

“And if the Anointed has not been raised
then our proclamation is vain,
and your faith vain;”
(1 COR 15:14)

The Development of Afterlife in the Ancient World **THE RESURRECTION: PART 2**

Resurrection is tightly connected with teachings of the afterlife. Carlos Blanco, in his book *Why Resurrection? An Introduction to the Belief in the Afterlife in Judaism and Christianity* (page ix), describes the power and function of this doctrine:

“The belief in the afterlife in Judaism and Christianity emerges as a response to a real challenge: the problem of evil. [Theologian Stendahl] wrote, ‘in its original setting the resurrection is an answer to the question of Judaism in the time of Jesus: the question of theodicy. Will justice win and the promises of God to the faithful be fulfilled?’

“The fundamental question is that of **theodicy**: What is the meaning of life and history in the midst of a world in which evil, injustice, and ultimately death persist and seem to achieve a constant triumph over the wish for life and endurance?”

Life after Death in Mesopotamia and Egypt

“The orthodox vision of the netherworld and existence there can be expressed in one word: *gloom*.” Texts dating back 5,500 years give us insight into how the ancient world viewed death (see the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Descent of Ishtar*). “Such texts stress just one point: even if death cannot be avoided, it should be delayed at all costs.”

Bodies were buried with food and protective amulets. Caretakers were assigned per family to provide for the dead and invoke their names, and necromancy was a well-developed art.

שְׁאוֹל — The Hebrew Land of the Dead

She'ol is the name for the afterlife destination of all who die in early Hebrew religion and culture. Much (but not all) of the Hebrew Bible assumes this understanding. Themes include:

- The subterranean underworld and lethal, engulfing waters
- Gates of Death (where the god *Mot* reigns?) — Ps 9
- Iron bars, cruel irons: a prison — Ps 107
- The Pit/the Grave

The translators of the King James Bible chose either “grave” (ex: Ps 6:5) or “hell” (ex: Ps 9:17) in English, either of which are misleading, and many other versions follow this pattern.

There are indications that those in *She'ol* were still connected to living relatives, and it's likely there were rituals for the dead including providing food at graves. Both body and spirit went to this place (the disembodied soul was a Greek concept, not Hebrew). The quality of this afterlife was grim all around, but the reverence of descendents helped!

In *She'ol* the dead are eternally absent from God, whether righteous or unrighteous. One could seem to enter *She'ol* before death if all hope was gone, from which pleas were given for rescue by God.

Numbers 16:31-34

Scarcely had [Moses] finished speaking all these words when the Ground (*h'adamah*) under them burst asunder, and the Earth (*h'eretz*) opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah's people and all their possessions. They went down alive into *She'ol*, with all that belonged to them; the Earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation.

All Israel around them fled at their shrieks, for they said, “The Earth might swallow us!”

II Samuel 22:5-6

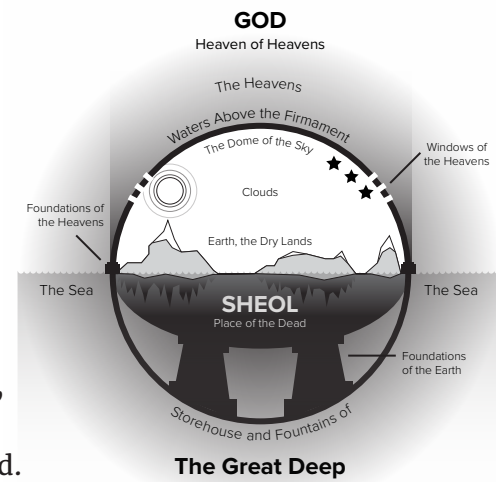
For the breakers of Death (*Mot*) encompassed me,
The torrents of *Belial* terrified me;
The snares of *She'ol* encircled me,
The coils of Death engulfed me.

Job 7:7-10

“Consider that my life is but wind;
I shall never see happiness again.
The eye that gazes on me will not see me;
Your eye will seek me, but I shall be gone.
As a cloud fades away,
So whoever goes down to *She'ol* does not come up;
He returns no more to his home;
His place does not know him.”

Jonah 2:3-7

In my trouble I called to YHWH,
And He answered me;
From the belly of *She'ol* I cried out,
And You heard my voice.
You cast me into the Depths,
Into the heart of the sea,
The floods engulfed me;
All Your breakers and billows
Swept over me.
I thought I was driven away
Out of Your sight:
Would I ever gaze again
Upon Your holy Temple?
The Waters closed in over me,
The Deep engulfed me.
Weeds twined around my head.
I sank to the base of the mountains;
The bars of the Earth closed upon me forever.



Other Themes of Death in Hebrew Culture

Although this picture of *She'ol* is widespread in the Hebrew Bible, there are indications that others saw the grave as the simple end of existence. The reward of the righteous in this view was long lives, three generations of descendants, a legacy of blessing, and a peaceful death with no fear of what came next. A short life, a lack of descendants, or a violent death were considered the reward of the unrighteous.

Abraham, Moses, and Job give good examples of this in the positive sense, and David's deathbed directive to "take care" of his war criminal general Joab is an example of the reverse:

"So act in accordance with your wisdom, and see that his white hair does not go down to *She'ol* in peace." (1 KINGS 2:6)

It is striking that in this view we have very little information about anything after death, in contrast to the imagery of *She'ol*, but it is clear the contrast between Heaven and Hell is not part of the Hebrew Bible worldview.

It could be that *She'ol* was a state of existence more than a "location," in which a temporal sadness (Jacob mourning in GENESIS 37:35) could extend into the afterlife if not resolved.

Necromancy

Attempts at communication with the dead is strictly forbidden in the Law, though we also have the story of Saul seeking out a medium and summoning the recently dead prophet Samuel who is described as a "god" (*Elohim*) and worshiped by Saul (I Samuel 28)!

Resurrection and Bodily Ascension

Accounts of dead people raised back to life are associated with the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Enoch and Elijah ascend to the heavens to dwell with God rather than dying at all.

The Emergence of the Resurrection

Near the end of the Bible's writings, about 200 years before Jesus, a major event occurs which shifts the majority of Jewish theology toward a new idea: the bodily resurrection of the dead!

History

Most of the books of the Bible were compiled and canonized around the time of the Babylonian Exile, but history continued.

- Babylon relocated the elites of Judah in 586 BCE.
- The Persian Empire took over in 540 BCE and eventually allowed the exiles to return and rebuild Jerusalem.
- Around 330 BCE Alexander the Great took over the Persian Empire for the Greeks, including the now-province of Judea.
- When Alexander died in 323 BCE, the Egyptian family of the Ptolemies was given rule over Judea.
- In 198 BCE the competing Seleucids took over Judea and began forcing cultural Hellenization on their provinces.
- The Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes pushed this program to the limit: In 167 BCE he placed a statue of Zeus in the Temple itself, required Jews to sacrifice to the pagan gods, and he made circumcision illegal.
- The Maccabees (also known as Hasmoneans) lead a Jewish revolt and in 25 years evict the Greeks from Judea! It is ruled as a nation-state until the Romans show up 80 years later.

Theodicy—how do we explain suffering and evil?

Up until this period, the suffering Israel faced at the hands of empires was explained by either the priests or the prophets: the people were simply facing the consequences of abandoning proper worship or abandoning the poor and oppressed.

The Maccabean Martyrs

The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees give stories (ex: Hanukkah) about the circumstances around the revolt and Greek atrocities. One of the stories is pivotal in showing why the new theodicy of a resurrection of the dead arose.

In 2 Maccabees chapter 7, seven brothers and their mother are tortured to force them to eat pork:

The king fell into a rage, and gave orders to have pans and caldrons heated. These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, “The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song that bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, ‘And he will have compassion on his servants.’”

As each subsequent brother is tortured and dies they say:

2: “You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this 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.”

3: “I got these [hands] from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again.”

4: “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!”

And so on until the seventh and last son is promised rewards by Antiochus himself if he eats and the mother tells her son:

“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.”

The last son gives his answer to Antiochus:

“You have not yet escaped the judgment of the almighty, all-seeing God. For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God’s covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance.”

The king fell into a rage, and handled him worse than the others, being exasperated at his scorn. So he died in his integrity, putting his whole trust in the Lord. Last of all, the mother died, after her sons.

This story challenged the old theodicy. Now faithful Jews were suffering and dying because of their unquestionable integrity and fidelity before God! Surely justice had to come in a new way, so Jewish theologians began insisting that this life was not all there was: the martyrs would also participate in the kingdom to come because they would be bodily raised into new life.

The Theology of Daniel

The book of Daniel, unlike Maccabees, is part of the official Jewish and Christian canon. Even though it is set in the time of the Exile in the 500’s, it was actually written during the time of the Maccabees and reflected the new theology of resurrection of the dead which was emerging:

“At that time, your people will be rescued, all who are found inscribed in the book. Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence. And the knowledgeable will be radiant like the bright expanse of sky, and those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever.” (DANIEL 12:1B-3)

Resurrection in the Time of Christ

By the first century, this new theology of bodily resurrection had been accepted by many Jews now living under the Empire of Rome. In particular significance, the sect of the Pharisees argued in favor of resurrection against the traditionalist Saducees (as described in MARK 12:18; MATTHEW 22:23; ACTS 4:1-12). This is important because Jesus and his followers were closest to the Pharisee views, and because Rabbinic Judaism was founded by the Pharisees after the Temple was finally destroyed in 66 CE.

Resurrection meant:

- Even death could not stop God's justice.
- The true afterlife was an embodied presence in the kingdom.
- Resurrection was directly connected to the final resolution, as God stepped in to make all things right and establish the kingdom on earth.

Resources used

- *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* by Kevin Madigan and Jon D Levinson
- "Funerary Practices and Afterlife Expectations in Ancient Israel" by Stephen L. Cook (VTS professor)
- Blog series on the afterlife by Bart Ehrman
- *The Jewish Study Bible* translation/notes