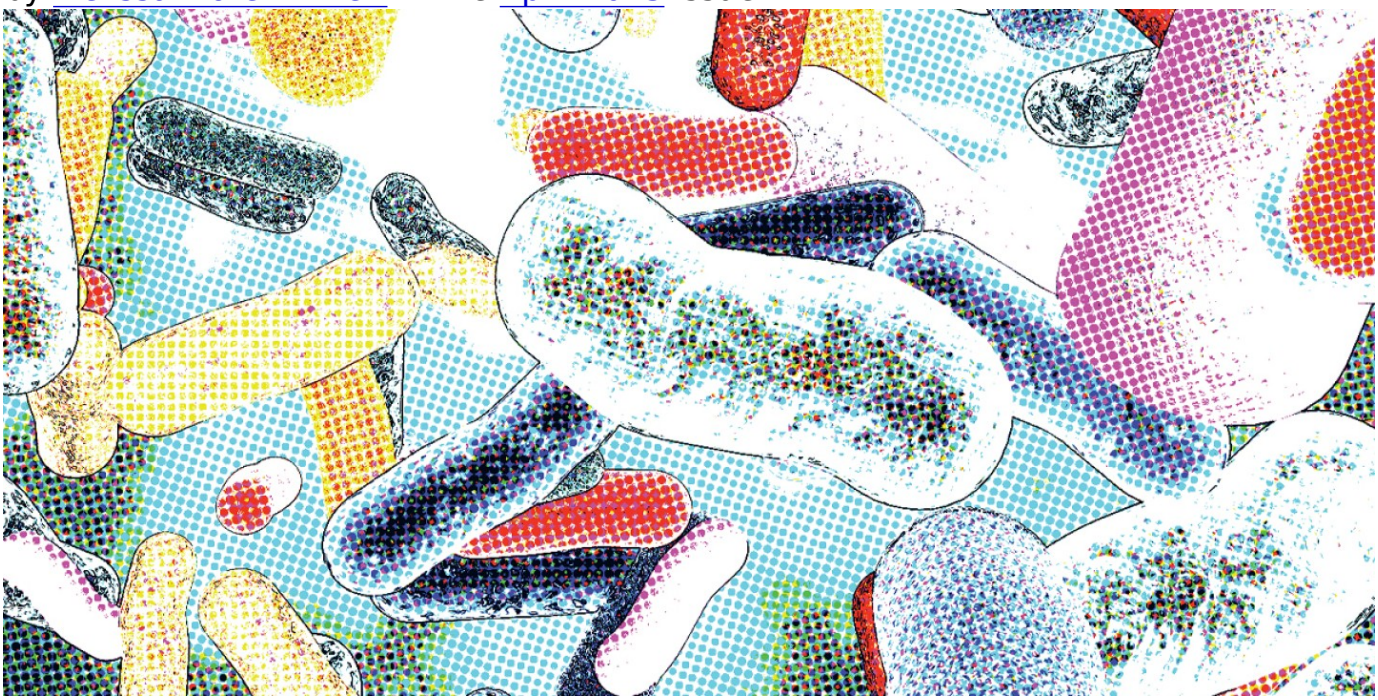
Jesus’ resurrected gut biome

In John’s Gospel we meet a body of flesh and blood. And microbes.

by Melissa Florer-Bixler in the April 2023 issue



(Source image: image_jungle / iStock / Getty)

Jesus takes a bite of fish. Inside his mouth, teeth grind the fleshy lump. He swallows. Stomach acid in Jesus’ gut breaks down the chaw before it passes into his digestive tract. In his bowels, 100 trillion microbes begin their work. More than a thousand species in Jesus’ intestines transfigure the protein into amino acids that feed his brain, muscles, and immune system.

This is an unremarkable process—after all, digestion is what bodies do—were it not for this: the teeth that chew, the stomach that digests, the microbes that turn through Jesus’ intestines are the resurrected body of Christ.

In John’s Gospel, there on the shore with the fishermen, we meet a body of flesh and blood. God and person: without confusion, without change, without mixture, without separation. For the risen Christ to remain human, he has to return as the full

community of creatures that constitute his body.

Every person is an assemblage, an island of creatures. We are a heart and lungs, muscle and blood. We are also microbes, intertwined with billions of bacterial communities. Across my head and in my gut live bean-shaped and rodlike bacteria, a million of which would fit on the head of a pin. I was not born with most of them, but within a second of my birth, these bacteria became inextricably linked to me. They are me.

Like all of us, Jesus is a holobiont: a creaturely community of microbiome, virome, and other organisms. One of the first gifts from Jesus' mother is baptism into her vaginal bacteria. Mary gives Jesus the starter kit of a microbiome. From birth, Jesus is bound up in creaturely mutualism. He cannot exist without other creatures.

Are the other creatures that make up Jesus also resurrected on the third day? It would seem so. Jesus is made up of organisms that live and die for and within the community of his body. His resurrection is the first fruit of our creaturely intimacies (1 Cor 15:20).

In the theophany icons that recall Jesus' baptism, icon writers depict Jesus standing above—not in—the waters of the Jordan. I utilize such an icon to teach catechumens that baptism is not only the renewal of their bodies but the redemption of creation. As Jesus is baptized in the water, so all creation is baptized in Christ.

We may be tempted to make of this image a confirmation of God's domination or manipulation of water, earth, and skies. Yet water is found not just below Jesus' feet but also in him. His body is a river of its own, over half of his biome a tide of water. And the water of God's body is bound to the rivers of the Jordan, just as all of our bodies are bound to the health of rivers and watersheds.

I have puzzled through what all this means for the body of Jesus in the tomb for three days. The women who come to anoint his corpse anticipate the smell that emits from Jesus' bacteria engaging in a final act of mutualism. Jesus' necrobiome should break down his body's fat and tissue stores, returning Jesus to earth, to soil.

But he is not there. He is risen! His friends find him on a beach. "Come and have breakfast," he bids them. He breaks bread and stretches out his hands. He does the same with a fish, steaming and crisp from the fire. Until this moment, as Norman Wirzba reminds us, they cannot recognize the man before them.

Perhaps in this moment we understand that we too cannot reckon with the one who is fully human and also fully beyond death. We, like the disciples, cannot grasp a creation that is mutual and also free from competition and corruption. Jesus is raised from death but still inexorably intertwined with fish and bacteria, bread and amino acids, yet not subject to decay. How can this be?

Douglas Farrow says that in the resurrection “creation is liberated from every form of alienation and from everything contrary to the life of communion.” In the mutuality of creation without death—in overcoming death—Jesus has become remote from a part of our human experience. For the rest of my life, my body will continue to participate in both mutualism and competition. I will get sick. My healthy cells and organs will break down. Eventually I will die.

Resurrection replaces estrangement with community: a communion of God and creation, of Jesus and his friends, of creatures. It’s no surprise, then, that Jesus reenacts communion, a shared meal, there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It takes an act of mutualism, a movement of his body in communion with other creatures, to offer the announcement of his redemption, writes theologian Hannah Malcolm. His body—a redeemed community of bacteria and water, flesh and synapses—evokes both otherness and recognition.

Like Malcolm, Aminah Al-Attas Bradford, and Sutton Amthor, I’ve been pondering the resurrected bacteria of Jesus’ microbiome while also recognizing that this might make people squeamish, even embarrassed. Many theologians have tried to get around the fleshy business of Jesus’ gut, to silently leave behind the flesh for the spirit. But if, with Irenaeus, we believe that the “whole nature” of humanity will receive salvation, then every bit of life is redeemed. We shouldn’t be surprised to discover that the order of our lives in this marred, dying creation is upended in redemption. Isaiah prophesied lambs who lie with wolves and lions who eat straw.

I love Irenaeus for this promise of a redeemed creation of feasts and labor. Malcolm points us to Irenaeus’s promise of “a land of wheat, and wine, and fruits, of animals and sheep.” With our holy bodies we will eat and drink, create and work. We will live on as redeemed fraternities of creatures. Not one part of creation will be lost, not one part of us.

This article was edited on May 24, 2023, to more thoroughly and clearly cite the author's sources. We regret the earlier oversight.