

Resurrection: The Old Testament View  
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When it comes to the afterlife, the texts of the Old Testament canon, the authoritative books chosen by rabbis at the Council of Jamnia in 90 A.D. for inclusion in the Bible, remain largely silent as the grave. (Sorry, couldn't resist.) This makes sense when we consider that the Israelites were a people focused on creation and covenant. What mattered was how one lives in the here and now. Do we celebrate and enjoy creation and treat it and other people justly? Do we stay in a faithful covenant relationship with God, in humility and obedience, avoiding idolatry and injustice?

With a few exceptions that we'll review later, the consequences for human behavior weren't stored up for an afterlife of eternal punishment or reward. They occur during a person's lifetime through the dominant law of retributive justice, where good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad. (See Job and Ecclesiastes for a "minority report" that challenges the idea of retributive justice.) We see this most plainly in the prophets, where the entire nation, having betrayed the covenant, suffers conquest and exile.

Where an afterlife is mentioned, it's almost always a reference to Sheol, called by a handful of other names, like the Pit. (Psalm 16:10) Most of those references are fleeting. None provide much in the way of detail. But we can glean enough to know that Sheol was essentially the Hebrew version of the Gentile Hades, a shadowy realm where the residents exist in a dreamlike state, neither fully awake nor fully asleep.

In most of the references, it's neither pleasant nor unpleasant, though some references, particularly the Psalms, demonstrate a sense of dread about being cast down to Sheol, even though there was nowhere else to go. So for some, nothingness seems to have been preferable to the dreary boredom of Sheol, or perhaps they were part of a small but growing minority that began to perceive the possibility of an afterlife that could be better.

When it comes to an afterlife that involved bodily resurrection, N. T. Wright puts it better than the rest, "Nobody doubts that the Old Testament speaks of the resurrection of the dead, but nobody can agree on what it means, where the idea came from, or how it relates to the other things the scriptures say about the dead." [The Resurrection of the Son of God, p. 108]

It helps to start with what ancient Israelites believed about death. Often this is posed as an either/or question. Did they view death as a natural event that occurred to mortal creatures or as punishment for sin, specifically the sin of disobedience chronicled in Genesis 3? The bulk of the Old Testament answers, "Both." Human mortality was caused by sin.

Eating from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil did not, as Adam and Eve feared, kill them, at least not directly. But their punishment for doing so was banishment from the garden of Eden, which meant that they no longer had access to the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-24), essentially a death sentence in slow motion for them and their descendants. So death was the punishment meted out to human beings who denied their created nature by renouncing their

relationship with God by attempting to become God. If death is the punishment, who needs a hell, or a heaven to reward the relatively godly?

As mentioned, there were a few exceptions. For instance, in the genealogy Genesis 5, every entry ends, “and he died,” except for verse 24, which claims “Enoch walked with God: then he was no more, because God took him.” Likewise, Elijah ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot in II Kings 2. There’s no elaboration about why they received special treatment, while other great figures, like the patriarchs Abraham and Joseph, did not. Scripture gives us no idea where they went, or what it was like there.

Then there are small handful of texts that could be read as references to the resurrection, though there’s fierce scholarly debate on whether these passages are meant to be interpreted as literal individual physical resurrection from the dead or as metaphorical statement of national restoration and renewal, the return from exile promised by God through the prophets. It’s possible that some text could be read as both/and instead of either/or. The principal passages are:

### **Daniel 12:2-3**

**2** Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. **3** Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

### **Job 33:15-30**

**15** In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on mortals, while they slumber on their beds, **16** then he opens their ears, and terrifies them with warnings, **17** that he may turn them aside from their deeds, and keep them from pride, **18** to spare their souls from the Pit, their lives from traversing the River. **19** They are also chastened with pain upon their beds, and with continual strife in their bones, **20** so that their lives loathe bread, and their appetites dainty food. **21** Their flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen; and their bones, once invisible, now stick out. **22** Their souls draw near the Pit, and their lives to those who bring death. **23** Then, if there should be for one of them an angel, a mediator, one of a thousand, one who declares a person upright, **24** and he is gracious to that person, and says, "Deliver him from going down into the Pit; I have found a ransom; **25** let his flesh become fresh with youth; let him return to the days of his youthful vigor'; **26** then he prays to God, and is accepted by him, he comes into his presence with joy, and God repays him for his righteousness. **27** That person sings to others and says, "I sinned, and perverted what was right, and it was not paid back to me. **28** He has redeemed my soul from going down to the Pit, and my life shall see the light.' **29** "God indeed does all these things, twice, three times, with mortals, **30** to bring back their souls from the Pit, so that they may see the light of life.

### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

**1** The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. **2** He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. **3** He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." **4** Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. **5** Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. **6** I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." **7** So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. **8** I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. **9** Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." **10** I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. **11** Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'" **12** Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. **13** And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. **14** I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

### **Isaiah 26:16:19**

**16** O Lord, in distress they sought you, they poured out a prayer when your chastening was on them. **17** Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, O Lord; **18** we were with child, we writhed, but we gave birth only to wind. We have won no victories on earth, and no one is born to inhabit the world. **19** Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

### **Hosea 6:1-2 & 13:14**

**1** "Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. **2** After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

**14** Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.

Whatever we make of these, Wright emphasizes, “The texts we shall consider, however we understand their detailed nuances, are not speaking about a new *construal* of life after death, but about something that will happen *after* whatever ‘life after death’ may involve. Resurrection means bodily life *after* ‘life after death,’ or, if you prefer, bodily life after the *state* of ‘death.’ Resurrection is what did *not* happen to Enoch or Elijah. According to the texts, it is what *will* happen to people who are at present dead, not what *has already* happened to them.” [pp 108-109, italics in the original]

In other words, even we interpret all of the passages in question as referring the resurrection of the dead, there’s a missing piece. What happens between bodily death and bodily resurrection? Based on the rest of the Old Testament texts, presumably Sheol, with a few exceptions, like Enoch and Elijah. More focused reflection about what happens to someone immediately after death starts to emerge during the intertestamental period, from a start date of somewhere between 400 – 250BC until the time of Christ. In those texts, rejected as authoritative by the Council of Jamnia in 90AD, and later by the Church, we begin to see more speculation about the afterlife and physical resurrection from the dead, and those texts reflect a strand of religious thought that had become very influential for some by the time Jesus arrived.