

Resurrection
The Second Temple Period
29 April 2020

Sacred writings created during the Second Temple period, roughly 200 B.C. to 200 A.D., show abundant reflection on the afterlife, relative to Old Testament texts, and a highly increased interest and belief in bodily resurrection from the dead. To quote N. T. Wright, “by the time of Jesus . . . most Jews either believed in some form of resurrection or at least knew that it was standard teaching. Comparatively few remained skeptical.” [The Resurrection of the Son of God, p. 129]

Of those who remained skeptical, or rather hostile to the idea of resurrection, the Jewish sect of the Sadducees largely stands alone. These are strongly held views, as revealed in Acts 23:7-9, during the trial of Paul. “When he [Paul] said this a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge all three.) Then a great clamor arose, and certain scribes of the Pharisees’ group stood up and contended. ‘We find nothing wrong with this man [Paul]. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?’” This issue drove a wedge between two Jewish major factions, neither one of which had any use for Paul. That’s how powerful it was.

The Sadducees resisted resurrection on both theological and practical grounds. As descendants of the high priest Zadok, from which their name derives, they viewed the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, as more authoritative than the rest, the prophetic and wisdom writings. As we saw last week, what little there is in the Old Testament about an afterlife, much less resurrection, is contained in the latter categories. Since there’s hardly a hint of resurrection in the Torah, the Sadducees rejected it.

From a practical standpoint, resurrection was dangerous. “The real problem was that resurrection was from the beginning a revolutionary doctrine. For Daniel 12, resurrection belief went with dogged resistance and martyrdom . . . It was not simply that the thought of such beliefs might lead the nation into a clash with Rome . . . It was that they realized that such beliefs threatened their own position.” [pp.137 - 138, *ibid*] Their position was one of great influence and affluence. They collaborated with the Romans to help keep the peace. Revolutionaries don’t like collaborators.

But what were the texts in question, and why did a more pronounced belief in bodily resurrection emerge over this span of four centuries? Many scholars perceive a shift from prophetic to apocalyptic thought. Prophecy involved the here and now. It looked toward how God would intervene in human history to vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked. Apocalyptic thought was more other worldly, inclined to focus on a “Last Day” when all accounts would be settled and the Kingdom of God would finally reign on Earth.

The motive behind the shift, these scholars would argue, comes from “prophet fatigue.” For several centuries, people had waited for the prophetic promises to come true, for Israel to be

liberated from foreign control and restored to its most prosperous state, roughly corresponding to the reigns of King David and King Solomon. The longer people waited, the more their hope waned, so they started to interpret prophetic writing differently. God wasn't going to intervene in the *course* of human history. Instead, God was going to *end* human history in one decisive, cataclysmic event. People under the influence of apocalyptic thought had (and still have) a great sense of urgency, because they believe the long-awaited day will come very soon.

Most of the texts of the Second Temple period, also called the intertestamental period, because so few of the writings from this time made it into the canons of either the Old or New Testament, are highly apocalyptic in their outlook. Apocalyptic looked for radical restoration of the righteous, and what could be more radical than being raised from death to life and receiving one's body – or rather a transformed version of it – back?

However, the record isn't consistent, even among different volumes of the same book. Take I Maccabees, for instance. It's included as part of the apocrypha, a sort of JV bible used by some Christian denominations, including ours. The first book of Maccabees holds out no hope for a future life, while II Maccabees includes the possibility of bodily resurrection for the righteous, particularly martyrs. (See 7:9, 11, 14, 21-23, 28f) IV Maccabees inclines toward the idea of an immortal soul. Obviously, this an ongoing "conversation" that lasted a very long time.

Other books, known as pseudepigrapha, or "false writings," are more uniform in their resurrection expectation. The collection of pseudepigraphal writings are vast, much greater in volume than the Old Testament, so only a few citations here, which can be looked up online if you'd like to read them in full: I Enoch 51:1f, and 62:13-15; and II Baruch, "the only clear anticipation of what we do find in the New Testament: the sense that resurrection will involve some kind of life-enhancing transformation." [Wright, p. 162]

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, believed to be the library of a community of Essenes who lived at nearby Qumran, we find in 4Q385 fragment 2:2-9 a direct linkage between Ezekiel 37 and bodily resurrection. Up until this point, that passage had always been interpreted as referring to return from Babylonian exile and the restoration of the entire nation. By the time 4Q385 was written, sometime in the 1st Century B.C. or early 1st Century A.D., the vision story had an entirely new interpretation.

What we need to remember is that at the time of Jesus these so-called false writings were not believed to be false by everyone. No authoritative canon would be formed for the Old Testament until 90 A.D. So such writings were often respected and used to come to theological conclusions. Going back to the apocrypha, the Wisdom of Solomon serves as an excellent example of this. Composed sometime between the mid-1st Century B.C. and the mid-1st Century A.D., Wisdom reflects on resurrection in a way so similar to Paul that there's speculation that he had read it, and was intentionally or unintentionally responding to it in his own writings. (See Romans 1:18-32 with Wisdom 13:1-19 and 14:8-31; Romans 2:4 with Wisdom 12:10; Romans 9:14-23 with Wisdom 2:12-22).

Of course, it wasn't just the writings of this period that contributed so much to resurrection being a believable possibility. It was also the *translations* of that era. Greek was the *lingua franca* of

Empire, starting from Alexander the Great in the 4th Century B.C. So in the mid-3rd Century B.C., in Egypt, Hebrew scripture – including many that wound up canonical and many that did not – was translated into Greek. Languages form the way we think, especially in terms of abstract concepts, and it's quite clear that in the Greek text, or the Septuagint, LXX for short, “the notion of resurrection becomes, it seems, much clearer, so that many passages which might have been at most ambiguous become clear, and some which seemed to have nothing to do with resurrection might suddenly give a hint, or more than a hint, in that direction.” [Wright, p.147]

So by the time of Jesus, there was a growing consensus about the resurrection. It wasn't a new idea, but one that had been slowly developing over a period of centuries in Hebrew thought. It was seen as a solution to a problem, as a reward for the righteous. It gave people hope when the future for national restoration looked increasingly bleak, as generation after generation went by and the prophecies of freedom, prosperity, and peace went unfulfilled. Why then was the resurrection of Jesus so widely disbelieved and the claims of his resurrection seen as so offensive by so many?

While the idea of resurrection permeated Jewish thought during Jesus' time, there were numerous takes on exactly what it was and who received it and when and why. To quote again from Wright, “Though by the time of Jesus it appears that most Jews believed in resurrection, there was no clarity as to what precisely it would look like or what sort of continuity or discontinuity there would be with present existence. This, as we shall see, is one of the striking contrasts between mainstream Jewish beliefs and the virtually uniform early Christian hope.” In addition, “There are no traditions about a Messiah being raised to life: most Jews of this time period hoped for resurrection, many Jews of this period hoped for a Messiah, but nobody put those two hopes together until the early Christians did so.” [p. 205]

So early Christians saw the resurrection from a very specific vantage point, unique among all the others, and how they interpreted resurrection in general and Jesus' resurrection in particular will be the subject that occupies us for the remainder of this course, starting with the writings of Paul next week.