

Resurrection
15 April 2020

Course Overview

1. When Jesus was alive, what views did people have of the afterlife? Was the idea of resurrection a popular one, in Judaism and/or among the "pagan" Gentiles, or did people mostly reject it? Did people think they had immortal souls, and if so, what did they think happened to souls after death?
2. What does the Old Testament say about the afterlife, and specifically about resurrection?
3. The "newest" book of the Old Testament, Daniel, was written somewhere between 250 and 400 years before Jesus. In that "in-between" period of time, say from 250 B.C. to Jesus, what did religious writings say about death, the afterlife, and resurrection? Were attitudes changing, and if so, how and why?

These three questions help us establish context. To what extent were people prepared to accept a claim that someone had been resurrected from the dead, and how did this facilitate or obstruct people's belief in Jesus' resurrection?

4. Paul wrote the earliest books of the New Testament, in the first few decades after Jesus' resurrection. How does Paul view the resurrection?
5. Each of the 4 gospel writers tell the resurrection story differently? What can we learn from each one independently, and what more can we learn by comparing and contrasting them?
6. What do the other New Testament texts - neither Paul's letters nor gospels- say about resurrection and what it means?
7. As the current texts of the New Testament "grew" into authoritative scripture, how did subsequent generations over the next century (the 2nd Century AD) interpret them? What were the variations of belief about the resurrection? Why did some of these beliefs come to be labeled heresies, and what can we learn from them?

These four questions ask how Jesus' followers responded to the event of the resurrection and how it reshaped their perspectives and their lives - and ours!

8. What do WE believe about the resurrection? Was it a real historical event, or is it a metaphor? When will the resurrection happen, and to whom? What happens to our souls after death? Do we go straight to heaven to await resurrection, or does something else happen?
9. What are YOUR questions about the resurrection?

The Ancient World

A fully comprehensive review of ancient, including pre-historic, beliefs about the afterlife deserves its own lengthy course. Here, we will try to gain a sense of the ideas that were current leading up to and during the time of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Again, this requires a measure of focus that limits us to the several centuries prior to Jesus and the geographical area of which he was a part, the eastern Mediterranean region of the Greco-Roman world. This may seem inadequate, especially considering how Palestine joined the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, making it a very cosmopolitan place where a host of perspectives from around the known world were shared. However, the representative sample taken for our discussion largely represents the known beliefs of a broader span, in both time and space.

The principal finding is that resurrection as an "orthodox" Christian reality involving the physical resurrection from the dead of an individual body was not something accepted by any major religious or philosophical systems of the ancient world. Instead, it emerged as a "mutation" of Jewish thought in relation to a specific set of events and to a specific person, Jesus. In fact, for much of the ancient world, this would have been considered grotesque and highly undesirable, not to mention impossible. There were myths, with accompanying rituals, about the death and rebirth of gods, particularly in Egypt, but the balance of evidence shows that these rites and myths were not interpreted as a literal event by those who participated in them.

At the personal level, we can look to archaeology, which reveals a persistent theme in burial sites. "I wasn't, I was, I am not, I don't care:" this epitaph was so well known that it was often reduced on tombstones to its initial letters," not unlike RIP, *requiem in pace*, or rest in peace, "in Latin as well as Greek. The only real immortality, many decided, was fame." [N.T. Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God, p. 34]

In terms of burial rites, and post-funeral activities, they don't appear to have been particularly religious, in terms of involving the gods. At most, coins might be placed on the eyes of the deceased as payment for the boatman to ferry their souls across the River Styx. In Egypt, royalty and occasionally other prominent figures, like important priests, would be buried with extensive grave goods. Indeed, the burial of things that someone might need in a subsequent life are found extensively even in pre-historic burial sites. However, bestowing such things indicated no sense of resurrection potential and give only the vaguest idea what people expected to happen after they died.

In general, there were three primary beliefs: 1. nothing happened; death was it; 2. there was a shadowy underground realm, known as Hades or Sheol (more on the latter, Hebraic concept next week), where one remained alive in a disembodied state that was boring at best and horrific at worst; this was perhaps the most prominent belief about the afterlife; and 3. an immortal soul, if deemed deserving, might become a celestial body, like a star, with undeserving souls returning to earth in different forms, known as the transmigration or reincarnation of souls, a continuous cycle that only ended when a soul had "developed" enough "virtue" to be elevated into a union with the cosmos. The latter, well known from Hinduism, was not restricted to it.

