

Resurrection and Judgment in Early Patristic Literature

- Irenaeus of Lyon (second century CE) was a church leader and, due to his writings, an early and important “Church Father” who formulated much Christian doctrine.
- In the course of writing a long and detailed treatise (*Against Heresies*) against so-called “gnostics”, whom he calls them “heretical” for their beliefs and practices, he addresses the issue of resurrection of the body and of judgment at the end of time (esp. in Book 5). Since Irenaeus here answers, and argues against, the ideas of other Christians, we can get a sense from his writings about a range of Christian beliefs about the afterlife during this period in which Christian beliefs were being formed.
- From the writings of Irenaeus and others at the time, it is clear that early Christian had to contend with much resistance from non-Christian Gentiles to the ideas [1] of Jesus as resurrected in the body and [2] of the afterlife of all as consisting, not in immortality of the soul, but in the resurrection of the body. Both points of resistance reflect the widespread Greco-Roman view of the body as impure and as inferior to soul and/or spirit, the body as an imperfect and destructible container in which the self dwells for a short time and then, by death, is freed.
- This resistance was present both outside the Early Church, among the non-Christian Gentiles (“pagans”) who constituted the dominant culture of the time, and inside the Early Church, among some Gentile converts to Christianity who held different views of the precise nature of Jesus’ special status, about the human body, soul, and/or spirit, and about death and the afterlife.
- Tertullian (third century CE) was the first “Church Father” to write in Latin and laid much of the groundwork for Catholic doctrine in particular. Writing slightly later than Irenaeus and influenced by him, Tertullian (like Paul before him) addresses specific issues of concern to Christians, both practical and theological. He writes a whole treatise on the Resurrection of the Body. This tells us much about his beliefs, but also shows how this issue continued to cause controversy, both inside and outside the church.

Jesus’ death and resurrection: Some Christians, for instance, saw that Jesus’ status as son of God, his divinity, as meaning that he was never really human at all and, most importantly, was not mortal and did not die. For Irenaeus, Tertullian, and other “Church Fathers,” it was very important that Jesus be both human and divine; Christians would continue to debate how exactly to understand this, but it is stressed in an early period. One reason that this was important was that Jesus’ own death and resurrection opened the way for the death and resurrection of all righteous at the end of time (which Irenaeus thought was close at hand).

Anthropology: To defend resurrection in the body, Irenaeus and Tertullian both stressed God as Creator of human flesh as well as spirit and soul; Jesus’ incarnation, death, and resurrection; and the making of humankind in the image and likeness of God; among other things. He lays out an anthropology whereby the human being is a combination of body, on the one hand, and spirit and soul, on the other. Afterlife is the recombination of these parts, not the survival of the soul alone.

Judgment: For them, this allows for judgment; it’s not just that all souls, by their inherent nature, survive past life in the body; there is a single just God, and He doles out justice to righteous and wicked people at the End of Time. They see this as one way in which Christianity is superior to “pagan” religions: promise of a better life to come for righteous, assertion of justice in the cosmos, and a more complex view of the human person.

Eschatology: Irenaeus in particular was very interested in the End of Time, which he saw as impending. He outlines the sequence of events at the very end of his treatise *Against Heresies*:

5.35.1. ... For all these and other (prophetic) words were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just, which takes place after the coming of Antichrist, and the destruction of all nations under his rule; in [the times of] which [resurrection] the righteous shall reign in the earth, waxing stronger by the sight of the Lord: and through Him they shall become accustomed to partake in the glory of God the Father, and shall enjoy in the kingdom intercourse and communion with the holy angels, and union with spiritual beings; and [with respect to] those whom the Lord shall find in the flesh, awaiting Him from heaven, and who have suffered tribulation, as well as escaped the hands of the Wicked one.

For it is in reference to them that the prophet says: "And those that are left shall multiply upon the earth," And Jeremiah³²² the prophet has pointed out, that as many believers as God has prepared for this purpose, to multiply those left upon earth, should both be under the rule of the saints to minister to this Jerusalem, and that [His] kingdom shall be in it...2. Now all these things being such as they are, cannot be understood in reference to

super-celestial matters; "for God," it is said, "will show to the whole earth that is under heaven thy glory." But in the times of the kingdom, the earth has been called again by Christ [to its pristine condition], and Jerusalem rebuilt after the pattern of the Jerusalem above, of which the prophet Isaiah says, "Behold, I have depicted thy walls upon my hands, and thou art always in my sight,"³²³ And the apostle, too, writing to the Galatians, says in like manner, "But the Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all."³²⁴ He does not say this with any thought of an erratic Aeon, or of any other power which departed from the Pleroma, or of Prunicus, but of the Jerusalem which has been delineated on [God's] hands. And in the Apocalypse John saw this new [Jerusalem] descending upon the new earth.³²⁵

For after the times of the kingdom, he says, "I saw a great white throne, and Him who sat upon it, from whose face the earth fled away, and the heavens; and there was no more place for them."³²⁶ And he sets forth, too, the things connected with the general resurrection and the judgment, mentioning "the dead, great and small." "The sea," he says, "gave up the dead which it had in it, and death and hell delivered up the dead that they contained; and the books were opened.

Moreover," he says, "the book of life was opened, and the dead were judged out of those things that were written in the books, according to their works; and death and hell were sent into the lake of fire, the second death."³²⁷ Now this is what is called Gehenna, which the Lord styled eternal fire.³²⁸ "And if any one," it is said, "was not found written in the book of life, he was sent into the lake of fire."³²⁹ And after this, he says, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth have passed away; also there was no more sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, as a bride adorned for her husband." "And I heard," it is said, "a great voice from the throne, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them; and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them as their God. And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, because the former things have passed away."³³⁰ Isaiah also declares the very same: "For there shall be a new heaven and a new earth; and there shall be no remembrance of the former, neither shall the heart think about them, but they shall find in it joy and exultation."³³¹ Now this is what has been said by the apostle: "For the fashion of this world passeth away."³³² To the same purpose did the Lord also declare, "Heaven and earth shall pass away."³³³

When these things, therefore, pass away above the earth, John, the Lord's disciple, says that the new Jerusalem above shall [then] descend, as a bride adorned for her husband; and that this is the tabernacle of God, in which God will dwell with men. Of this Jerusalem the former one is an image-that Jerusalem of the former earth in which the righteous are disciplined beforehand for incorruption and prepared for salvation. And of this tabernacle Moses received the pattern in the mount;³³⁴ and nothing is capable of being allegorized, but all things are stedfast, and true, land substantial, having been made by God for righteous men's enjoyment. For as it is God truly who raises up man, so also does man truly rise from the dead, and not allegorically, as I have shown repeatedly. And as he rises actually, so also shall he be actually disciplined beforehand for incorruption, and shall go forwards and flourish in the times of the kingdom, in order that he may be capable of receiving the glory of the Father. Then, when all things are made new, he shall truly dwell in the city of God. For it is said, "He that sitteth on the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And the Lord says, Write all this; for these words are faithful and true. And He said to me, They are done."³³⁵ And this is the truth of the matter.

36.1. For since there are real men, so must there also be a real establishment (*plantationem*), that they vanish not away among non-existent things, but progress among those which have an actual existence. For neither is the substance nor the essence of the creation annihilated (for faithful and true is He who has established it), but "the fashion of the world passeth away;"³³⁶ that is, those things among which transgression has occurred, since man has grown old in them. And therefore this [present] fashion has been formed temporary, God foreknowing all things; as I have pointed out in the preceding book,³³⁷ and have also shown, as far as was possible, the cause of the creation of this world of temporal things. But when this [present] fashion [of things] passes away, and man has been renewed, and flourishes in an incorruptible state, so as to preclude the possibility of becoming old, [then] there shall be the new heaven and the new earth, in which the new man shall remain [continually], always holding fresh converse with God. And since (or, that) these things shall ever continue without end, Isaiah declares, "For as the new heavens and the new earth which I do make, continue in my sight, saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain."³³⁸ And as the presbyters say, Then those who are deemed worthy of an abode in heaven shall go there, others shall enjoy the delights of paradise, and others shall possess the splendour of the city; for everywhere the Saviour³³⁹ shall be seen according as they who see Him shall be worthy.