Beginning with the teachings of Jesus, Christianity has promised the resurrection of each believer in his or her own body.

In contrast to fearful Greek notions of the dead having a marginal existence in a shadowy Hades, the Christian afterlife is desirable. It is a joyful reanimation in a working body, with a mind and consciousness. This happens in a desirable place called heaven and in the company of one’s resurrected friends and relatives.

In Christian belief, this attractive scenario can be accessed only by true believers. Evil people who lack salvation will receive punishment instead.

Pop culture plays with different notions of what it means for a body to be resurrected. Ghosts, for example, have an ethereal resurrection linking personality to an incorporeal body. Ideas about ghosts go back centuries but, rather than being discarded as old fashioned, each generation reshapes them. Think of the ghosts in the popular Harry Potter series, ghosts’ roles in horror films and TV series featuring ghost hunters.

More recently, zombies have become a key entertainment. A zombie is a body reanimated in its decayed form -- usually without much brain or personality. While storytellers give zombies different characteristics, their motivating force seems to be hunger -- for “brains.”

Of course, ghosts and zombies are this-worldly, but they provide models for thinking about heavenly resurrection. And, these models are useful, for their repulsive character helps us identify what would not be desirable as heavenly resurrection.

By contrast, since 2000, biologists have provided new insights about the human body that could impact our understanding of heavenly resurrection. When the human genome was sequenced in 2003, scientists learned that there were approximately 22,000 different genes in the human body.

Continued study of genes in humans revealed that we carry around another 3.3 million genes. These belong not to our bodies, but to the microbes that have inhabited us from birth. From our mouths to our large intestines, from our skin to our sexual organs, colonies of microorganisms live in us. This is termed the human biome.

We can thus conceive of the human body as a superorganism. It is not a single entity, but a collection of multiple organisms that work together for the well-being of the whole.

We also can think of the human body as a walking environment, carrying around many habitats to which different living creatures have become adapted.

Although our understanding of the role of microbes in the human body is in its infancy, it is clear that some microbes simply live in the body without having any significant impact on it. But, other microbes have a mutualistic relationship with their bodily surroundings.

The microbiome of the human large intestine contains an entire community of microbes. Some of these break down food into nutrients our bodies can absorb. Others synthesize from food vitamins B and K, which the body needs and cannot produce on its own.

Microbes in our mouths help the body recognize dangerous microbes and even produce anti-inflammatory chemicals to fight microbes that can cause disease.

The presence or absence of particular microbes in our gut impacts our central nervous system, causing or relieving anxiety, depression or obsessive-compulsive disorders. They even affect brain functions, including memory.

In other words, from digestion and nutrition to disease prevention to mental function, the human microbiome is essential to the body’s proper function.

So, here is the question: When God resurrects each human body, will its microbiome be resurrected with it?

If not, if the body alone is resurrected, then how will the body be able to function? A body will need to eat to have the energy to move about, to think and function, to enjoy the company of relatives and the heavenly experience. Without the microbiome, the body will not be able to digest food to provide energy.

Some people might object that the resurrected body will not eat. But, if this is the case, then it will not function as a real body. It won’t be a bodily resurrection; a real body cannot function without food.

If one’s microbiome is resurrected with his or her body, then not only humans will undergo resurrection, but mindless, thoughtless creatures also will receive the blessing of resurrection. They are not believers, not true Christians, not capable of hearing the gospel let alone receiving it. So, God would bring beings incapable of salvation into a realm reserved for the saved.

Or, perhaps, the newly resurrected individuals acquire a microbiome in the same way newborn babies acquire theirs, namely, from the environment around them. That would mean that microbes -- millions of different microbes -- live in heaven to support its resurrected human inhabitants.

What is the answer? No one knows. We cannot see beyond the veil. But, the implications that humans are not a single entity, but host to necessary creatures that help our bodies function, have interesting implications for Christian belief.

Note: Thanks to the following: NIH (National Institutes of Health) Human Microbiome Project (hmpdacc.org); Learn.Genetics (learn.genetics.utah.edu); “Human microbiota” (Wikipedia); and Luke K. Ursell et al., “Defining the Human Microbiome” (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3426293/).

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