

His flesh did not see corruption (Acts 2:31)

Patristic conceptions of Jesus' body and their foundations
in the New Testament

Conference at the University of Siegen, 19-21 March, 2025

In the sixth century an intense debate arose over the nature of the body of Jesus Christ: was it incorruptible (*aphthartos*) in the fullest sense already prior to the resurrection? This dispute, conducted initially between Julian of Halicarnassus and Severus of Antioch, took place in various Christian communities and lasted for centuries, particularly in the Syriac and Armenian-speaking East. It is therefore more than a marginal episode in the history of dogma.

In the voluminous literature occasioned by this controversy, problems surfaced that had accompanied the christological debates since the writing of the Gospels. However, the heated discussion about the *aphtharsia* of the body of Jesus is only one of many examples that New Testament texts did not just state problems for the christologies of the early church; rather, they acted as a sort of engine to propel them forward.

In the debate about the corporeality of Jesus, two passages from the Acts of the Apostles are central, for both Peter and Paul give speeches in which they interpret Psalm 16:10 as referring to the crucified and buried Christ: his flesh did not see corruption (Acts 2:25-31 and 13:34-37). Despite their prominence in Acts, these passages have been largely neglected by modern scholarly discourse on the christology of Luke-Acts. In the early church, to the contrary, these and other biblical texts increasingly gained importance in the dispute over the *aphtharsia* of the body of Christ, as well as in the theological reflection and debates preceding it.

This discrepancy between modern and late antique perceptions of the biblical text can also be observed in those passages in the Gospels that describe Jesus as exhausted, asleep, hungry and thirsty, weeping or trembling; or that portray him in grief, fear of death, or other strong emotions; or that describe bodily activities such as eating and drinking. In the various christological conceptualizations of the early church, such texts proved to be as fruitful as they were confounding. How did early Christians interpretively align the biblical testimonies of the corporeality of Jesus with passages that attribute a supernatural quality to his body?

The conference is associated with the DFG project WE 4122/4-1 (*From the incarnation of the Logos to the incorruptibility of his body: the interpretation of John in the aphthartodocetist controversy and its prehistory*). It will invite New Testament exegesis into conversation with patristic scholarship, especially concerning the Christian East. Individual case studies will inquire how exegesis of certain New Testament passages informed such debates and propelled them forward. At the same time, the conference will address how the christological debates

of the early church can shed light on exegetical problems that are already implicitly present in the New Testament statements about the man Jesus Christ and his body. The patristic debates thus also have exegetical significance, especially concerning Luke–Acts, the Gospel of John, and the Pauline corpus (including the Letter to the Hebrews), where those passages occur that became centrally relevant in the later history of interpretation and reception.

Please contact the organizers for further information about the conference.

Ute Possekkel, Ph.D.
Lecturer on Syriac
Harvard Divinity School
upossekkel@verizon.net

Dr. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann
Professor of New Testament
University of Siegen
weidemann@kaththeo.uni-siegen.de

Funded by

DFG Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation