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As we study the second half of the New Testament, it becomes evident very quickly that the early Church struggled with doctrinal drift. One of the central responsibilities of having a Church with apostles and prophets, we learn in Ephesians, is so “that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” (Ephesians 4:14). Therefore, most of Paul’s epistles were written to combat this doctrinal drift. But what happens when the people no longer listen to the Apostles? Paul warned the Saints to avoid those who teach different doctrines. For example, he warned the Saints in Rome to avoid those who cause divisions in the Church with doctrines
“contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned” (Romans 16:17). Likewise, he charged Timothy to make sure that the Saints in Macedonia did not teach any “other doctrine” (Greek, heterodidos-
kalos; 1 Timothy 1:3), but Paul realized that “the time will come when they [the members of the Church] will not endure sound doctrine. . . . And they shall turn away their ears from the truth” (2 Timothy 4:3–4). And what happens when there are no longer functioning Apostles and prophets on the earth?

While part of this doctrinal drift seems to have originated with some Jewish-Christians (see Acts 11:1–3; 15:1–11; Galatians 2:12–14), I will focus on two issues that seem to have been influenced by a particular strain of Greek philosophical thought: “The body is a tomb.” Although the ancients’ view of the body was complex and multidimensional, I will focus on just some of the ramifications of this particular philosophical idea in the debates over the nature of the mortal Christ and the nature of the Resurrection.1 Although these debates reach their zenith in the second century and beyond, we find evidence of their infancy in the New Testament. For example, John warns of “many antichrists” in the Church “who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh” (1 John 2:18; 2 John 1:7), and Paul complains to the Corinthian Saints, “How say some among you there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Corinthians 15:12).

In order to better appreciate the nuances of these New Testament passages, I will briefly discuss the nature of heresy, the philosophical teaching of “the body is a tomb,” and the Christian debates that raged in the second century and beyond.

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1 For some discussions on the multidimensional views of the body in the Greco-Roman and Christian worlds, see Dale B. Martin, The Corinthian Body (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), and Gregory J. Riley, Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1995).
Christianities in the Second Century and Beyond

In the second century, Christianity was not a monolithic Church; rather, it was a collection of groups who had different ideas on what it meant to be a Christian. At times these groups coexisted with different levels of acceptance, but this diversity ultimately led to strained relations as each group sought to legitimate their own position. Wayne A. Meeks described the resulting situation as a “vector constituted by tensions in many directions.” His imagery conveys well the strained pull between groups who sought to disengage the ties of shared belief that connected them so they could highlight the differences that separated them. It is during this time period that we see the development in meaning of the Greek word *hairesis* from simply “choice” to the more pejorative sense of “heresy”—a group that is isolated from the parent body by some form of deviation from the “truth.”

Alain Le Boulluec convincingly argues that it was Justin Martyr, a second-century church Father, who invented the concept of heresy. In doing so, Justin made an analogy between his opponents and the Greek philosophical schools. While he admits that in its purest sense philosophy was divinely sanctioned, two developments arose that fostered the concept of heresy. First, with time,

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philosophy changed from a search for truth to the exposition of particular doctrines; second, the disciples of philosophical schools depended on human masters for truth, rather than depending on God. Justin thus understood philosophical teachings to be the fountain from which the concept of heresy sprang. It is not surprising, therefore, that the early church Fathers who followed in Justin’s footsteps, such as Irenaeus and Hippolytus, attacked heretical groups on the grounds of their philosophical teachings.

Sōma Sēma

One philosophical concept that undergirded some of these doctrinal disputes was sōma sēma: “The body is a tomb.” In one of Plato’s dialogues, Socrates says that the Orphics were probably the inventors of this idea (Cratylus, 400c; see also Phaedrus, 250c, Gorgias, 493a). This belief stemmed from the Orphic theogonic myth, about which we learn from a number of fragmented sources, but particularly from the Christian Father, Clement of Alexandria. Although Clement’s purpose in recounting the myth is to discredit it, we are indebted to him for the information he records.

“The mysteries of Dionysos are wholly inhuman; for while still a child, and the Curetes danced around [Dionysos’s cradle] clashing their weapons, and the Titans having come upon them by stealth, and having beguiled him with childish toys, these very Titans tore him limb from limb when but a child, as the bard of this mystery, the Thracian Orpheus says:—

“‘Come, and spinning-top, and limb-moving rattles, And fair golden apples from the clear-toned Hesperides.’

“And the useless symbols of this mystic rite it will not be useless to exhibit for condemnation. These are dice, ball, hoop, apples, top, looking-glass, tuft of wool. Athene (Minerva), to resume our

5 Le Boulluec, La notion d’hérésie, 1:54.
account, having abstracted the heart of Dionysus, was called Pallas, from the vibrating of the heart; and the Titans who had torn him limb from limb, setting a caldron on a tripod, and throwing into it the members of Dionysus, first boiled them down, and then fixing them on spits, ‘held them over the fire.’ But Zeus having appeared, since he was a god, having speedily perceived the savour of the pieces of flesh that were being cooked,—that savour which your gods agree to have assigned to them as their perquisite,—assails the Titans with his thunderbolt, and consigns the members of Dionysus to his son Apollo to be interred.”

What Clement does not record is that Zeus, in retribution, sent down his thunderbolts on the Titans and reduced them to ashes. From these ashes Zeus then created the bodies of the mortal race. Thus, according to the Orphics, mortals consist of both a “Titanic nature (the fleshly body) and a Dionysian nature (the immortal soul).” However, Latter-day Saints should understand that the word “soul” in ancient texts has a very different meaning than the one given by the Prophet Joseph Smith in Doctrine and Covenants 88:15, e.g., “the spirit and the body are the soul of man.” Rather, in antiquity, the soul is the immaterial part of a person and is often synonymous with the spirit or the mind.

It seems that Plato and others agreed with the Orphic view. In the Republic Plato writes that in order to understand the true
nature of the soul, “we must view it not marred by communion with the body and other miseries as we now contemplate it, but consider adequately in the light of reason what it is when it is purified, and then you will find it to be a far more beautiful thing and will more clearly distinguish justice and injustice and all the matters that we have now discussed. But though we have stated the truth of its present appearance, its condition as we have now contemplated it resembles that of the sea god Glaucus whose first nature can hardly be made out by those who catch glimpses of him, because the original members of his body are broken off and mutilated and crushed and in every way marred by the waves, and other parts have attached themselves to him, accretions of shells and seaweed and rocks, so that he is more like any wild creature than what he was by nature—even such, I say, is our vision of the soul marred by countless evils.”

Epictetus, a Greek Stoic philosopher from the first century A.D. who was influenced by Socrates, teaches that the body “is not thy own, but only a fine mixture of clay” (Dialogue, 1:1). Further, he taught, “You are a little soul carrying a dead body” (Fragments CLXXVI). Seneca, a Roman Stoic philosopher from the same time period, wrote that the soul “is weighted down by a heavy burden and desires to be freed and to return to the elements of which it was once a part. For this body of ours is a weight upon the soul and its penance; as the load presses down the soul is crushed and is in bondage. . . . I regard this body as nothing but a chain which manacles my freedom” (Epistle, 65:16, 22). For Seneca, only the study of philosophy allows the embodied soul an element of

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freedom. From these sources it becomes clear that, at least in some sections of Greco-Roman philosophy, there is a very strong anti-body sentiment circulating from an early time—at least by the fourth century B.C. with the writings of Plato and continuing into the Christian era.

But this view of the body was not unique to the Greco-Roman world. There is evidence that it was also being assimilated into some Jewish traditions. Although there is not a large corpus of material dealing with the status of the body in early Jewish tradition, it appears that initially the body was regarded positively. Genesis 1:26–27 records that “God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.”

Isaiah teaches that in the resurrection “thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body [Hebrew, nēbēlāh] shall they arise. Awake

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and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead” (Isaiah 26:19).  

The Jewish texts that we have from the intertestamental period are more mixed in their references to the body. On the one hand, in the 2 Maccabees account of the torture and martyrdom of the seven Jewish brothers, the third brother seems to have an expectation of a physical resurrection. “He quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, and said nobly, ‘I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again” (NRSV, 7:10). Likewise, 2 Baruch teaches that the resurrected body will be a reconstitution of the earthly body: “For the earth will surely give back the dead at that time; it receives them now in order to keep them, not changing anything in their form. But as it has received them so it will give them back” (50:2).  

On the other hand, however, some Jewish sources show that the concept of body was being influenced by the Orphic maxim. The Jewish philosopher Philo accepted the Orphic doctrine that the body is a tomb: “Now, when we are alive, we are so though our soul is dead and buried in our body, as if in a tomb” (Legum allegoriae, 1.108). He argued that “it is not possible that he whose abode is in the body should attain to being with God; this is possible only for him whom God rescues out of prison” (Legum allegoriae, 3.42)—the implication being that it is the body that constitutes

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13 Job 19:26 is sometimes referred to in order to establish the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh, but this text is problematic. The King James version reads, “Yet in my flesh shall I see God.” The Hebrew text, however, uses the preposition min, which can be translated as “apart from.” Thus the New American Standard Bible reads, “Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh shall I see God.” See also the Jewish Publication Society version and the footnotes in the ESV, NIV, and the New Living Translation.

the prison. This is a far cry from the Genesis view of the body as being created in the image of God. In practical terms this negative understanding of the body is played out in the emergence of ascetic groups, such as the Essenes, who sought to control their bodily impulses. According to the writings of Josephus (JW, 2.119–22) and Pliny (Natural History, 5.15.73), the Essenes were a celibate community who held all things in common. The basis for their celibate practices once again seems to stem from the notion that the body is a prison for the soul. Josephus records that the doctrine of the Essenes was “that bodies are corruptible, and that the matter they are made of is not permanent; but that the souls are immortal, and continue for ever; and that they come out of the most subtile air, and are united to their bodies as in prisons, into which they are drawn by a certain natural enticement; but that when they are set free from the bonds of the flesh, they then, as released from a long bondage, rejoice and mount upward” (JW, 2.47).

Thus they believed that true life consists of suppressing the body’s desires in order for the soul to live (JW, 2.155).

The Nature of the Mortal Christ

If a person believes that the body is a tomb, how does he or she understand the Christian message of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ? This question became an important issue for the early Christian Church. Two important and related questions with which the early Christians struggled were whether a god could have a body and whether he could experience suffering. These were such important questions for the Church that they eventually became the subject of a number of Ecumenical Councils in the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁵

¹⁵ For example, three of the first four Ecumenical Councils dealt with the issue of the nature of Christ. The Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) was convened by Constantine to address the teachings of Arius, who claimed that Christ was not divine. Over a
At the heart of this controversy are the Docetists. There is some debate about whether they were a distinct group or whether—more likely—they represent a philosophical outlook found in a number of groups. Unfortunately, we do not have a lot of information about them. At the end of the second century A.D., Serapion, bishop of Antioch, wrote a letter to the church at Rhossos where he mentions a group known as the *dokētai* (as quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.12). He does not tell us much about them, just that they used the apocryphal Gospel of Peter and that he suspected a connection with Marcion. Clement of Alexandria notes that their name comes from their “peculiar dogmas” (*Miscellanies*, 7:17). *Dokētai* comes from a Greek word which means “to seem” or “to appear.” In its simplest manifestation, therefore, Docetism taught that Christ only *seemed* to have a body. This basic belief gave rise to three main interpretations.

The first interpretation is most clearly noted in the letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch. After he was arrested and as he traveled to Rome to face a martyr’s death, he wrote letters to a number of churches. The letters are a fascinating insight into his understanding of the purpose of Christian suffering. In writing these letters, he vehemently argues against those who taught that Jesus only *seemed* to suffer because that would make Ignatius’s own suffering meaningless. In Ignatius’s letter to the Trallian Saints, he warned, “Be deaf, then, to any talk that ignores Jesus Christ, of David’s

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lineage, of Mary; who was really born, ate and drank; was really persecuted under Pontius Pilate; was really crucified and died, in the sight of heaven and earth and the underworld. He was really raised from the dead, for his Father raised him, just as his Father will raise us, who believe on him, through Christ Jesus, apart from whom we have no genuine life. And if, as some atheists (I mean unbelievers) say, his suffering was a sham (it’s really they who are a sham!), why, then, am I a prisoner? Why do I want to fight with wild beasts? In that case I shall die to no purpose. Yes, and I am maligning the Lord too!” (Trallians, 9–10). Likewise he wrote to the Smyrneans, cautioning them: “For it was for our sakes that he suffered all this, to save us. And he genuinely suffered, as even he genuinely raised himself. It is not as some unbelievers say, that his Passion was a sham. It’s they who are a sham!” (Smyrneans, 2).

The second interpretation took the denial of Christ’s suffering further to argue that Jesus only seemed to be human, and therefore they made a distinction between the divine Christ and the man Jesus. Jesus, they argued was a man, like all other humans. Christ, however, as Cerinthus taught, “descended upon him in the form of the dove from the Supreme Ruler. . . . But at last Christ departed from Jesus” before the crucifixion (Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 1.26.1). From a slightly different perspective, the Gnostic teacher Basilides taught the same idea: “He [i.e., Christ] appeared, then, on earth as a man, to the nations of these powers, and wrought miracles. Wherefore he did not himself suffer death, but Simon, a certain man of Cyrene, being compelled, bore the cross in his stead; so that this latter being transfigured by him, that he might be thought to be Jesus, was crucified, through ignorance and error,

18 All of Irenaeus’s quotations are from Roberts and Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Fathers.
while Jesus Himself received the form of Simon, and standing by, laughed at them. For since he was an incorporeal power, and the Nous (mind) of the unborn father, he transfigured Himself as he pleased, and thus ascended to Him who had sent him, deriding them, inasmuch as he could not be laid hold of, and was invisible to all” (Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 1.24.4; see also 3.18.3). This distinction between the human and divine was integral to the later doctrinal disputes over the nature of Christ: Was He by nature divine, or was He by nature human, or some combination of these?

As a logical extension of these positions, we come to the third interpretation: As God, Jesus could not have been born as a mortal. Marcion apparently argued this position, although our only evidence comes from Tertullian’s refutation of it (Against Marcion, 3.11). According to Tertullian, Marcion denied that Christ had flesh. He argued that Christ was a spirit (Greek, “phantasma”; Against Marcion, 3.8). He took this position because he “was apprehensive that a belief of the fleshly body would also involve a belief of birth,” and Marcion “rejected the sham of a nativity.” Tertullian says that Marcion’s chief argument against Christ being born was the defilement of the process of birth. “Come then, wind up your cavils against the most sacred and reverend works of nature; inveigh against all that you are; destroy the origin of flesh and life; call the womb a sewer of the illustrious animal—in other words, the manufactory for the production of man; dilate on the impure and shameful tortures of parturition, and then on the filthy, troublesome, contemptible issues of the puerperal labour itself” (Against Marcion, 3.11). Likewise, one Valentinian fragment recorded by Clement of Alexandra suggests that Valentinus taught that Jesus was not subject to corruption: “Valentinus in his letter to Agathopus says, ‘Jesus showed his self-control in all that he endured. He lived in the practice of godhead. He ate and drank in a way individual to himself without excreting his food. Such was his power of self-control that the food was not corrupted within him,
SOMA SEMA: THE INFLUENCE OF “THE BODY IS A TOMB”

since he was not subject to corruption’’ (Miscellanies, 3.59.3 or 3.7).

19 Thus these authors rejected Jesus’ mortality because it would mean that He existed in a state of corruption.

While these issues were strenuously debated in the second through the fourth centuries, there is evidence that they began in the texts of the New Testament. Sometimes these scriptural texts, particularly the Johannine writings (Gospel of John, 1–3 John, and Revelation), became part of the later debate.

In his first two epistles, John warns his readers against many antichrists: “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time” (1 John 2:18). These antichrists were not outsiders, rather “they went out from us, but they were not of us” (1 John 2:19). John provides a general definition of an antichrist: “Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22). More specifically, however, John goes on to define an antichrist as “every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist” (1 John 4:3). Furthermore, in his second epistle he writes, “For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist” (2 John 1:7).

It appears that John writes these epistles to counter the teachings of Christian Docetists who argue that Christ did not come in the flesh. 20 John counters such teachings by declaring at the beginning of his first epistle, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which

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20 A similar Docetic audience seems to be behind the Logos Hymn in John’s Gospel (John 1:1–14).
we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (for the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you” (1 John 1:1–3). In this passage John emphasizes Jesus’ divinity by identifying Jesus as the Word (Greek, ho logos). This is a direct reference to the Logos Hymn that introduces John’s Gospel. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1; emphasis added). But in declaring His divinity he also acknowledges Jesus’ humanity. In the Logos Hymn, John specifically teaches, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The introduction to John’s epistle draws on both of these aspects: Jesus is God, but He is also mortal. John’s understanding of Christ’s mortal nature, however, is informed not by philosophical maxims but by his personal experience of hearing, seeing, and handling.

Tertullian specifically turns to John’s teachings on the antichrist in his writings against groups who “have great cause for besetting the flesh of Christ also with doubtful questions, as if it either had no existence at all, or possessed a nature altogether different from human flesh” (On the Flesh of Christ, 1).

“Surely he is antichrist who denies that Christ has come in the flesh [1 John 4:3]. By declaring that His flesh is simply and absolutely true, and taken in the plain sense of its own nature, the Scripture aims a blow at all who make distinctions in it. In the same way, also, when it defines the very Christ to be but one, it shakes the fancies of those who exhibit a multiform Christ, who make Christ to be one being and Jesus another,—representing one

21 Tertullian’s treatise On the Resurrection of the Flesh refers to this text, On the Flesh of Christ, and identifies those against whom he is arguing. He says that he is “contending with Marcion and Basilides that it [Christ’s flesh] possessed no reality; or else holding, after the heretical tenets of Valentinus, and according to Appelles, that it had qualities peculiar to itself” (On the Resurrection of the Flesh, 2).
as escaping out of the midst of the crowds, and the other as detained by them; one as appearing on a solitary mountain to three companions, clothed with glory in a cloud, the other as an ordinary man holding intercourse with all, one as magnanimous, but the other as timid; lastly, one as suffering death, the other as risen again, by means of which event they maintain a resurrection of their own also, only in another flesh. Happily, however, He who suffered ‘will come again from heaven’ [Acts 1:11], and by all shall He be seen, who rose again from the dead. They too who crucified Him shall see and acknowledge Him; that is to say, His very flesh, against which they spent their fury, and without which it would be impossible for Himself either to exist or to be seen; so that they must blush with shame who affirm that His flesh sits in heaven void of sensation, like a sheath only, Christ being withdrawn from it; as well as those who (maintain) that His flesh and soul are just the same thing, or else that His soul is all that exists, but that His flesh no longer lives” (On the Flesh of Christ, 24). For Tertullian it is important to reject the Docetic teachings on the nature of the mortal Jesus because of the implications it has for the doctrine of the Resurrection.

The Nature of the Resurrection

In addition to questions about the nature of Christ, how does a person who believes that the body is a tomb deal with the doctrine of the Resurrection? Did Christ’s Resurrection mean that He rose with a physical body, or was the Resurrection something different? What implications does the answer to this question have for the rest of humanity? These questions also became a major debate in early Christianity.

In the second century, Celsus recorded the argument that many educated non-Christians made when they heard the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection: “Jesus could not have risen again with
His body” (*Against Celsus*, 6.72). The hope of a resurrection, Celsus says, “is simply one which might be cherished by worms. For what sort of human soul is that which would still long for a body that had been subject to corruption?” (*Against Celsus*, 5.14). Thus he dismisses the biblical accounts of the Resurrection as either hallucinations or a desire to impress people (*Against Celsus*, 2.55). Later Augustine records the depth of controversy that the doctrine of a physical resurrection elicited: “Yet on no other point is the Christian faith contradicted so passionately, so persistently, so strenuously and obstinately, as on the resurrection of the flesh. Many philosophers, even among the pagans, have argued at length about the immortality of the soul, and in their numerous and various books have left it on record that the human soul is indeed immortal. But when it comes to the resurrection of the flesh they never falter, but openly and plainly deny it. So flatly do they contradict us on this that they declare it impossible for earthly flesh to ascend to heaven” (*Exposition 2 Psalms*, 88.5). In the New Testament, this position seems to be portrayed when Paul teaches among the philosophers in Athens. While they apparently had no problem with him teaching about an “unknown god” (Acts 17:23) or that “we are the offspring of God” (Acts 17:29), there was a polarizing reaction from his audience when he taught of the Resurrection. “And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter” (Acts 17:32).

This rejection of a physical resurrection, however, was not limited to non-Christians. Celsus claimed that not even all Christians believed in the Resurrection (*Against Celsus*, 5.14). We see

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22 All of Origen’s quotations are from Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*.

evidence of this claim in a number of texts. In the second century, Polycarp, a disciple of John, describes Christians who twist “the sayings of the Lord to suit his own sinful desires and claims that there is [no] resurrection.” He describes them as “the first-born of Satan” (To the Philippians 7.1).24 Apparently this group or groups who denied the Resurrection were not numerically insignificant because Polycarp describes them as being “many” (Greek, pollòn; 7.2).

But why would so many Christians reject the concept of a resurrection, and specifically a resurrection of the flesh? Justin Martyr argues that the justification comes from philosophical teachings rather than from the teachings of Christ: “The Saviour in the whole Gospel shows that there is salvation for the flesh, [then] why do we any longer endure those unbelieving and dangerous arguments, and fail to see that we are retrograding when we listen to such an argument as this: that the soul is immortal, but the body mortal, and incapable of being revived? For this we used to hear from Pythagoras and Plato, even before we learned the truth” (Fragments of the Lost Work of Justin on the Resurrection, 10).25 Tertullian devotes an entire treatise to argue the case for a resurrection of the flesh (third century A.D.).

Who were these Christians who denied the resurrection of the flesh? Tertullian identifies them as followers of Marcion, Basilides, and Valentinus, who taught that there was a separate creator god (On the Resurrection of the Flesh, 2). This view originates in Plato’s Timaeus, where the world was created by the demiurge, a divine artisan, rather than the high god (Timaeus, 28A, 29A, 40C, 41 A&C).26 Later, some Christians identified the demiurge with the

26 For a Christian example, see Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 1.26.1.
god of the Old Testament. They interpreted him to be a fallen divine being who was cast out of the presence of the other gods. In ignorance he declared, “I am God and there is no other God beside me” (Apocryphon of John, 11.20–21). In some sources this demiurge is called Yaldabaoth, meaning “child of chaos.” He was responsible for creating the material world and creating the physical bodies, which was “the tomb of the newly-formed body” (Apocryphon of John, 21.10; see also 31.3–4). In the Apocryphon of John both salvation and damnation come when the souls “come out of their flesh” (Apocryphon of John, 26.22–27.30). In such a belief system, the notion of a resurrection of the flesh would be untenable.

It is clear that even in the New Testament the concept of a resurrection was difficult for many of the early Christians to understand. The women did not go to the sepulcher on Easter Sunday expecting to find Jesus resurrected. Rather, it was a shock to them when they found the tomb empty: “they trembled and were amazed” (Mark 16:8). When Mary Magdalene told the disciples, Mark says that they did not believe her (Mark 16:11). Luke records that the women’s report “seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not” (Luke 24:11). But the difficulty was not just about the general concept of resurrection; it also seems to be over the nature of that resurrection. Luke and John, in particular, seem to have crafted their Gospels, at least in part, to respond to people who did not understand the Resurrection to be a physical event. Both authors insist that Jesus’ resurrected body is indeed physical. Luke records that Jesus proved to the disciples that He wasn’t a ghost or spirit (Greek, pneuma) by inviting them to touch His hands and His feet: “for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have” (Luke 24:39). Then, lest there be any doubt, He also ate fish and honeycomb (v. 42). This account has many similarities with the 3 Nephi account of the resurrected Jesus’ appearance. John makes the same point through the account of Thomas’s unbelief: “Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails,
and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). When the resurrected Jesus returns the following week, He specifically insists that Thomas “reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing” (John 20:27).

The most detailed canonical discussion, however, on the nature of the Resurrection is found in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Paul writes 1 Corinthians because he has learned that there is contention in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:11). This contention seems to have developed because some in Corinth were promoting a philosophical approach to the Christian teachings. Paul specifically argues against those who use “enticing words of man’s wisdom” (1 Corinthians 2:4).

One of the issues of contention was specifically about the Resurrection. Apparently some members of the Church in Corinth were teaching that there was no Resurrection. In his writing Paul seems to be using some of the slogans of his opponents. So Paul asks, “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Corinthians 15:12; emphasis added). Later, he helps us see more specifically what their concerns were about the Resurrection: “But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?” (1 Corinthians 15:35; emphasis added). In response to these two questions, Paul reaffirms the centrality of the doctrine. The Resurrection and the Atonement were the most important things (Greek, en prōtois) that he had taught the Corinthians (15:3), and without Christ’s Resurrection, “then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain” (15:14). Further, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable” (15:19). The issue over the Resurrection here does not seem to be denying the existence of an afterlife—both Greeks and Romans believed in an afterlife, and the Corinthians
were performing baptisms for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29). So when Paul lists all those who had seen the post-mortal Jesus, he would not have been arguing that Jesus’ spirit continued to exist. Rather, the Resurrection must have entailed more. The reality of the Resurrection was itself a refutation of the body as a tomb that ceased to exist after death.

Paul did not think the resurrected body was, as Celsus argued, cherished by worms. Rather Paul anticipated it to be a transformed, “spiritual” body (1 Corinthians 15:44), which bears “the image of the heavenly” (v. 49), is incorruptible (v. 53), and immortal (vv. 53–54), but does not consist of “flesh and blood” (v. 50). The difficult point here is the last characteristic: a spiritual body that does not consist of flesh and blood. What does Paul mean by a “spiritual body”? Is a spiritual body inconsistent with a physical body? Certainly some in antiquity argued that this was indeed Paul’s intent. Irenaeus claims “all the heretics” used this passage to argue that the body is not part of the Resurrection (Against Heresies, 5.9.1)

To understand Paul’s teachings, a number of things should be noted. First, it is clear that Paul’s teachings on the Resurrection must be understood to come from a very different starting point than the Orphics. Earlier in his epistle he has taught, “What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God . . . ?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Thus Paul did not view the human body as inherently evil, something to be shunned or rejected. Far from viewing the body as a tomb, Paul understood the spiritual capacity that enabled the body to be a temple, or a place for the Holy Ghost to dwell. This position


28 The Pauline context of 1 Corinthians 3:16 uses the term body as a reference to the Church, not to the physical body.
is fundamentally different from the Orphic view of the body. Therefore he is not under the same constraints when thinking about the resurrected body.

Second, even though a spiritual body does not consist of flesh and blood, that does not automatically mean that it cannot consist of flesh and bone. As noted earlier, in Luke’s account of the Resurrection, Jesus specifically invited His disciples to handle His body so that they could understand that resurrected bodies consist of flesh and bones (Luke 24:39). In the Book of Mormon, Amulek, in teaching Zeezrom, defined a spiritual body as one in which “the spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form . . . never to be divided” (Alma 11: 43, 45). President Joseph F. Smith said it this way: “Our bodies are designed to become eternal and spiritual. God is spiritual himself, although he has a body of flesh and bone as Christ has.”29 Both Amulek and President Smith make it clear that spiritual bodies include physical bodies. The most natural reading of Paul’s argument concurs with Amulek and President Smith. In the Resurrection we, like Christ, have a body that, although it has lain in the grave, rises again (1 Corinthians 15:4). The literary balance of this verse requires that Christ’s body rose with Him in the Resurrection, and because His Resurrection is the prototype for the rest of humanity, all of us shall also be raised with a physical body.

The major thrust of Paul’s position in 1 Corinthians 15, however, is not that our resurrected bodies are merely the “reanimation of a corpse to continue bodily existence in its present form”30—a state which would have certainly horrified many of the Corinthian Saints. Rather, Paul’s message is that as people become “in Christ,”

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not only are their spirits enlarged and transformed but so are their resurrected bodies. Notice how in verses 36 through 38 he teaches this principle through the imagery of planted seeds: we may plant “bare grain,” but “God giveth it a body.” But note verse 39: “All flesh is not the same flesh: but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fishes, and another of birds.” Paul follows this verse with a description of heavenly and earthly bodies: “There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory” (1 Corinthians 15:40–41; cf. JST, 1 Corinthians 15:40).

In the passage’s context, the celestial and terrestrial bodies refer to the type of bodies that one may receive in the Resurrection. It would seem, therefore, that there are differing degrees of spiritual transformation that our bodies experience in the Resurrection. In a 1917 general conference address, Elder Melvin J. Ballard said that “those who live the laws and attain unto the glory of the celestial shall have a body” whose “fineness and texture” or “composition” shall be greater than those who inherit a lower degree of glory.\footnote{31} Just as there are degrees of glory that we can inherit depending upon our faithfulness, so we too will inherit resurrected bodies that are commensurate with our spirits.\footnote{32}

Paul further testifies that although our physical bodies are sown in corruption, dishonor, and weakness, eventually they will be raised in incorruption, glory, and power. In short, our bodies may have been sown as a natural body of flesh and blood, but because of Christ’s Resurrection they are raised as spiritual bodies.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31] Melvin J. Ballard, Conference Report, October 1917, 110.
\item[32] Note the following from President Joseph F. Smith about the Resurrection: “Deformity will be removed; defects will be eliminated, and men and women shall attain to the perfection of their spirits, to the perfection that God designed in the beginning” (Gospel Doctrine, 23; emphasis added).
\end{footnotes}
(1 Corinthians 15:42–44), transformed so as to “bear the image of the heavenly [Christ]” (1 Corinthians 15:49). Thus, rather than being a proof-text for those Christians who argued against the physical Resurrection, Paul’s teachings, when taken in context, have an exalted view of the body and its place in the Resurrection.

Conclusion

Tertullian once famously asked, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” (Prescription against Heresies, 7). In other words, what has philosophy to do with the Church and its doctrine? Historically, the answer is that in many areas, Athens had a profound influence upon the early Christian church. When revelation ceased to come through authorized priesthood leaders, philosophy began to take on a very important role in the development of the church and its doctrines. We have examined just one philosophical concept and showed in a limited way some of the tensions that developed in the doctrinal discussions of the nature of Christ and of the Resurrection. These tensions came to full fruition in the second to fourth centuries, but even before that time we see evidence that they were already beginning to surface during the apostolic period.