

Theology Matters: Resurrection

Session 1: Life after Death in the Old Testament

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Introduction

- What does the word 'resurrection' mean?

- What is going to happen to you when you die?

Life after Death in the Old Testament

Many people see this life as little more than a prologue to true life – the afterlife. They're preoccupied with escaping this world, and getting to heaven, where they hope to spend eternity, most likely in a disembodied existence and if they're lucky, with their own cloud, halo and state of the art harp!

The Old Testament doesn't have much to say on the subject of the afterlife. We can easily misread the first verse of the Bible if we're not careful: **'In the Beginning God created the heavens and the earth'**. We can imagine God creating the earth where we dwell now and heaven where we go after we die. But as we look through the Torah (or even the rest of the first chapter) we can see that heaven very often simply means the sky. So it might be better to render the opening verse in the Bible, 'In the beginning God created the sky and the earth.'

That is the world that the writers of the Old Testament are concerned with: the physical world, not a spiritual world.

The Mainstream View

1. Love, Life and Land

a. Plan A: Adam and Eve

- Genesis 1:26-30

b. Plan A fails: Land is corrupted, Life is forfeit, and relationships (Love) are ruined

- Genesis 3:16-19

c. Plan B: Noah and Children

- Genesis 9:1

d. Plan B fails: People are dispersed but no unity

- Genesis 11

e. Plan C – Abram and Descendants

- Genesis 15:5-7

f. Plan C continues: Joseph to Moses and beyond

- Genesis 50:22-24
- Exodus 1:7
- Exodus 6:7-8

According to the mainstream view, the purpose of life is to continue your lineage, be God's representatives and dominate a small plot of land. That is what the majority of the Old Testament is concerned with – people's lives, not what comes *after* their lives.

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The Minority Views

There are occasions in the Old Testament when you get the hints of a life beyond this life. These views do not unfold chronologically. Instead, at different times and in different places three minority views emerge:

2. Sleep

a. Next to nothingness:

- Ps 6:5
- Ps 115:17
- Gen 3:19
- Ps 30:9
- Eccles 9:5-6
- Eccles 9:10

b. Disturbing the dead

- Isaiah 14:9-11
- 1 Samuel 28:11-19

Key Verse:

What will it look like?

When will it happen?

3. Hope for the Soul.

a. Delivered from Sheoul.

- Ps 16: 8-11
- Job 33:28-30

b. Glory after suffering

- Ps 73:18-20
- Ps 73: 23-27
- Ps 49:14

Key Verse:

What will it look like?

When will it happen?

4. Wake up to Resurrection

- Dan 12:2-3.
- Hosea 13:14.
- Isaiah 26:19
- Isaiah 53:9-10.
- Hosea 6:1-2.
- Ezekiel 37:1-14.

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Key Verse:

What will it look like?

When will it happen?

Intertestamental Development

At the end of the OT era, we have the mainstream view: (i) You lived for land, to have children and to represent God on Earth, and the minority views of (ii) soulish sleep, (iii) hope for the soul (iv) resurrection.

And yet when we open the New Testament, a future physical resurrection is by far the mainstream view. Jesus openly refers to it and the Sadducees are a minority group who do not believe in it. So what happened between the end of the Old Testament and the start of Matthew?

1. LXX Translation

The Greeks happened. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and then translated into Greek (called the Septuagint). Even though Greek thinking would have been heavily influenced by Philosophers such as Plato who believed in immortality (not resurrection) the translators have rendered the Septuagint with a resurrection bent.

For example:

- Hosea 13:14: **'Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death?'** becomes **'I shall rescue them from the hands of Hades and I shall redeem them from the death.'**
- Job 14:14 **'If a man dies, shall he live again?'** in LXX becomes **'If a man dies, he shall live.'**

2. Pharisees and Sadducees

The various interpretations of these accounts, and the rest of scripture, led to the formation of various theological groups. The Pharisees and Sadducees are probably the most famous, and were active participants in Jewish life at the time of Jesus.

a. Pharisees

- The Pharisees believed in the resurrection, but didn't always agree on who would be raised and when.
- They still used the death penalty, but in such a way as to preserve bones for the resurrection.

b. Sadducees

- The Sadducees were the ruling elite and included the high priestly family. Traditionally they are believed to have come about in the 2nd Century BC.
- One Rabbi wrote, **'You should not be like slaves serving the master for the sake of receiving a gift, but like slaves serving the master without any prospect of receiving a gift.'** (m.'Abot 1.3). As resurrection was seen to be a gift from God, the Sadducees rejected it.
- They read only the Torah, and therefore still held the OT mainstream view that there was no resurrection.

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- The Pharisees and Sadducees argued about the appearance of resurrection in the Torah. See for example, Deuteronomy 32:39.
- By AD70 the argument died out as the Sadducees were killed by the Romans during the invasion of Jerusalem.

3. The Apocrypha

After the end of the OT people continued to write, and collected their writings in what is now known as the Apocrypha.

a. 2 Maccabees – Life for the Martyrs

Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the temple after the Jews rose up against their Seleucid (Syrian) oppressors who had outlawed Judaism and defiled the temple. Led by Judas Maccabeus the Jews stood up against great persecution and many were martyred. Like Daniel 12, in a time of overwhelming difficulty resurrection is offered as a solution to some.

In 2 Maccabees 7 we read of seven brothers tortured for not eating defiled food. Their final words are very revealing:

'You accursed wretch [said the second brother,] you dismiss us present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life because we have died for his laws.'
(v9)

'[The third brother] put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, and said nobly, "I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again."' (v10-11)

'When he was near death, [the fourth brother] said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!" (v14)

'[The mother] encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit she... said to them, "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws."' (v21-23)

'[The mother spoke secretly to the youngest son:] "I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers."' (v27-29)

'[The youngest son said,] "You... will not escape the hands of God. For we are suffering because of our own sins. And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants... For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of everflowing life, under God's covenant; but you. By the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy to our nation and by trials and

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plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation.” (v31-38)

Here we see a whole family not only hoping for a future awakening after death, but indeed forfeiting their lives for the certainty of resurrection.

In 2 Maccabees 14, a Jewish elder called Razi, finding himself surrounded, decided to fall on his own sword:

‘But in the heat of the struggle he did not hit exactly, and the crowd was now rushing in through the doors. He courageously ran up on the wall, and bravely threw himself down into the crowd. But as they drew back, a space opened and he fell in the middle of the empty space. Still alive and aflame with anger, he rose, and though his blood gushed forth and his wounds were severe he ran through the crowd; and standing upon a steep rock, with his blood now completely drained from him, he tore out his entrails, took them in both hands and hurled them at the crowd, calling upon the Lord of life and spirit to give them back to him again.’ (v43-46)

In 2 Maccabees 12, Judas Maccabeus makes a sin offering on behalf of the dead, who have been discovered to have kept idolatrous tokens under their robes. He does this so that they too would be raised from the dead.

‘For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.’ (v44-46)

b. Life at the end of time

A second development in the Apocrypha links resurrection to the end times:

‘As for this fragrant tree, not a single human being has the authority to touch it until the great judgement, when he shall take vengeance on all and conclude everything forever. This is for the righteous and the pious. And the elect will be presented with its fruit for life. He will plant it in the direction of the northeast, upon the holy place, in the direction of the house of the Lord, the Eternal King. Then they shall be glad and rejoice in gladness, and they shall enter into the holy place; its fragrance shall penetrate their bones, long life they will love on earth, such as you fathers lived in their days.’ (1 Enoch 25:4-6)

This chapter doesn’t explicitly talk about resurrection, but it anticipates some kind of vindication at the end, when everything is concluded. Chapter 62 is more overt:

‘The righteous and the elect ones shall be saved on that day; and from thenceforth they shall never see the faces of the sinners and the oppressors. The Lord of the Spirits will abide over them; they shall eat and rest and rise with that Son of Man forever and ever. The righteous and elect ones shall rise from the earth and shall cease being of downcast face. They shall wear the garments of glory...’ (1 Enoch 62:13-15)

This chapter adds a surprising element, the rising with the Son of Man. Perhaps there was an emerging view that a Messianic figure might be the one that would usher in the resurrection.

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Conclusion

By the time Jesus was born, many Jews, but by no means all, believed in resurrection. Resurrection didn't simply mean some kind of vague life after death but it meant a physical, bodily coming back to life after an interim period of soulish consciousness. Resurrection is therefore 'life after life after death'. It meant hope for the future and the fulfilment of the promises of Israel – they may not see all the land taken and the Jewish rule established in their lifetime, but when that day came, they would be resurrected to enjoy the new age.

No one knew quite how resurrection would happen, and no one really connected the Messiah's resurrection with our own until the mutation of Christianity in the first century...