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Origen on the Resurrection

By Jim Myers

Before I address the topic of this issue, please help me conduct a quick experiment. Close your eyes and picture yourself after the resurrection – how do you look? Do you have a body like you have now? Are you flesh and blood or a spirit, ghost type being? Are you young or old? If I had a choice of a physical body I would like to return to when I was in my early twenties, in great shape, healthy, curly black hair (and lots of it) and full of energy. Of course, one small problem is that my grandkids wouldn't recognize me.

Origen, surnamed Adamantinus, was born in all probability in Alexandria, Egypt, about the year 185 CE. His father Leonides was probably one of the many teachers of rhetoric or grammar who abounded in that city of Grecian culture. Origen became a well-known Christian teacher and many of his ideas greatly influenced the development of Christian doctrine. He died at Tyre in 254 CE at the age of 70, after being released from prison at the end of the Decian persecutions.

The third-century Christian theologian Origen wrestled with many questions concerning the resurrection and the life of saints after death. He clearly understands that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, insists that the resurrection from the dead must be a bodily resurrection.

If it is certain that we are to possess bodies, and if those bodies that have fallen are declared to rise again – and the expression 'rise again' could not properly be used except of that which had previously fallen – then there can be no doubt that these bodies

rise again in order that at the resurrection we may once more be clothed with them. (Origen, *On First Principles* 2.10.1)



Origen

But, Origen was also aware of the fact that Paul also wrote that "flesh and blood can not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 15:50). Obviously a radical transformation would have to take place at some point, otherwise Paul's writings would have seemed to have been in conflict. Origen would address this point in his writings.

We now direct the discussion to some of our own people, who either from want of intellect or from lack of instruction introduce an exceedingly low and mean idea of the resurrection of the body. We ask these men in what manner they think that the 'natural body' will, by the grace of the resurrection, be changed and become 'spiritual,' and in what manner they think that what is sown 'in weakness' will be 'raised in power,' and what is sown 'in

dishonor' is to 'rise in glory,' and what is sown 'in corruption' is to be transformed into 'incorruption.' Certainly if they believe the apostle, who says that the body, when it rises in glory and in power and in incorruptibility, has already become spiritual, it seems absurd and contrary to his meaning to say that it is still entangled in the passions of flesh and blood. (*On First Principles* 2.10.3)

Origen's argument presupposes that a physical understanding of the resurrection was current in Christian Alexandria. However, he insists that the body which is raised in resurrection is continuous with the physical body in principle, but different from it in substance. This becomes clear in the next quote:

Now some men, who reject the labor of thinking and seeking after the outward and literal meaning of the law, or rather give way to their own desires and lusts, disciples of the mere letter, consider that the promises of the future are to be looked for in the form of pleasure and bodily luxury. And chief on this account they desire after the resurrection to have flesh of such sort that they will never lack the power to eat and drink and to do all things that pertain to flesh and blood, not following the teaching of the Apostle Paul about the resurrection of a 'spiritual body.' (*On First Principles* 2.11.2)

Origen also provides readers with his view of what happens to a person after the moment of death:

I think that the saints when they depart from this life will remain in some place situated on the earth, which the divine Scripture calls 'paradise.' This will be a place of instruction and, so to speak, a lecture room or school for souls, in which they may be taught about all that they had seen on the earth and may also receive indications of what is to follow in the future; just as when placed in this life they had obtained certain indications of the future,

seen indeed 'through a glass darkly', and yet truly seen 'in part', which are revealed more clearly and brightly to the saints in their proper times and places. If anyone is 'pure in heart' and of unpolluted mind and well-trained understanding he will make swifter progress and quickly ascend to the region of the air, until he reaches the kingdom of the heavens, passing through the series of those 'abiding places', if I may so call them, which the Greeks have termed spheres, that is, globes, but which the divine scripture calls heavens. (*On First Principles* 2.11.6)

According to Origen, once the saints have been transformed into their new spiritual bodies and 'pass through all graduations,' they will then come to the highest level of all.

When, then, the saints shall have reached the celestial abode, they will clearly see the nature of the stars one by one, and will understand whether they are endued with life, or their condition, whatever it is. And they will comprehend also the other reasons for the works of God, which He Himself will reveal to them. For He will show to them, as to children, the causes of things and the power of His creation, and will explain why that star is placed in that particular quarter of the sky, and why it was separated from another by so great an intervening space . . . the rational nature, growing by each individual step, not as it grew in this life in flesh, and body, and soul, but enlarged in understanding and in power of perception, is raised as a mind already perfect to perfect knowledge, no longer at all impeded by those carnal senses, but increased in intellectual growth; and every gazing purely, and, so to speak, face to face, on the causes of things, it attains perfection. (*On First Principles* 2.11.6)

The resurrection would continue to be one of the central topics of interest by the Church Fathers and also a good study resource. **BHR**

SOURCE: (1) Classical Christianity & Rabbinic Judaism by Bruce D. Chilton & Jacob Neusner. (2) Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV, pages 223-300 (W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company).

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