

The Resurrection

AiF Level 2 - Unit 211



Week 1 – General Beliefs about Death in Ancient Times

Outcomes for this Unit

The following are the outcomes that we hope to achieve over the course of the next 6 weeks;

- An awareness of the different ideas on life after death in the 1st century world, both Jewish and non-Jewish
- Identification of the development of the idea of resurrection in the Old Testament
- Identification and understanding of some of the New Testament texts regarding resurrection
- An understanding of how important the doctrine of resurrection is to the day to day life of a Christian
- An understanding of some of the evidences that support a belief in a physical resurrection of Jesus

1/ Introduction - Why is this topic important?

The word 'resurrection' is used 11 times in Paul's writings of which 9 occur in 1 Cor. 15. The word 'raised' and its variations occur 45 times in Paul's writings.

It is abundantly clear that the NT's concern with the future life of the Christian is all about resurrection and not about what happens when a person dies. 59 times in 56 verses throughout the NT the word 'hope' appears. In the vast majority of these verses the 'hope' that is spoken of is the hope of the future resurrection.

- Acts 23:6
- Acts 24:15
- Col 1:4-5

The idea of resurrection is tightly intertwined with the Good News and with the doctrine of the Second Coming. The Second Coming and the Resurrection make up the second book end of the narrative of scripture.

"If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead." Tim Kellar

"I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Everyone was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world, and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible." Charles Colson

"The first fact in the history of Christendom is a number of people who say they have seen the Resurrection. If they had died without making anyone else believe this 'gospel' no gospels would ever have been written." C. S. Lewis

“The cross of Christ only triumphs in the breast of believers over the devil and the flesh, sin and sinners, when their eyes are directed to the power of His Resurrection.” John Calvin

“The cross was the moment when something happened as a result of which the world became a different place, inaugurating God’s future plan. The revolution began then and there; Jesus’s resurrection was the first sign that it was indeed under way.” N T Wright

What did ‘Resurrection’ mean to Ancient Non-Jewish Cultures?

In so far as the ancient non-Jewish world had a Bible, its Old Testament was Homer. And in so far as Homer has anything to say about resurrection, he is quite blunt: it doesn’t happen.¹

Here are a couple of statements indicating how Homer’s culture thought of life after death;

You must endure, and not be broken-hearted. Lamenting for your son will do no good at all. You will be dead yourself before you bring him back to life.

Once a man has died, and the dust has soaked up his blood, there is no resurrection.²

This basic tenet of human existence and experience is accepted as true throughout the ancient world; once people have gone by the road of death, they do not return.

The immediate conclusion is clear. Christianity was born into a world where its central claim was known to be false. Many believed that the dead were non-existent; outside Judaism, nobody believed in resurrection.³

Were there ideas about what happened to the dead that did not involve resurrection?

- The dead are shades or ghosts.
- The dead were in Hades, or whatever term was used, and their existence was sort of normal.

¹ N. T. Wright, [*The Resurrection of the Son of God*](#), Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 32.

² N. T. Wright, [*The Resurrection of the Son of God*](#), Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 32.

³ N. T. Wright, [*The Resurrection of the Son of God*](#), Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 35.

- When death happened the ‘soul’ went back to its appropriate place.
- For some, and especially for the rich and powerful and definitely for the Roman emperors, death was the doorway to becoming a god, or a star.

Through all of these ideas it is quite clear that resurrection was never an option. The body was the prison house of the soul and as such it was never desirable to go back into a body.

Death and Beyond in the Old Testament

In general terms the Old Testament shows a three-phase development of thoughts regarding the fate of the dead;

- absence of hope beyond death;
- hope for blissful life after death;
- hope for new bodily life *after* ‘life after death’.⁴

Many passages in the OT seem to echo Homer’s position in regard to Hades.

- Ps 6:5
- Ps 115:17
- Isa 38:10, 18
- Eccl 9:5, 10
- Isa 14:9-11

For the OT writers the question of the hope of the individual beyond death was not the focus of the story. Rather the story was focused on the hope for the nation of Israel beyond its exile and loss of Temple, land and king.

- Isa 61:1-3, 11
- Ps 72:1-4, 8, 12
- Ps 89:35-37

However, at some stage the belief in the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh and that Yahweh would not abandon his people began to play into the idea that even the grave could not separate Israel from her God.

- Ps 16:8-11 – note ‘keeping Yahweh before me’ is a statement of authority not geography
- Ps 73 – like the Roman and Greek ideas this psalm sees Yahweh as bringing final justice to the world. The word for

⁴ N. T. Wright, [*The Resurrection of the Son of God*](#), Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 86.

‘receive’ in v. 24 could be translated ‘take’; it is the same word as is used of God’s ‘taking’ of Enoch in Gen. 5:24.

Daniel 12:1-3 is the clearest reference to resurrection in the OT.

Second Temple Post Biblical Judaism

The Second Temple period is from the dedication of Zerubbabel’s Temple in 516 BC to AD 70 when Herod’s Temple was destroyed. Within this period, which is part of the cultural and theological period into which both Jesus and Paul are located, there was a variety of views regarding life after death within Judaism.

- No resurrection – the Sadducees.
- A disembodied blissful after life for the faithful

Resurrection for 1st Century Judaism

Several areas of evidence show that resurrection as an idea was alive and well in 1st century Judaism.

- The central prayers
- Translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek LXX did not water down the resurrection passages
- Non-biblical writing such as 2 Maccabees and Josephus

Conclusion

Nothing in the entire Jewish context warrants the suggestion that the discussion in 1 Corinthians 15 was about ‘resurrection *in heaven*’, or that the Jewish literature of the period ‘speaks both of a resurrection of the body and a resurrection of the spirit without the body’.⁵

But it remains the case that resurrection, in the world of second-Temple Judaism, was about the *restoration of Israel* on the one hand and *the newly embodied life of all YHWH’s people* on the other, with close connections between the two; and that it was thought of as the great event that YHWH would accomplish at the very end of ‘the present age’, the event which would constitute the ‘age to come’.⁶

⁵ N. T. Wright, [*The Resurrection of the Son of God*](#), Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 204.

⁶ N. T. Wright, [*The Resurrection of the Son of God*](#), Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 205.