

On Removing a Trump Card: Flesh and Blood and the Reign of God

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This article reexamines the meaning of the phrase 'flesh and blood' in 1 Cor 15:50 in light of two recent proposals (Martin, Asher) as to the reason why "some" in Paul's audience are denying a future resurrection. While assuming these nuanced proposals cogently describe the assumptions of Paul's audience, the article contends that Paul does not use "flesh and blood" to denote the particular "stuff" of which human beings are composed. Hence, contra these recent proposals, 1 Cor 15:50 does not exclude the possibility that the fleshly "stuff" of the human person is able to be redeemed/transformed and yet remain fleshly material capable of participating as such in the coming kingdom of God.

Key Words: Resurrection, flesh and blood, flesh, Kingdom/Reign of God, J. Asher, D. Marti, J. Jeremias, E. Teichmann, pneumatikos/psychikos, new creation, transformation

INTRODUCTION

1 Cor 15:50 has often been used as a kind of rhetorical "trump card" in the hands of those who argue that Paul holds to a more "spiritual" (i.e., less concretely material) concept of resurrection. Such interpreters use this verse to rule out the possibility that the fleshly "stuff" of the human person is able to be redeemed/transformed and yet remain *fleshly* material capable of participating in the coming kingdom of God as such. These readings take the phrase σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα to refer to part(s) of the human being which are, *by nature*, ontologically problematic and incapable of participation in the reign of God / new

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creation. They tend to locate the problem in *fleshly existence* per se rather than in the corruption that has entered into the whole created order through sin. The gist of this position was classically expressed by E. Teichmann, who argued that Paul expects the full annihilation (*Vernichtung*) of everything that belongs to the σὰρξ, with only pneumatic material remaining.¹ In contrast to such readings, J. Jeremias argued that σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα is an idiom with which Paul refers to living persons who will be transformed at the parousia.² Hence, on Jeremias's reading, v. 50 does not function to denote the particular material of which human beings are composed thereby excluding it from participation in the reign of God. Commenting on Jeremias's article in 1986, B. Meyer could say, "Jeremias' 1955 essay all but put an end to the idea that 'flesh and blood' (interpreted as the corporeal principle itself) had no part in final salvation . . . few today being ready to follow Teichmann in suppressing the prima-facie sense of 'change' . . . in favor of making it mean annihilation and new creation."³

Meyer's assessment would at least require nuancing in light of some recent interpretations of 1 Corinthians 15 which, while not directly dependent on Teichmann, restate some of his basic ideas. Two such interpretations have moved the discussion on 1 Corinthians 15 forward by persuasively delineating the main issue leading "some" of Paul's audience to deny the future resurrection.⁴ Whether framed in

1. *Die paulinische Vorstellungen von Auferstehung und Gericht und ihre Beziehungen zur jüdischen Apokalyptik* (Freiburg-Leipzig: Mohr, 1896), 46, 48, 50, 53. O. Pflleiderer preceded Teichmann with a similar understanding of πνεῦμα, claiming that it is the opposite of σὰρξ, which he characterized as the "relatively *sinful* element of the world . . . [and thereby] excluded from the kingdom of God (*Paulinism: A Contribution to the History of Primitive Christian Theology* [2 vols.; London: Williams and Norgate, 1877], 1:201).

J. Weiss (*Der erste Korintherbrief* [2d ed.; MeyerK 5:9; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1910], 372-73) and H. Lietzmann (*An die Korinther I. II.* [5th ed.; HNT 9; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969], 84) were also influenced by this classic line of thinking.

2. "Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God," *NTS* 2 (1956): 151-59. J. Gillman traces the line of thinking articulated by Jeremias to W. A. van Hengel in 1851, showing its development by W. N. Stort (1854), J. P. Briët (1857), F. Godet (1887), et al. (Gillman, "Transformation in 1 Cor. 15,50-53," *ETL* 58 [1982]: 310-13).

3. "Did Paul's View of the Resurrection of the Dead Undergo Development?" *TS* 47 (1986): 375.

4. Efforts to reconstruct the original community situation behind 1 Corinthians 15 usually center on why the "some among you" of 15:12 are denying a resurrection of the dead (see J. S. Vos, "Argumentation und Situation in 1Kor 15," *NovT* 41 [1999]: 313-33, for a recent summary of the main options). The usual options include their holding to (1) disbelief in any form of afterlife; (2) over-realized eschatology; (3) some form of body/soul dualism. I have summarized my understanding of the rhetorical situation of 1 Corinthians 15 and argued against options (1) and (2) in "Firstfruits and Death's Defeat: Metaphor in Paul's Rhetorical Strategy in 1 Cor. 15:20-28," *WW* 16 (1996): 457-58. For reasons for rejecting option (2) see also n. 26 below as well as my "Turning the World Upside Down in 1 Corinthians 15: Apocalyptic Epistemology, the Resurrected Body, and the New Creation," *EvQ* 75 (2003) forthcoming.

D. B. Martin's terms of a "hierarchy of stuff" on a cosmological spectrum or in J. R. Asher's terms of a "cosmic polarity" between the terrestrial and celestial realms, the main issue both Martin and Asher have Paul addressing in 1 Corinthians 15 is that the Corinthian deniers cannot imagine that the terrestrial *fleshly* "stuff" of the human body is capable of participation in *celestial* afterlife.⁵ However, while avoiding Teichmanik's *language* of annihilation, they continue to use 1 Cor 15:50 as support for attributing to Paul an understanding of the resurrected body similar to that of Teichmann: that is, as composed of very light pneumatic material fit for celestial existence.⁶ To my knowledge, no one has revisited the debate over the meaning of σὰρξ, καὶ ἄιμα in 1 Cor 15:50 in light of Martin and Asher's more nuanced understanding as to why "some" of the Corinthians deny the future resurrection. The purpose of this article is to do just that, showing that the phrase σὰρξ καὶ ἄιμα still does not provide support for arguing that Paul himself holds to the idea that the "fleshly" material of the present human body is *by nature* problematic. I will show that, in the rhetorical context of 1 Corinthians 15, the phrase functions as a part of Paul's overall argument that even the fleshly material of the human body will be transformed and incorporated into the reign of God / new creation. While there remains ambiguity as to the type of material that will be "put on over" this present fleshly body, I will conclude that one must at least consider the possibility that Paul conceives of it as superior, incorruptible fleshly material. The upshot of the article will be that, in the light of Martin and Asher's more nuanced understanding of the background of 1 Corinthians 15, v. 50 cannot function to exclude the possibility that the fleshly "stuff" of the human person is able to be redeemed/transformed and yet remain *fleshly* material capable of participating in the coming kingdom of God as such.

5. D. B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 108-29; J. R. Asher, *Polarity and Change in 1 Corinthians 15: A Study of Metaphysics, Rhetoric, and Resurrection* (H T 42; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 89-145, esp. 144-45; "ΣΤΕΙΡΕΤΑΙ: Paul's Anthropogenic Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44," *JBL*, 120 (2001): 103. Hence, the problem for the Corinthian deniers was not the general category of *embodiment* or of *materiality*, but the *specific type of materiality* these deniers assume is involved in the future resurrection. This way of setting forth the problem is a more carefully *nuanced* version of the body/soul dualism referred to in the preceding footnote. By focusing on popular assumptions pervading much of Greco-Roman society, it represents an advance over efforts to delineate the problem by appealing to the more speculative categories of *Religionsgeschichte* or to a version of body/soul dualism more indebted to Descartes than to categories of thought present in Roman Corinth (on which see Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 3-6). While it is not possible ever to know for sure that this way of reconstructing the situation was in fact what called forth Paul's rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 15, it makes better sense of the rhetoric he uses there than any of the other alternatives usually offered.

6. Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 126-32; Asher, *Polarity and Change*, 156 n. 20.

1. PAUL'S RHETORIC LEADING UP TO 15:50

1 Cor 15:50 is in the context⁷ of an overall argument for the *future* resurrection.⁸ Understanding what Paul has argued in vv. 35-49 is particularly important for our purposes. In those verses he addresses the main issue reflected in the question of the interlocutor in v. 35, namely, "What sort of body could the resurrected dead possibly have?"⁹ In his answer, the ψυχικός/πνευματικός terminology plays a crucial role. Earlier in 1 Cor 2:12-15 he uses this terminology to refer to *epistemological* opposites, that is, those who see by the standards of "this age" versus those whom the Spirit enables to see by the standards of the "new creation." In vv. 35-49 Paul uses this terminology in a way that corresponds to his use of it in chap. 2 except that, in this context, an issue of *ontology* rather than epistemology per se is his *focus*, namely, the nature of the resurrected body. Here they point to two distinct ontologies that correspond to the two distinct epistemologies in chap. 2, one characteristic of "this age" and one characteristic of the "new creation." The distinction between these two ontologies is *not* that the former has room for fleshly existence whereas the latter does not. Rather, when applied to the human body, the ψυχικόν/πνευματικόν terminology simply distinguishes the state of the human body of "this age" (σῶμα ψυχικόν) from the state of that same human body after it has been completely transformed to enable its participation in the consummated "new creation" (σῶμα πνευματικόν).

Paul uses the controlling imagery of the buried seed as an analogy to the future resurrection (vv. 36-37) to argue that the dead will be raised with a πνευματικόν body, which for all its discontinuity and newness, will have a definite *material continuity* with the ψυχικόν body that is buried. Using language that deliberately evokes his audience's assumptions of cosmic hierarchy/polarity, Paul destabilizes his audience's expectations by forging the πνευματικόν and ψυχικόν bodies as *temporal*, not cosmological/physiological, opposites.¹⁰ But he evokes these assumptions, *not to accommodate to them*, but to per-

7. For a detailed analysis of how Paul's argument moves to persuade his audience throughout vv. 1-34, see my "Resurrection Rhetoric: A Rhetorical Analysis of 1 Corinthians 15" (Th.D. diss., Luther Seminary, 1994), 44-189.

8. For the argument that Paul assumes his audience's belief in the resurrection of Jesus and uses that belief as a common assumption from which to argue for a future resurrection of the dead, see my "Firstfruits," 457-58.

9. This paragraph and the next one are a summary of what I have argued more extensively in "Turning."

10. As I argued in "Turning," the most natural opposite of πνεῦμα on the cosmological scale of hierarchy or polarity is clearly σὰρξ, not ψυχή. Hence, had Paul wanted to forge *cosmological* opposites here, it would have been much more natural to oppose a σάρκινον or σαρκικόν body to the πνευματικόν body.

suaude "some" in his audience to leave them behind. By arguing that lower-status elements such as flesh will be transformed and incorporated into the "new creation" at its consummation, he turns the physiological/cosmological hierarchy or polarity of the "some among you" (v. 12) upside down and offers them a new way of understanding the cosmos that accommodates a future resurrection of the dead involving the normal human ($\psi\upsilon\chi\iota\kappa\acute{o}\nu$) body.¹¹

Paul's answer to the question with which he starts in v. 35, however, raises another question. By using the first-person plural language in v. 49 to gather up the imagery he has been using and applying it *to himself and his audience*, Paul has gone a step beyond what the interlocutor had actually asked. The implied audience expects that some of their number will be alive at the end.¹² Hence, when Paul says "We will bear the image of the heavenly person" in a context dealing with the sort of bodies *the dead* will have at the future resurrection, the question naturally arises as to how this relates to the "we" in the community who are still living.¹³ In vv. 50-58 he shifts his focus to clarify this issue in a way that is directly connected with vv. 35-49 and, in the process, brings all the various arguments and imagery of this rhetorical unit into convergence.¹⁴

2. σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα AND THE βασιλεία θεοῦ IN 1 CORINTHIANS 15:50

By beginning v. 50 with the words Τοῦτο δέ φημι, ἄδελφοί, Paul signals his audience that what he is about to say functions as a kind of conceptual summary statement that refers both backward and forward; that is, it underlies much of his preceding argument and his

11. As I argue extensively in "Resurrection Rhetoric," Paul does not "theologically impose" his own views on his audience but begins with assumptions he holds in common with them and attempts to move them to a different view.

12. See n. 26 below.

13. Cf. A. Lindemann, *Der Erste Korintherbrief* (HNT 9; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 365. Hence, the distinction Paul will make between the living and the dead in vv. 50-57 is not simply incidental to the main thrust of his argument (contra Asher, *Polarity*, 162). Rather, it was explicitly called forth by the need to clarify his own argument in light of the nature of the audience he was addressing.

14. This shift at the beginning of v. 50 is recognized by numerous interpreters as the beginning of a new section (e.g., A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 1290-91; Lindemann, *Erste Korintherbrief*, 364; R. Collins, *1 Corinthians* [SP; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1999], 573; C. Wolff, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther* [THKNT 7; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1996], 413; Fee, *First Epistle*, 797-98; E.-B. Allo, *Saint Paul: Première Épître aux Corinthiens* [2d ed.; Pars: Gabalda, 1956], 431; Weiss, *Erste Korintherbrief*, 377). Others (e.g., A. C. Perriman, "Paul and the Parousia: 1 Corinthians 15.50-57 and 2 Corinthians 5.1-5," *NTS* 35 [1989]: 514) see v. 50 as the conclusion to the preceding verses.

argument that will follow it.¹⁵ "Now what I am saying brothers and sisters is this," Paul says, "Flesh and blood (σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα) is not able to inherit the reign of God, nor will corruption (ἡ φθορά) inherit incorruptibility (τὴν ἀφθαρσίαν)." Various considerations, some external to 1 Corinthians, and some internal in the letter itself, converge to support Jeremias's contentions that the phrase σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα is an idiom with which Paul refers to living but frail and sinful human beings and that the parallelism of v. 50 is synthetic, not synonymous. We begin by giving attention to a consideration external to the letter itself, namely, the use of the phrase prior to and contemporaneous with Paul.

a. Uses of σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα Prior to and Contemporaneous with Paul

Since, as is widely recognized, the most authentic reading treats σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα as a *singular grammatical* entity,¹⁶ we ought to regard the phrase *as a whole*, rather than the individual words in it, as the carrier of meaning. Therefore, we begin by inquiring after other uses of the phrase *as a whole* to help us decide on its meaning here.

Besides 1 Cor 15:50, there are only four other instances of the use of this exact idiom, σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα, in Greek literature prior to and including the first century (although it is inverted in Eph 6:12 and Heb 2:14).¹⁷ In Sir 14:18 the writer makes the point that all will die and expounds on this in v. 18: "Like green leaves on a thick tree, some fall and some grow, so also is the generation of flesh and blood (σαρκὸς καὶ αἵματος): one dies and another is born." The most natural way to understand the use of the phrase here is as a reference to a generation

15. See 7:29. As we will see, one part of the summary statement "Flesh and blood is not able to inherit the reign of God" is directed toward the implicit question about the living he has just raised in v. 49 and underlies and summarizes much of what he will say about the necessity of their transformation in vv. 51-55. The other part of the statement, "nor will corruption inherit incorruption," underlies and summarizes what he has already said in vv. 35-49 about those who will be resurrected.

16. Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1290. Among others, Ἄ, B, Clement, and Origin all combine the infinitive, κληρονομησαί, with the singular indicative, δύναται, to produce the reading preferred by both the UBS⁴ and NA²⁷, "κληρονομησαί οὐ δύναται" where σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα is the *singular* subject of δύναται.

17. Jeremias lists these references with little comment ("Flesh and Blood," 152). R. Sider's brief analysis of them confirms Jeremias's basic understanding, but emphasizes the phrase's connotation of humanity as frail *sinner*s ("The Pauline Conception of the Resurrection Body in 1 Corinthians XV. 35-54," *NTS* 21 [1975]: 436-37). In a slightly longer discussion of the passages, Gillman concludes that the parallelism in v. 50 is synonymous rather than synthetic, as Jeremias contends ("Transformation," 316-17; see also his "Thematic Comparison: 1 Cor. 15:50-57 and 2 Cor. 5:1-5," *JBL* 107 [1988]: 443).

of *living people who are capable of dying*.¹⁸ Hence, the phrase as a whole is the carrier of meaning, and its referent is frail, living human beings.

In Sir 17:29-32 there is an obvious contrast between God and humanity. There the writer says that the great mercy of the Lord (v. 29) cannot be found in human beings because they are not immortal (ἀθάνατος, v. 30). He then continues in vv. 31-32: "What is brighter than the sun? Even this undergoes eclipse. And σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα will ponder evil. He himself [God] considers the power of the height of heaven. And all people are earth and ashes." The point of the peculiar analogy seems to be: "If the sun, most brilliant of the stars, can at times fail to give light, how much more can a human fail, who is but 'flesh and blood.'" ¹⁹ In this context, the idiom σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα dissociates what is divine from what is merely human. In addition, it is important to note that Ben Sira is using the term ἀθάνατος to describe living, frail human beings, distinguishing them from God in the process. Hence, his use of ἀθάνατος in this rhetorical context parallels his use of σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα. As I will argue below, this is consistent with the way Paul uses the cognate, ἀθανασία, in the rhetorical context of 1 Cor 15:50-55 where it also parallels his use of σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα. Hence, in the only other rhetorical context where the exact phrase σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα and a cognate of ἀθανασία are used together, they are used parallel to each other and their field of meaning has to do specifically with frail, living human beings.²⁰ In both of the occurrences in Ben Sira, then, the phrase σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα is a reference to frail, *living* people and, especially in the latter text, the aspect of humanity it emphasizes is its nondivinity.

In addition to 1 Cor 15:50, the idiom is used twice in the NT. In Matt 16:17, after Peter's confession that Jesus is "the Christ, the son of the living God," Jesus praises him by saying: "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, because flesh and blood (σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα) has not *revealed* (ἀπεκάλυψεν) this to you, but my Father in heaven." No doubt "flesh and blood" here refers to living human beings and in this context it has the added rhetorical function of dissociating divine *revelation* from what is simply human information.

For our purposes, the most important usage of the phrase outside 1 Cor 15:50 is Paul's own use of it in Gal 1:15-16. There, after speaking about his former life in Judaism, he says: "But when it pleased God,

18. On the basis of this verse, Gillman claims that [t]o say that a generation of flesh and blood dies implies that this dual expression may also include what is dead" ("Transformation," 316). That the writer would continue to use "flesh and blood" to describe this generation *after* they have died is simply an argument from silence.

19. P. W. Skehan and A. A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (AB 39; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987), 285.

20. A discussion of this passage is notably absent from Gillman's otherwise quite thorough article, where he only mentions it in passing ("Transformation," 318).

who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, *to reveal* (ἀποκαλύψαι) his son in me in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood (σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα)." In this context the idiom "flesh and blood" obviously refers to living human beings, and one could even paraphrase it "mere human beings," as opposed to God. Here, as in Matt 16:17, it also dissociates divine *revelation* from what is merely human information. Paul's *casual use* of the phrase in the context of an epistle addressing a church of *Gentiles* is worth noting because he expects his entirely Gentile audience to understand what he means by this Jewish idiom without stopping to explain it. Hence, there would be no reason to imagine that he could not expect the mostly Gentile audience of 1 Corinthians, among whom he spent significant time, to understand his use of it in the context of 1 Cor 15:50.²¹

In summary, when the phrase σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα appears the only other time in Paul and in places prior to or roughly contemporaneous with him, it is a Jewish idiom that refers to living people and generally has the rhetorical function of distinguishing what is merely human from what is divine. In addition, in its two uses in the NT, one can go a bit further and say that it has the rhetorical function of dissociating divine *revelation* from what is simply human information. This observation is closely related to our next consideration.

b. Σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα and Paul's Apocalyptic Epistemology

Paul's use of σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα does not reflect his capitulation to a cosmic hierarchy/polarity but is entirely at home in his apocalyptic epistemology.²² As we saw above, when Paul uses σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα in Gal 1:15-16 it not only refers to living humans, but also functions rhetorically to dissociate divine *revelation* from what is merely human information. It took an ἀποκάλυψις for Paul's epistemological categories to be transformed in such a way that a crucified Messiah would make any sense. Hence, from his perspective there was no need to consult with any living human being who had not received

21. Therefore, contra Gillman and Collins, one need not argue that this Semitic expression in 50b would need translating and explaining with "the more Hellenistic terms in v. 50c" (Gillman, "Transformation," 316; Collins, *1 Corinthians*, 579).

22. A. Segal also argues that Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 15 is influenced by Jewish apocalypticism, albeit with a decidedly mystical slant ("Paul's Thinking about Resurrection in Its Jewish Context," *NTS* 44 [1998]: 400-419). My disagreement with various aspects of Segal's interpretation is partially due to his understanding of 1 Cor 15:50 as implying a spiritualization "of matter, a new body which is not flesh and blood, which cannot inherit the kingdom" (p. 412).

such an ἀποκάλυψις. Since those who were apostles before him obviously did make sense of the world in terms of a crucified Messiah, his distinction between them and other living human beings (σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα) in 1:16-17 implies that he was using the latter as a general category for those who had not received such a revelation from God and, therefore, consulting with them would have been pointless. In Gal 1:15-17 then, the phrase σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα refers to a category of people who have not received a revelation that would effect a radical epistemological transformation, enabling them to see reality in terms of the new creation begun by God in the death and resurrection of a crucified Messiah.

In 1 Cor 2:12-15, Paul uses the terminology of ψυχικὸς ἄνθρωπος in a way that is analogous to his use of σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα in Gal 1:15-16. In 1 Cor 2:12-15, a ψυχικὸς ἄνθρωπος is one who lives on a merely human level, one who has not yet been transformed into a πνευματικὸς ἄνθρωπος--that is, one to whom the Spirit's ἀποκάλυψις has not yet come, enabling him or her to see reality in terms of the new creation rather than by the standards of "this age." As we saw above, when an issue of ontology arises in chap. 15 (i.e., the nature of the resurrected body), we find Paul using the ψυχικόν/πνευματικόν terminology in an analogous way. In 15:44-49 he uses them to point to two distinct ontologies that correspond to the two distinct epistemologies in chap. 2, one characteristic of "this age" and one characteristic of the "new creation." When applied to the nature of the resurrected body, the ψυχικόν/πνευματικόν terminology distinguishes the Adam-like body of "this age" (the σῶμα ψυχικόν) from the body that has been completely transformed by the "making alive Spirit" to fit it for the "new creation" at its consummation (the σῶμα πνευματικόν). *Hence, the way Paul uses the ψυχικόν/πνευματικόν terminology in 1 Corinthians distinguishes what is suited for "this age" from what the Spirit makes appropriate for the "new creation."*²³

When Paul is using the phrases σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα and ψυχικὸς ἄνθρωπος in rhetorical contexts related to *epistemology* (Gal 1:15-17 and 1 Cor 2:12-15, respectively), he uses them in an analogous way: that is, to mark out those with epistemological glasses suited for "this age." Since the *focus* of the rhetorical context in 1 Cor 15:50 has shifted to an issue of *ontology*, it is therefore not surprising that he can now use σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα and σῶμα ψυχικόν in an analogous way: that is, to mark out bodies suited for "this age" that have yet to be

23. For a more detailed explanation of Paul's apocalyptic epistemology in 1 Corinthians 2 and its relationship to his understanding of the resurrected body in 1 Corinthians 15, see my "Turning."

acted upon by the "making-alive Spirit" fitting them for the "new creation."²⁴ What this suggests is that the phrase σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα here is no more a reference to the "stuff" of human beings than is ψυχικόν. Rather, placing σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα in synthetic parallelism with ἡ φθορὰ, is simply Paul's way of differentiating between the ψυχικοί bodies of the living and the ψυχικοί bodies of the dead, both of which must be acted upon by the "making alive Spirit" in order to inherit the reign of God/"new creation."

c. The Use of σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα as a Subject that Is Not Able to "Inherit the βασιλεία θεοῦ"

Paul uses *flesh and blood* as a subject which he says "is not able to *inherit the reign of God*." He does *not* say, "*flesh is not able to ascend into heaven*."²⁵ In 1 Corinthians Paul implies that his entire audience is expecting to participate in the future βασιλεία θεοῦ.²⁶ Granted, Paul says little about the nature of the βασιλεία θεοῦ in 1 Corinthians (4:20; 6:9-10; 15:24, 50). But what he does say does not lead to the impression that he himself understood it in terms of "celestial existence," as something *into which one must ascend*, although the "some" of v. 12 may have naturally come to reinterpret this language in precisely that way after Paul's departure.²⁷

24. Paul's rhetoric in vv. 44-45b makes it clear that σῶμα ψυχικόν is simply the body appropriate for this age, the type of body that is both "sown" at death (v. 44a) and constitutes all living humans in "this age" (vv. 44b-45a). As I will argue below, at the parousia the "making-alive Spirit" transforms the ψυχικοί bodies of both the dead and the living into πνευματικοί ones.

25. As we might expect if Paul was "openly endorsing" the view of the "some" that the fleshy stuff of human bodies could not ascend into a celestial existence (Asher, *Polarity*, 152). Nowhere does Paul speak about believers permanently ascending into heaven (in 1 Thess 4:17, following the ἀπάντησις in the clouds, the context implies a descent, not an ascent).

26. Paul's rhetoric in 1 Corinthians assumes that "the end," a "judgment day," and the coming "reign of God" are accepted parts of his audience's narrative world. This is because he *never stops to argue for them but rather appeals to them as he is making other arguments*, as he does here in v. 50 (cf. 15:24-28; 6:9-10; 3:13-17; 5:5; 4:5). The hypothesis that there is an "over-realized eschatology" at Corinth is increasingly being challenged (e.g., see my "Turning"; "Firstfruits," 461; Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 105; Vos, "Argumentation," 313-33; R. Hays, "The Conversion of the Imagination: Scripture and Eschatology in 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 45 [1999]: 391-412; D. W. Kuck, *Judgment and Community Conflict: Paul's Use of Apocalyptic Judgment Language in 1 Corinthians 3:5-4:5* [NovTSup 66; Leiden: Brill, 1992], 150-222).

27. If Martin and Asher are correct that the "some" of v. 12 were arguing that the terrestrial, *fleshy* material of those who had died was incapable of participation in *celestial* afterlife, then when community members began to die, it would have been very natural for the "some" to imagine some sort of celestial existence for them prior to the future reign of God. It would then have been a short step for them also to imagine the

In fact, recent work on Paul's political setting would suggest that Paul's use of βασιλεία θεοῦ as well as other terms having similar political connotations could have at least initially been heard by the audience as loaded political language, language standing in opposition to the Roman imperial order, addressing an alternative. ἐκκλησία as they await the *descent* of the true κύριος, who will fully and finally place all enemies under his feet (including his imperial enemies).²⁸ Hence, even if the deniers had begun to reinterpret this language after Paul's departure, when Paul referred to the βασιλεία θεοῦ, they would still have most likely understood *his use* of the phrase in concrete, material, and political terms and not as an endorsement of their view of the place of human flesh in the cosmos or of their "celestial" view of the coming βασιλεία θεοῦ. Here, as in vv. 23-28, Paul is subtly attempting to reconfigure their view of the future βασιλεία θεοῦ to include the transformation of the human body of flesh.²⁹ Paul's rhetoric in the remainder of vv. 50-55 bears this out, and it is to an examination of these verses that we now turn.

3. PAUL'S RHETORIC IN VERSES 50-55

a. Verse 50 as Synthetic Parallelism

Paul's careful use of language in the remainder of vv. 50-55 both corroborates and is clarified by the understanding of σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα articulated in the last section. We begin with what he says immediately following in v. 50c: "neither will corruption (ἡ φθορὰ) inherit incorruption (τὴν ἀφθαρσίαν)." The way these terms are used in v. 42 informs how they function here. *The context of v. 42 has to do with "sowing" a dead body of flesh.*³⁰ Hence, the term φθορὰ takes the general meaning of "dissolution, deterioration, corruption."³¹ The second term in v. 42, ἀφθαρσία, while capable of taking the broader meaning of "immortality," most naturally takes its more narrow meaning of "incorruption"³² since Paul is using this terminology to differentiate

future reign of God in analogous terms—that is, as the future descent of the κύριος, only to ascend with those who belonged to him into a "celestial existence." Even so, there is still no reason to think that they did not understand what *Paul* meant by the phrase.

28. See, for example, the essays in R. A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 2000); R. A. Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 1997),

29. On vv. 23-28, see my "Firstfruits," 458-64.

30. See my "Turning."

31. BDAG, 1054. The point is that what is sown is in the very process of decaying, that is, of its organic matter being broken down.

32. Or perhaps even, in Thiselton's terms, "*the reversal of decay, i.e., flourishing*" (*First Epistle*, 1297 [his italics]).

what is sown (the dead body of flesh subject to decay) from its antithesis (a body that is no longer subject to decay).³³ Paul has not changed the way he is using these terms in v. 50. Here, ἡ φθορά continues to refer to those who have died and whose corpses are thus in the state of corruption in which they "were sown," whereas ἀφθαρσίαν specifically denotes nondecay.³⁴ Hence, while we will see that this use of these cognates is corroborated in vv. 52-54, enough has been said so far to maintain that v. 50 can indeed be read as synthetic parallelism, where the inability of "flesh and blood" (frail human beings alive at the parousia) to inherit the reign of God parallels the inability of ἡ φθορά (dead and decaying/decayed human beings) to inherit ἀφθαρσίαν.³⁵

b. The Mystery of Transformation: Verses 51-52

In vv. 51-54 Paul clarifies his conceptual summary statement of v. 50. He begins by characterizing what he is about to say as a mystery, the *content* of which is found in v. 51c, especially the latter part: "We will not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed."³⁶ Since this entire au-

33. See my "Turning." For a different view of the function of these terms, see K. Usarni, "How Are the Dead Raised?" (1Cor 15, 35-58)," *Bib* 57 (1976): 490.

34. So Meyer, "Did Paul's View?" 379; contra Collins, *1 Corinthians*, 579 and Fee, *First Epistle*, 798 n. 11, both of whom translate ἡ φθορά as "the perishable" and claim that it cannot refer to what is already dead. But such a claim is unwarranted. That cognates of φθορά could naturally apply to that which is already dead (i.e., corpses in a state of decomposition) is clear from Plutarch's narration of the fate of Mithridates. His death was so engineered as to mimic the fate of a decomposing corpse. His flesh was allowed to decompose in a boat, being consumed by worms and maggots as a result of the overall corruption (φθορά) and rottenness of his excrement and decaying flesh. Plutarch sums up his fate as follows: "Thus, Mithridates died painfully by decomposing (φθειρόμενος) for seventeen days" (*Lives, Artax.* 16.7. I owe this reference to BDAG, 1054).

35. So Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood," 152. Perriman, followed by Asher (*Polarity*, 153 n. 16), objects to this understanding with the charge that Paul's change from the "kingdom of God" to "the imperishable" in the second line makes synthetic parallelism unlikely. Synthetic parallelism, he argues, would require "a greater convergence in the second part of each member," by which he means that τὴν ἀφθαρσίαν ought to be more closely linked to βασιλείαν θεοῦ ("Paul and the Parousia," 514). But Paul has already forged the very convergence that Perriman demands in his preceding argument. In vv. 23-24 he directly connects the future resurrection with the parousia and collectively calls these events "the end" which is the point at which he hands over the reign to God (τὴν βασιλείαν τῷ θεῷ). Hence he directly links the future resurrection with the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ. Then, in v. 42 he claims that the body of that future resurrection will be raised by ἐν ἀφθαρσίᾳ, thereby forging a clear convergence between the ἀφθαρσία of the future resurrection body and the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ. It would be difficult for there to be "a greater convergence in the second part of each member" without Paul's simply repeating βασιλείαν θεοῦ in the second line.

36. On the textual problems associated with this verse, see B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2d ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994),

dience is expecting to participate in some way in God's coming reign, at which time they believe some of their number will be alive,³⁷ the first part of the statement, "We will not all fall sleep," is not news to them.³⁸ The content of the mystery, then, is that it is not *just* those who have died that will be changed, but *we all will be changed*, including the living.³⁹ Hence, while Paul intentionally distinguishes between the living and the dead in vv. 50-55, his primary concern is articulating *the transformation of all* in the coming reign of God.⁴⁰

In v. 52 Paul describes the time *at which* the change takes place as being *at the last trumpet*. "For," he continues, "the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible (ἄφθαρτοι) and we ourselves will be changed." Thus, *when the trumpet sounds the call for battle*,⁴¹ the dead undergo their bodily change by being raised incorruptible and God changes the bodies of the living (the σὰρξ καὶ αἶμα) without their having experienced death.⁴² It is only then that the last enemy, Death, is defeated, God's reign is consummated, and God becomes "all in all." In vv. 53-54 Paul further describes God's action that brings this about.

c. Putting on the Transformed Body: Verses 53-54

In vv. 53-54 one must first decide what the words τὸ φθαρτὸν τοῦτο and τὸ θνητὸν τοῦτο mean *in this rhetorical context*. The adjective φθαρτὸν means "subject to decay /destruction."⁴³ It corresponds to the noun φθορὰ in vv. 42 and 50, which, as I have argued above, refers to dead and decaying/decayed human beings. In addition it is clearly the opposite of ἄφθαρτοι in v. 52c which unambiguously refers to the bodily state in which *the dead* will be raised. Hence, while it is capable of meaning anyone or anything subject to decay, contextual indicators make it clear that Paul is using φθαρτόν here in reference to that which was "sown ἐν φθορᾷ" (v. 42), that is, a corpse subjected to the process of decay/destruction. As I argued above

502. The repetition of πάντες in 51c indicates that the statement "We all will be changed" applies to both the living and those in the community who have fallen asleep.

37. See nn. 26 and 27 above.

38. So Meyer, "Did Paul's View?" 378.

39. Ibid.; Fee, *First Epistle*, 801; Wolff, *Erste Brief*, 414.

40. So Asher, *Polarity*, 157.

41. On the connotations of warfare evoked by σάλπιγξ, see Collins, 1 Corinthians, 574.

42. Paul's addition of the emphatic nominative pronoun ἡμεῖς which replaces the more all-inclusive πάντες of v. 51 indicates that here the "we ourselves" are those who are still living (so also Fee, *First Epistle*, 802; Gillman, "Transformation," 319-20; Wolff, *Erste Brief*, 415; Lindemann, *Erste Korintherbrief*, 367; Asher, *Polarity*, 161; contra Perri-man, "Paul and the Parousia," 515, 516).

43. BDAG, 1053; LSJ, 1927.

with reference to its use in v. 50, in this rhetorical context, the corresponding noun ἀφθαρσία takes the meaning of incorruption, specifically denoting nondecay or perhaps even, "the reversal of decay, i.e., flourishing."⁴⁴ In this rhetorical unit then (in vv. 42, 52, 53, 54), cognates of φθορά and ἀφθαρσία uniformly refer to the bodily state of the dead (i.e., corruption, decay) versus the bodily state in which they are raised (i.e., incorruption, nondecay).

In contrast, the adjective θνητόν is almost always used of living creatures and means "mortal" or "subject to death."⁴⁵ Paul is the only writer in the NT who uses this term and in every case he uses it to refer to the bodies / flesh of *living* human beings which are / is "mortal" or "liable to death" (Rom 6:12; 8:11; 2 Cor 4:11; 5:4).⁴⁶ Its corresponding noun, ἀθανασία (only used here by Paul; cf. 1 Tim 6:16), means "immortality."⁴⁷ Thus, in terms of their field of meaning the adjectives θνητόν and φθαρτόν correspond respectively to the distinction in v. 50 between the living (σὰρξ καὶ αἶμα) and the dead (ἡ φθορά).⁴⁸

The sense of v. 53 then, is as follows: "For this corruptible *body* (of the dead) must put on incorruptibility, and this mortal *body* (of the living) must put on immortality."⁴⁹ Paul has already prepared his au-

44. Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1297 (his italics).

45. LSJ, 802; BDAG, 458.

46. On 2 Cor 5:4, see n. 56 below. In Rom 8:11 he uses the term to refer to the bodies of his *currently living* audience that are "dead *because of Sin*," that is, bodies that are liable to death because of the power of Sin at work in "this age." However, since the Holy Spirit (i.e., the firstfruits/agent of the new creation) is at work among them, they will be made truly alive when the whole cosmos is redeemed (8:23). Whether some in his audience will still be alive and constituted by a θνητόν body or dead by then and constituted by a φθαρτόν body, Paul simply does not say.

47. LSJ, 30; BDAG, 23.

48. So also Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood," 153; contra Wolff, *Erste Brief*, 416. Gillman agrees that those who are to be clothed in this passage are both the living and the dead ("Transformation," 322) but argues against differentiating them on the terminological basis I am suggesting. The parallels he cites from Philo and Wisdom show that the terminology (φθορά/ἀφθαρσία and θνητόν/ἀθανασία) can be used interchangeably when used in conjunction with each other. In addition, he points out that Paul uses the terminology φθαρτός/ἀφθαρτος in Rom 1:23 to distinguish the incorruptible God from corruptible living humans (pp. 316-17). Gillman is correct in concluding that in Paul's usage of the term φθαρτός and its cognates, neither category (i.e., the dead or the living) can be a priori excluded (p. 316). My argument, however, is not based on an a priori decision as to how this terminology can be used but on the way it is being used in *this rhetorical context, the only context in which Paul is using these terms in close rhetorical quarters in order to draw on their nuances in meaning*. Hence, while it is possible to understand the antitheses in vv. 53-54 as parallel in meaning, the cumulative weight of my argument makes it improbable and it is certainly not true to say that Gillman has shown them to be "clearly parallel in meaning" and that Jeremias's view "has been corrected in Gillman's research" (Asher, *Polarity*, 153, 154).

49. Taking both φθαρτόν and θνητόν as modifying the unexpressed neuter-singular subject σώμα as in the NRSV.

dience for the sort of language he uses here with the seed imagery of vv. 36-38. There, the imagery of the body (σῶμα) of wheat being raised from the *naked* (γυμνός) seed buried in the ground presses the audience to imagine *the corrupted and decaying body* as something that is naked and thus needing to be clothed by God.⁵⁰ And here Paul's emphatic use of the demonstrative pronouns vividly draws attention to the *bodily continuity* between the respective bodies of both the dead and the living before and after transformation.⁵¹ It is *this* corruptible, decayed body of the dead and *this* mortal / liable-to-death body of the living which must "put on" incorruption and immortality respectively. Thus, the combined effect of the "putting on" imagery and the demonstrative pronouns presses the audience to imagine the change that happens to all as something that occurs to *this present body*, whether it is still mortal / liable to death or already in a state of corruption.⁵² When this happens, when God clothes both groups and only then, the last enemy, Death, will suffer its final defeat and be swallowed up into victory.⁵³

Hence, the mystery is that we, both the living and the dead, will have the *present state of our body* changed. What the living and the dead have in common is that both are currently constituted by a σῶμα ψυχικόν, that is, a "this age" body that "all" have who "continue to die in Adam," a merely human body already subject/subjected to death and decay *because of sin*.⁵⁴ It is a σῶμα ψυχικόν whether it is manifested as a decayed/decaying body or as a currently living, mortal / liable-to-death body.⁵⁵ Hence, whatever the state of our ψυχικόν body at the parousia, that present body will be changed into, or will put on, a πνευματικόν body. The clothing imagery Paul is using here

50. Contra Lindemann, who reads ἐνδύσασθαι as referring to an "exchange / replacement of identity" (*Erste Korintherbrief*, 369).

51. So Sider, "Pauline Conception," 437; Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1297.

52. Paul's σῶμα concept is more comprehensive than the material with which the terrestrial human body is composed, but this language emphasizes that its very stuff/matter somehow persists throughout God's transformation of it (contra Asher, *Polarity*, 159-60; Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 128; Gillman, "Transformation," 332). Hence, Paul's language presses the audience to recognize some continuity in the body's material that persists throughout the change, not because of any inherent potentiality in old bodies, *but only because God wills some continuity to be located there*.

53. Since Death is one of the Powers of the old age and is a constant threat *to the living*, speaking of its being "swallowed up" is a quite suitable way of speaking about the fate of the living (Contra Perriman, "Transformation," 514).

54. Note that Paul's argument in vv. 21-22 only works if the audience knows that in the story of Genesis 2-3, it was through Adam's sin that death came into the cosmos. Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 15 implies that the discontinuity between "this age" and the "new creation" has to do with the ravaging effects of Sin that will continue in the cosmos until the consummation of the "new creation" (see my "Turning").

55. Cf. Sider, "Pauline Conception," 438.

converges well with the imagery he used to speak about the nature of the resurrection body in vv. 35-49.⁵⁶

To conclude this section, we have seen that the rhetoric of vv. 51-55 is both clarified by and corroborates the understanding of σὰρξ καὶ αἶμα we set forth in the preceding section. We move now to summarize the results of this article and briefly describe some of the implications that emerge from it.

4. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

To summarize, in light of a more nuanced understanding of the background of 1 Corinthians 15, σὰρξ καὶ αἶμα is still best understood as a reference to living human beings. It is not a reference to parts of the human being which are, by nature, ontologically problematic and incapable of participation in the reign of God / new creation. Hence, contra Teichmann and contemporary interpretations similar to his (e.g., Martin and Asher), Paul's use of (σὰρξ καὶ αἶμα in 15:50 is not evidence that he holds to the idea that the "fleshly" material of the present human body is *by nature* problematic. Rather, in its rhetorical context, the phrase functions as a part of Paul's overall argument that even the fleshly material of the human body will be transformed and incorporated into the reign of God / new creation. The net effect of this is to remove 1 Cor 15:50 as a "trump card" from the hands of those who use it to argue that Paul holds to a more "spiritual" concept of resurrection as opposed to what they might term a more "physical/material" one.

This has implications for further reflection on the nature of the resurrected body. First, it enables us to recognize more clearly the direction Paul's overall argument in 1 Corinthians 15 is moving. That is, if σὰρξ καὶ αἶμα is not a reference to the material of which humans are composed, the nature of the transformation implicit in the seed imagery in vv. 36-38 and in the "putting on" language of vv. 51-54 begins to emerge with more clarity. Rather than envisioning σὰρξ as material that will be "sloughed off along the way," Paul is arguing strenuously that fleshly elements will be transformed and incorporated into the "new creation" / coming reign of God. Hence, one must consider the possibility that although Paul doesn't directly say what

56. The clothing imagery in 1 Cor 15:50-55 is also consistent with the way Paul uses "clothing" language in 2 Cor 5:1-5. There, as he awaits the parousia in his "earthly dwelling," such existence is "naked" *when viewed in light of the future spiritual body*. That is, it too is a *mortal* body (τὸ θνητόν, v. 4, a body liable to death because of Sin as in Rom 8:10), that must be clothed with the future "building from heaven" / "spiritual body" and in that sense is "naked."

kind of material will be "put on over" this present fleshly body, he may indeed conceive of it as superior, incorruptible fleshly material.⁵⁷

If this is true, a second implication follows for the wider debate over reconstructing the history of the tradition with regard to the nature of Jesus' resurrection. In this debate, 1 Cor 15:50 has also been pressed into service, again functioning as a "trump card" for a particular way of reconstructing that history. That is, it is often understood to clinch the argument that Paul doesn't understand the future resurrection body as fleshly material and therefore, since he understands the future resurrection on analogy with that of Christ's, neither did he conceive of Christ's risen body as fleshly material.⁵⁸ The usual implication drawn from this is that a "more spiritual" conception of Jesus' resurrection was earlier than the "late apologetic," physical conception displayed in the finished Gospels. If what I have argued in this paper is correct, 1 Cor 15:50 cannot serve as an anchoring point for this way of reconstructing the tradition history of the nature of Jesus' resurrection. One cannot simply appeal to 1 Cor 15:50 as a primary warrant for portraying Paul's understanding of Jesus' resurrection as "more spiritual" and then pitting it against the "late apologetic, crassly physical" portraits of the finished Gospels. Indeed, Paul's rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 15 might more naturally lead to the conclusion that he understood the future resurrection body (and by analogy that of Christ's resurrected body) as "crassly physical,"

57. See the similar conclusion of R. H. Gundry, "The Essential Physicality of Jesus' Resurrection according to the New Testament," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ—Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 209, 217-18. Technically, Paul's rhetoric in this chapter does not totally exclude one of the ways that Asher argues Paul might have understood the transformation, that is, where the terrestrial substance (flesh) is not sloughed off but transformed into the celestial substance of πνεύμα (*Polarity*, 156 n. 20). However, as I argued in more detail in "Turning," in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul simply has not juxtaposed the fleshly material of the present human body to some sort of pneumatic material of the resurrected body as evidenced by: (1) his making a ψυχικὸν body, rather than a σάρκινον/σαρκικὸν body, the opposite of the resurrected πνευματικὸν body; (2) the way he contrasts the two Adams in v. 45 indicating that their being opposites is not primarily because of the *stuff* of which they are composed; (3) his refusal in v. 47 to juxtapose "the man of earth *composed of dust*" with what, on Asher's reading would be his opposite—that is, "the man of heaven *composed of πνεῦμα*"; (4) Paul never speaks about believers permanently ascending into heaven so that their bodies would have to meet the requirements of some sort of celestial existence (see n. 25 above).

58. E.g., A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 87. Whether one *should* draw an analogy between Christ's resurrection and that of a future resurrection as Paul is describing it in 1 Corinthians 15 is open for debate. However, that such an analogy is often drawn and that 1 Cor 15:50 plays a large part in understanding how the analogy is understood is beyond debate.

and perhaps even just as fleshly as the portrayal of Christ's resurrected body in the finished Gospels.⁵⁹

59. If, in fact, Paul's rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 15 is not in tension with Luke's narrative depiction of the appearances of the risen Christ but rather has a certain resonance to them, an interesting canonical dialogue between the two might be explored. On Luke's depiction of the risen Christ, see my "Ripples of the Resurrection in the Triune Life of God: Reading Luke 24 with Eschatological and Trinitarian Eyes," *HBT* 24 (2002); "Our God Reigns: The Body of the Risen Lord in Luke 24," *WW* 22 (2002): 133—43; "Resurrection, Ascension, and the Developing Portrait of the God of Israel in Acts," *SJT*, forthcoming.