

reference to the resurrection especially in his use of the word for “body” which is *soma*. I will begin this paper by first observing the use and meaning of resurrection, followed by a discussion on the use of *soma* in a resurrection context. I will then treat the view albeit briefly of the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels and Acts and compare them with Paul and examine whether we have unity or conflict between them. I will then end by examining Paul’s use of the phrase *soma pneumatikon*/“spiritual body” which he employs in 1 Cor 15:44 and examine the meaning of this phrase and whether it conflicts with the concrete materialistic view of Jesus’ resurrection presented in the Gospels and Acts.

The Use of Resurrection Language

Why was the language of “resurrection” applied to Jesus to describe his posthumous status in early Christianity? Raymond Brown comments that,

Thus the choice of resurrection language was not an inevitability for the early Jews who believed in Jesus. To the contrary, its choice must be explained; for while there was an expectation among many Jews of the resurrection of the dead in the last times, there was no expectation of the resurrection of a single man from the dead, separate from and preliminary to the general resurrection.³³⁴

The choice to use resurrection language to express what early Christians believed about Jesus brings us back to the point of origin of the Christian movement which is the empty tomb discovery and the absence of the body of Jesus. It was the absent body of Jesus from the tomb and later the postmortem appearances which contributed to the application of resurrection language. This seems to be the most reasonable

³³⁴ Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 76.

point of origin and the appropriation of the motif of the death and rising of the Messiah is very early.³³⁵

The very fact that the Christian movement began and has continued to the present day is highly significant from a socio-historical point of view. While the landscape of the first and second centuries were no stranger to messianic movements, it is remarkable that the messianic movement that came to be known as Christianity survived while others dissipated into the vapors of history. When messianic leaders were crushed, their followers either disbanded or joined a new messianic movement.³³⁶ In the case of the Christian movement, the death of Jesus by crucifixion most certainly would have dealt a fatal death blow to his followers and dashed any messianic aspirations they had concerning Jesus. The crucifixion itself from a biblical standpoint would render Jesus “cursed by God”, because anyone who hung on a tree was perceived as accursed in (Deut 21:23 cf.; Gal 3:13). According Joseph Klausner crucifixion was believed to be the equivalent of one “hanging on a tree”.³³⁷ Nevertheless, the movement appeared to be revived after it came to the belief in the resurrection of Jesus. While the belief in the resurrection of Jesus was incorporated from the Jewish thinking of the first century, there were nevertheless distinct and significant differences which Christians held to in regards to resurrection which were dissimilar to Second Temple Judaism.

First, contrary to popular Jewish belief which held that the resurrection would take place at the *eschaton* (e.g. John 11:24), the early followers of Jesus came to believe that Jesus had already experienced the eschatological resurrection prior to

³³⁵ Ted Peters, “The Future of the Resurrection,” in Robert B. Stewart (ed.), *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), pp. 156-57.

³³⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 3; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 560.

³³⁷ Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), p. 28.

the end itself. Joachim Jeremias comments, "Ancient Judaism did not know of an anticipated resurrection as an event of history. Nowhere does one find in the [Jewish] literature anything comparable to the resurrection of Jesus."³³⁸ This new understanding from a Christian perspective seems to be implied in Paul's reference to the risen Jesus being the "the first fruits" from the dead (1 Cor 15:20, 23). Secondly, resurrection belief entailed the rising again of a collective or general whole of the people of God including unbelievers to judgment (Dan12:2). In the case of Jesus however the resurrection was individualistic. In this respect, the resurrection of Jesus is unique. The uniqueness of the resurrection of Jesus is further heightened by a third point made by Geza Vermes that first century Judaism did not know of a dying and rising Messiah.³³⁹ If the early Christian confession of Jesus dying and rising again was dissimilar to Second Temple Judaism its origin can only be explained as emerging from the early Christian movement itself. Arguments to the effect that the early Christian belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus arose out of Greco-Roman pagan myths of alleged dying and rising gods has been soundly dismissed by most of scholarship.³⁴⁰ The understanding

³³⁸ Jeremias, "Die älteste Schicht der Osterüberlieferungen," p. 194.

³³⁹ Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: a historian's reading of the Gospels* (Great Britain: SCM Press, 1983), p. 20.

³⁴⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), p. 164. Brown notes that while Jesus' resurrection was in the spring (March-April), so was his death. This Brown maintains does not correspond to the winter concept of dormancy common in pagan religions where the gods were said to descend to the netherworld. See also David E. Aune, "The Genre of the Gospels," in R. T. France and David Wenham, eds., *Gospel Perspectives II* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), p. 48; Gerhard Kittel, "Die Auferstehung Jesu," in *Deutsche Theologie* 4 (1937): 159; William Lane Craig, "Reply to Evan Fales: On the Empty Tomb of Jesus," in *Philosophia Christi* 3 (2001): 67-76. On the relation of paganism to the Old Testament see Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle* (Leiden: Brill, 1994). Smith also denies any influence of Greco-Roman myths

however was that this resurrection was bodily in nature because if it was not it could not be unique in any sense of the word. If all resurrection meant was the ascension of the soul or spirit to God, the same could be said of all holy and pious servants of God. According to this view what happened to Jesus has happened and continues to happen to all the faithful. If resurrection means spiritual ascent of the soul to God then why did the early Christians not speak of the resurrection of Moses, or Abraham? The absence of such language strongly indicates that resurrection does not mean ascent of the soul to God.³⁴¹ In rejecting bodily resurrection in favour of spiritual resurrection some scholars have in effect resorted to Plato's *Phaedo* with its emphasis on the immortality of the soul. While there were Jews who believed in the immortality of the soul (as evidenced in Second Temple Jewish texts such as *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Jubilees*, *Testament of Moses*, *Testament of Abraham*, *4 Maccabees*), they never called this belief 'resurrection.'

A fourth dissimilarity appears in the emphasis and centrality the early Christians gave to the resurrection. While some Jews subscribed to belief in the resurrection,³⁴² it was never a foundational but a marginal belief. The Christian movement shifted this marginal belief into the centre of their belief system making it their fundamental doctrine. The truthfulness of the Christian faith rests or falls on the veracity of the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor15:12-20).

The Meaning of Resurrection

on the early Christian belief of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, p. 70.

³⁴¹ Oscar Cullmann recognized the distinction between resurrection and immortality of the soul. See Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: Epworth Press, 1958). I do not concur with all of Cullmann's points in this book but I am in agreement with his distinction between immortality of the soul and resurrection.

³⁴² The exception would be Jewish groups like the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8).

Resurrection in its first century grammatical context referred to the raising of the body. The question of ambiguity as to the definition of resurrection as proposed by some scholars is wholly unnecessary. On this point Brown comments:

It is not really accurate to claim that the NT references to the *resurrection* of Jesus are ambiguous as to whether they mean bodily resurrection—*there was no other kind of resurrection*. Ambiguity arises only about the kind of body involved (earthly, celestial, etc.).³⁴³

Brown notes that belief in resurrection involved the body as a point of reference. The question was not whether the body was raised or not, that was not under dispute, but rather the question was about the *nature* of the body involved. Brown's point above that "there was no other kind of resurrection" is lamentably ignored by many scholars like Borg as we have seen, who neglect the language and grammar of the New Testament. Brown also asserts that "...the resurrection of the body was the only form of immortality known to the disciples...The various NT authors clearly speak about a *bodily* resurrection of *Jesus*."³⁴⁴ This point is clearly evident in Paul's treatment of the resurrection where he poses the rhetorical question: "How are the dead raised? With what *kind* of body do they come?" (1 Cor15:35; emphasis mine) Paul's polemic and apologetic in 1 Corinthians 15 on the resurrection is a reaction to his audience's implied rejection and unbelief in the resurrection of the body. The repugnant and contemptuous view of the body in Hellenistic thinking derived from Plato is evident in the Corinthian audience that Paul is addressing. If Paul had believed that the resurrection of Jesus and those of believers was immaterial or non-physical as some scholars contend he would not have had to defend and argue his position in 1

³⁴³ Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 70 n121. Italics mine in the second clause. Italics in first clause in the original text.

³⁴⁴ Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, pp. 164-65.

Corinthians¹⁵ that the body would indeed be raised to immortal and incorruptible life at the *parousia* of Jesus.

The Use of *Soma* and Resurrection

One of the stumbling blocks in the scholarly treatment of the resurrection of Jesus has been the misleading view which has identified the New Testament usage of *soma* ("body") with the person, instead of the body proper. In other words, we have the equivalent *soma* = person. This has resulted in a great disadvantage and disservice to the understanding of New Testament grammar as it relates to the use of *soma* in its contextual sphere but especially so in respect to the subject of the resurrection of Jesus. This misapplication of *soma* as person has served as a grave impediment to a proper understanding of the New Testament view of the resurrection, especially as it relates to Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 15 which is the eye of the storm in scholarly treatments of the resurrection of Jesus. If one accepts the proposition that *soma* = person then the resurrection of the *soma*, becomes the resurrection of the *person* and not the physical body. It is this presupposition that precisely lies behind Borg's statement above and a number of other scholars.

The idea of *soma* as the whole person still lingers amongst scholarly circles. This view entered New Testament studies primarily due to the influence of existentialism which was adopted by Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann argued, "Man does not have a soma; he is a soma."³⁴⁵ In effect, the resurrection of the *soma* was conceived to be the resurrection of

³⁴⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament Vol.1* (trans. K. Grobel; London: SCM Press, 1952), pp. 194-95. See also William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), p. 119. This view was not original to Bultmann as he adopted it from his former teacher J. Weiss. See Robert Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 4.

the *person* instead of the physical body. Robert Gundry in his linguistic study analysis of *soma* in the New Testament has demonstrated that the popular view among some scholars that *soma* = person is erroneous and unjustified.³⁴⁶ Robert Jewett has equally charged that, “Bultmann has turned [*soma*] into its virtual opposite: a symbol for that structure of individual existence which is essentially non-physical.”³⁴⁷ Gundry persuasively demonstrates through linguistic analysis of the contextual use of *soma* that this term is *never* used in the New Testament to denote the whole person isolated from his physical body. Rather, it is used of the physical body or the person with special emphasis accorded to the physical body itself.³⁴⁸ The *soma* is always physical and never an abstract notion. Gundry notes that,

The *soma* denotes the physical body, roughly synonymous with ‘flesh’ in the neutral sense. It forms that part of man in and through which he lives and acts in the world...But it [the *soma*] will also be resurrected.³⁴⁹

It is important to stress that even though *soma* refers primarily to the physical body it can be used in various other ways. The context must always be determinant of the meaning of words. *Soma* can also be used as a synecdoche in representing the whole person but Gundry points out that:

The *soma* may represent the whole person simply because the *soma* lives in union with the soul/spirit. But *soma* does not mean ‘whole person’, because its use is designed to call attention to the physical object which is

³⁴⁶ Robert H. Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

³⁴⁷ Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms* (AGAJY 10; Leiden: Brill, 1971), p. 211. Scholars who advocate the view of *soma* = person also speak of ‘person’ synonymously as the “I” or “ego”.

³⁴⁸ Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 120.

³⁴⁹ Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology*, p. 50.

the body of the person rather than the whole personality.³⁵⁰

Gundry further notes that when Paul uses the term *soma*, he uses it for the physical body³⁵¹ and that Paul employs *soma* because "...the physicality of the resurrection is central to his soteriology."³⁵² *Soma* may also be employed metaphorically as in "the body of Christ", i.e., the Church.³⁵³ However, the metaphor is still *physical* since the Church is not the "person", "I" or "ego" of Christ. Words which are used as metaphors presuppose a literal meaning to the given word, and as such metaphors are secondary in functional meaning, not primary. Thus, while the "body of Christ" is used as a metaphor for the Church, the word "body" (*soma*) presupposes the literal physical body of Jesus. While this holds true for *soma*, the same can be said about *anastasis*, for while resurrection can be spoken of metaphorically of Christian believers for instance (Eph 2:1-7), it nevertheless presupposes the literal or bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The Gospels, Acts, Paul and the Resurrection of Jesus: Unity not Conflict

The early material that is offered by Paul in 1 Cor 15:1-8 in regards to the Christian creed³⁵⁴ of the sequential order of the death, burial, resurrection, and appearances of the risen Jesus

³⁵⁰ Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology*, p. 80.

³⁵¹ Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology*, p. 168.

³⁵² Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology*, p. 169.

³⁵³ John A.T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology*. (London: SCM, 1952) Robinson is correct to note that *soma* can mean "community" as in the Church, but again the context indicates that the usage here is metaphorical. However when *soma* is applied to the individual it is always physical.

³⁵⁴ This creed is generally accepted by scholarship to be pre-Pauline and Semitic in origin and thus tied to the original Aramaic speaking disciples of Jesus. See I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 93.

bears a striking resemblance in capsuled narrative form to that of the Gospels and the book of Acts. Paul intricately links these events together by the use of the conjunction *hoti* (1 Cor 15:3-5) and the implication is that these events follow each other in sequential order.

A. The Gospels and Acts

The grammatical and linguistic understanding of *soma* as a reference to the physical body as Gundry has argued is buttressed by the Gospels and Acts, but also by Paul. The Gospels specifically in Luke and John emphasize the concreteness of Jesus' body who has been raised even bearing the wound marks (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:26-29), and his tacit statement, "it is I myself" (Luke 24:39), thereby implying a numerical continuity between the pre and post Easter Jesus. The emphasis on the concreteness of Jesus' resurrected body in both Luke (and Acts) and John are not accidental. They appear to be very deliberate on the part of the writers and seem to imply an intentional apologetic response to those who would deny the bodily resurrection and who would also argue that the postmortem appearances were merely hallucinatory experiences by the disciples and not real. Luke emphasizes about the post Easter Jesus: "After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs" (Acts 1:3). The "convincing proofs" must have involved some empirical means of factual verification from Luke's perspective. The emphasis on the sense of seeing is complimented with the sense of touching or tangibility.³⁵⁵

Another implicit polemical feature is discernible in Luke 24:37 where in one of the postmortem appearances of Jesus the disciples reacted with surprise, "They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost." The force of the passage seems to be intended to contrast "ghost" with "flesh

³⁵⁵ While Matthew does speak of the risen Jesus being seen (Matt 28:17), the tangibility of the body of Jesus is clearly implied in Matt.28:9, "Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, *took hold of his feet*, and worshiped him" (emphasis mine).

and bones". The response given by Jesus is clearly intended to counter the idea that the risen Jesus was a ghost or incorporeal entity, "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:39). It is presumed in this passage that encounters with ghosts or spirits of the deceased were not uncommon.³⁵⁶ The reference to "a ghost" or "a spirit" in Luke 24:37, 39 also infers that at least Luke's audience and those of the other gospel writers also held the belief that a person's ghost or spirit survived death.³⁵⁷ The concreteness and corporeality of the risen Jesus is further reinforced with the description of Jesus eating before the disciples (Luke 24:41-43; cf. John 21:9-14), but also eating *with* the disciples (Acts 10:41). The fact that the gospels depict the risen Jesus appearing and disappearing at will, demonstrates that the post Easter Jesus while being numerically the same, was in another respect different. There is thus a perceived continuity between the *identity* of Jesus but a discontinuity in respect to the *bodily nature* of Jesus. No hint is offered to the effect that the risen Jesus was incorporeal in the Gospels or Acts other than the misperception of the disciples (Luke 24:39) which is quickly corrected.

B. Paul

The evidence provided in the Pauline material (1 Cor 15:1-8) in regards to the resurrection of Jesus is very early. Paul is the

³⁵⁶ Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 189.

³⁵⁷ It is interesting that the other Synoptic Gospels display the disciples' mistaken identity of Jesus as a ghost or spirit. In Matt 14:26 when the disciples see Jesus walking on the water they assume he is a *phantasma*, "a phantom", "a ghost" or a "spectre". In the parallel passage in Mark 6:49 the same wording is used. The idea of a person's spirit or ghost surviving death appears in Luke's description of the Pharisees' beliefs in Acts 23:8-9. It is also seen in the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. That the Pharisees believed in the continued existence of the soul following death see Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.8.14; *Antiquities* 18.1.3.

earliest New Testament writer who claims to have been a first hand eyewitness who saw the risen Jesus (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8; Gal 1:15-16; cf. Acts 1:22). Paul asks rhetorically with an implied positive response to his questions:³⁵⁸ “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (1 Cor 9:1).³⁵⁹ As we noted above many scholars see a tension between Paul and the Gospels including Acts when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus. The problem as we noted is that while the Gospels / Acts see the resurrection of Jesus as a *bodily* resurrection, Paul on the other hand held a different view, namely that the resurrection was spiritual. It is argued that for Paul resurrection was about a *soma pneumatikon*, a *spiritual body* (1 Cor 15:44) as opposed to a physical body. This alleged tension has been and continues to be it seems to me, over stated and exaggerated in current scholarship. The major impediment and obstacle in finding a common ground of agreement between Paul and the Gospels / Acts is the misapplication of the meaning of *soma* in Paul

As I argued above since Weiss and Bultmann, the dominant view in New Testament scholarship was that the *soma* meant the whole person and not necessarily the physical body.³⁶⁰ This view of the *soma* as the whole person was then attributed primarily to Paul and his usage of the term.³⁶¹ As

³⁵⁸ This is seen in the use of the negative Greek particle *ouk* which when used rhetorically always implies a positive response.

³⁵⁹ It is interesting that Paul’s words here in 1 Cor 9:1: “Have I not seen [*heoraka*] Jesus our Lord?” is reminiscent of the wording in the Gospels regarding the appearances of Jesus to the women: “I have seen [*heoraka*] the Lord” (John 20:18); “We [*heorakamen*] have seen the Lord” (John 20:25).

³⁶⁰ Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology*, p. 5.

³⁶¹ Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 192. Following closely with Bultmann is J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: SCM, 1952; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977). These two works have contributed prominently to the scholarly community on the existentialist view of *soma* as the whole person. Robinson operated under the same false assumption in ignoring the meaning of *soma* as primarily referring to the physical body.

Gundry has demonstrated this view can no longer be sustained and should be abandoned. This has contributed to a long and unnecessary bifurcation and tension between Paul and the Gospels / Acts on the question of the resurrection of Jesus.

Paul is usually presented as advocating a non-physical view or interpretation of the resurrection opting instead for a spiritual resurrection instead hence the emphasis on the Pauline term *soma pneumatikon* in 1 Cor 15:44. This alleged contrast as we noted has led a number of scholars to postulate the idea that the Gospels / Acts were later compositions set out to refute Paul's views of a spiritual resurrection of Jesus by presenting a physical bodily resurrection in its place.³⁶² Much of the studies in support of an opposing dichotomy between Paul and the Gospels / Acts have been based for the most part on a faulty assumption on the meaning of *soma* for both Paul and the Gospels / Acts. We end up having here a false dichotomy between the two.³⁶³

The *Soma Pneumatikon* in Paul

The Pauline phrase *soma pneumatikon* (1 Cor 15:44) is a *hapax legomenon*³⁶⁴ and has generally been taken by some scholars to support the idea that Paul conceived of the resurrection body as a spirit or as "pneumatic".³⁶⁵ Daniel Smith claims that "exactly

³⁶² See for instance the discussion in Daniel A. Smith, *Revisiting the Empty Tomb: The Early History of Easter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), pp. 109-11. See also my review of this book in the Review of Biblical Literature (forthcoming).

³⁶³ John Dominic Crossan points out, "Paul needs in 1 Cor. 15 to equate his own experience with that of the preceding apostles. To equate, that is, its *validity* and *legitimacy*, but not necessarily its mode or manner... Paul's own entranced revelation should not be... the model for all the others." John Dominic Crossan. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), p. 169. See also Karl Martin Fischer. *Das Ostergeschehen*. 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), p. 74.

³⁶⁴ A *hapax legomenon* is a word or phrase that appears only once.

³⁶⁵ Smith, *Revisiting the Empty Tomb*, p. 109.

what Paul meant by a ‘spiritual’ (*pneumatikos*) body in his explanation of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 is a debated point.”³⁶⁶ But why is a debated point? The problem seems to be a misunderstanding of what Paul intended by *soma pneumatikon*. The adjective *pneumatikon*, “spiritual” does not necessarily mean ‘non-physical’ or ‘immaterial’. This adjective is also used elsewhere by Paul in 1 Corinthians to refer to things that are clearly physical or material but which have a divine origin or source to them. The following texts also taken from 1 Corinthians will demonstrate this point:

1 Cor 2:15, *pneumatikos anakrinei* / “the spiritual [man / person] discerns”

1 Cor 10:3, *pneumatikon broma* / “spiritual food”, i.e. manna

1 Cor 10:4a, *pneumatikon... poma* / “spiritual drink”, i.e. water

1 Cor 10:4b, *pneumatikes...petra* / “spiritual rock”, the rock representing Christ

In 1 Cor 2:15 Paul can speak of *pneumatikos anakrinei* / “the spiritual (man)” who discerns without insinuating that such a spiritual person is a spirit or immaterial. This is comparable to calling someone “spiritual” without meaning such a person is an invisible immaterial entity but rather than he /she has a religious or mystical orientation. The background to the references in 1 Corinthians 10 is the Old Testament narratives of the Israelite wandering in the wilderness (Exod16-17; Num 20) in which food is supernaturally provided for by God. The manna and water in these narratives are clearly intended to be literal, but their origin or source are seen as supernatural as they find their source in God and this is implied in Paul’s use of the adjective *pneumatikon*.³⁶⁷ Thus the meaning of *pneumatikon* / “spiritual” refers to a *supernatural source*. This understanding is

³⁶⁶ Smith, *Revisiting the Empty Tomb*, p. 109.

³⁶⁷ See the discussion in Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp.347-61.

evident in the RSV and NEB translation of 1 Cor 10:3-4 in which *pneumatikon* is translated as “supernatural”. If this grammatical understanding of the adjective *pneumatikon* is consistently applied to Paul’s reference to a *soma pneumatikon* in 1 Cor 15:44, then the case can be made that what Paul is addressing regarding the resurrection body is not that it is immaterial or an invisible spirit *contra* Smith,³⁶⁸ but rather, that it is a body which has a divine origin and source, in that it has been raised by God to an immortal and imperishable state. Thus a spiritual body = a resurrection body. It is clear from 1 Corinthians 15 that what Paul is arguing is a change of the body from one state to another, from mortal to immortal, from perishable to imperishable.³⁶⁹ That the body (*soma*) is in view here is also clear from Paul’s treatment elsewhere when he deals with the resurrection. In Rom 8:11: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life *to your mortal bodies* also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (emphasis mine). Moreover, Paul describes the resurrection in this passage as “the redemption of

³⁶⁸ It is interesting yet unfortunate that Smith, *Revisiting the Empty Tomb* provides no treatment at all of 1 Cor 2:15; 10:3-4 which uses the same adjective *pneumatikon* when he deals with Paul’s use of *soma pneumatikon* in 1 Cor 15:44.

³⁶⁹ The RSV and NRSV translation of 1 Cor 15:44: “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body” is most unfortunate. The term “physical” functions as an antonym to “spiritual” and implies that spiritual means the opposite of physical, namely that spiritual = non-physical. The term Paul uses is *psuchikos* which is usually translated “natural” and means, “concerned with this life only, animal, natural” and further that it is “opp.[osed] to spiritual.” *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 798. In 1 Cor 2:14-15, Paul uses both terms *psuchikos* and *pneumatikos* to describe one who does not have the Spirit of God (natural person), from one who does (spiritual person). The word *psuchikos* is variously translated as “physical” (NRSV; RSV; CEV), “natural” (NASB; ASV; KJV; NKJV; NIV; NLT; ESV; NJB; Darby; Young), “beastly” (Wycliffe), “animal” (NEB, Weymouth). Wright prefers to translate this term as “soulish”. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 282, 346.

our bodies” (Rom 8:23). Paul believes that the body (*soma*) of the risen Jesus is the model of the bodies that believers will receive at the *parousia*,

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body [*soma*] of our humiliation [or “our humble bodies”] that it may be conformed to the body [*soma*] of his glory [or “his glorious body”], by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. (Phil.3:20-21)

The Pauline evidence is consistent that the subject of the resurrection is the physical body, and that it will undergo a change from its present state to a superior one. Paul in his understands it as a transformation or transition of the body from a lesser state to a higher one (mortal to immortal, corruptible to incorruptible, perishable to imperishable, natural to spiritual) and that it is an act of God himself (1 Cor 15:38).³⁷⁰

In another attempt to divorce Paul from the Easter materials found in the Gospels / Acts scholars have made the oft-repeated charge of Paul’s ignorance of the empty tomb tradition.³⁷¹ This argument is usually geared towards rejecting the physical nature of the resurrection of Jesus by way of the empty tomb tradition thus suggesting that Paul believed in a spiritual resurrection of Jesus where his spirit ascended to God.

³⁷⁰ The same seems to be reflected elsewhere in the NT for instance in 1 John 3:2-3 where the *parousia* is also in view in which the writer muses: “what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” The reserve here is not so much an exhaustive understanding of what exactly believers will be like at the *parousia*, but it seems rather, that it is sufficient for them to know that they will be like (*homoioi*) Jesus. Thus the early Christians did not seem to be bogged down by an exhaustive knowledge of what exactly a resurrection body was. They believed that God acted in raising Jesus from the dead, and that Jesus served as the model for what would happen to them in their own resurrection.

³⁷¹ Smith, *Revisiting the Empty Tomb*, p. 3; Fischer, *Das Ostergeschehen*, 58; Zeitlin, *Jesus and the Judaism of His Time*, p. 165.

In regards to Paul's knowledge of the empty tomb whether he knew one or not does not constitute an argument against the veracity of the empty tomb since an argument from silence proves nothing.³⁷² Paul however does make reference, although implicit, that he was aware of the empty tomb tradition. In the primitive creedal formula of 1 Cor 15:3-4, Paul mentions the *burial* of Jesus and his consequent rising and appearance to the disciples.³⁷³ An additional note which would reinforce that Paul had at least some knowledge of the empty tomb tradition was his meeting and consultation with the original disciples of Jesus who would have been familiar with this original tradition (Gal 1:18-2:10).³⁷⁴

³⁷² The dangerous tendency to argue from silence in comparing Paul and the Gospels / Acts is seen in a number of areas. Paul never mentions John the Baptizer in his letters, but John's historicity is not disputed by any New Testament scholar or historian. John the Baptizer is attested in the Gospels / Acts and even Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.5.2. Paul never refers to Jesus as the "son of man" yet no scholar denies Jesus utilized this term. The baptism of Jesus is never mentioned by Paul either, but all New Testament scholars acknowledge the historical baptism of Jesus by John the Baptizer. Were it not for the abuses of the Eucharist in Corinth Paul may never have mentioned it in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. In a similar vein if the resurrection was never in dispute in Corinth it is possible Paul may not have written 1 Corinthians 15. The Gospels / Acts and the Pauline literature should be judged on their own merits and not to be used at the expense of the other.

³⁷³ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 476 n152.

³⁷⁴ The place of Peter as one of the original disciples Paul visited, consulted and even argued with is important in respect to the empty tomb tradition. Paul mentions Jesus' appearance to Cephas or Peter in 1 Cor 15:5, but this same appearance is also attested in Luke 24:34, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" The context of the Lukan material here is the empty tomb discovery. Thus it is possible that Paul cites this creedal material which has its roots in the empty tomb tradition.

Another supporting factor in demonstrating that Paul believed in a bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead stems from his own autobiographical admission. He states that he was “a Pharisee” (Phil 3:5), and in addition, mentions both his belief in the resurrection of Jesus and the future resurrection of the dead (Phil 3:10-11).³⁷⁵ The sect of the Pharisees are presented in the New Testament as believers in the resurrection. This description is further corroborated externally by Josephus who also attributes belief in resurrection to the Pharisees as well as the belief in the immortality of the soul.³⁷⁶

Conclusion

We have examined and seen that the meaning and usage of resurrection language in the New Testament has a somatic reference to it namely the body. The Gospel narratives including Acts in their concrete presentation of the risen Jesus appear to be in complete agreement with the meaning of *soma* as a reference to the physical body of Jesus. When we examined the use of *soma* in Paul in reference to the resurrection we noted that Paul used it with the adjective *pneumatikon*. Many scholars have seen Paul’s description of the resurrection body as a *soma pneumatikon* as being at variance with the Easter narratives of the Gospels and Acts principally because they take the Pauline term *soma pneumatikon* to be synonymous with a spirit, i.e. something which is immaterial or incorporeal. I argued that this is a hasty and rash conclusion with no sound basis which has caused unnecessary debate in academic studies of the resurrection of Jesus. A cursory study of Paul’s consistent use of *pneumatikon* elsewhere in his letter of 1 Corinthians as we

³⁷⁵ Luke also points out that Paul was a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; 26:5). It is significant that in both these passages the context is about belief in the resurrection of the dead.

³⁷⁶ *Antiquities* 18.1.3-5; *War* 2.8.14; 3.8.5. Josephus points out that the Pharisees and also the Essenes affirmed these beliefs in resurrection and immortality while the Sadducees denied them. Even Josephus, himself a Pharisee sheds an unfavourable light on the Sadducees.

have seen demonstrates that Paul uses this adjective to denote a supernatural source. In light of this understanding we submit that Paul understood the *soma pneumatikon* to be a resurrection body which is supernatural because it is raised by God and has been changed from one state to another without dispensing the physicality of the body. Thus the alleged tension advocated by some scholars between the Gospels / Acts and Paul in respect to the subject of the resurrection of Jesus appears to be conjecturally imagined.