

The Resurrection of the Dead in Biblical Tradition: A Sketch

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Introduction: The Resurrection of Christ and the Future Resurrection of the Dead

The belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead is a firm and undisputed element in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed,¹ drawn from the unanimous testimony of the New Testament scriptures. The death and resurrection of Christ are the two most fundamental soteriological events (cf. 1 Cor 15:3–4; Rom 4:25) in Christian salvation history. Although Christ's resurrection is seen as a unique and unparalleled event in the history of humankind, nevertheless, the New Testament connects it with the notion of a (more) general resurrection. One example is Paul's statement in his speech to Agrippa in Acts 26:23: "... the Messiah must suffer, and ... *by being the first to rise from the dead*, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles."² Other examples are the designation of Christ in the Colossian hymn as "the firstborn from the dead" (Col 1:18), and the detailed exposition of this matter in 1 Corinthians 15:20–23:

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹ For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²² for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

As a matter of fact, in his controversy with those in Corinth who reject the resurrection of the dead, Paul goes to the extreme of claiming that "if there is no resurrection of the dead, then [even] Christ has not been raised" (1 Cor 15:13).³ Hence, according to Paul, the so-far unprecedented event of Christ's resurrection from the dead is futile and merely an unfounded imagination if there is no general resurrection of the dead.⁴

¹ Standard English formulation of this element in the third article is, respectively, "I believe in ... the resurrection of the body" (Apostles' Creed) and "We look for the resurrection of the dead" (Nicene Creed).

² Quotations from the Bible follow the NRSV Anglicized Edition. I have italicized the phrase of special interest to us in the cited verse.

³ The imperative and absolute interconnection between the raising of Christ and the general resurrection of the dead is argued throughout the passage 1 Cor 15:12–19; see, as a repetition or continuation of v. 13, especially vv. 15–16: If there is no resurrection of the dead, "¹⁵ [w]e are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised."

⁴ Most likely those referred to in 1 Cor 15:12 as the ones saying there is no resurrection of the dead, hardly intended to dispute the third and fourth element of the christological confession quoted at the beginning of the chapter in 1 Cor 15:4b–5, that Christ "was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." Apparently, they had a notion of Christ's resurrection that did not correspond to and imply a general bodily resurrection. Probably, they were surprised or even shocked at how Paul fervently connected the raising

The Views of Sadducees and Pharisees

It is well known that there were varying opinions among Jews at the time of the New Testament regarding the belief in the resurrection of the dead. In the New Testament these differences are spelled out only rarely. One of these few instances is found in Acts 23:6–8, where Luke describes how Paul successfully appealed to the Pharisaic position on the resurrection of the dead when he was standing before the council in Jerusalem:

⁶ When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council. ‘Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.’ ⁷ When he said this, a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge all three.

The only story about a controversy between Jesus and the Sadducees recounted in the synoptic gospels is about the resurrection of the dead (Mark 12:18–27; Matt 22:23–32; Luke 20:27–38). In order to demonstrate the absurdity of the belief in the resurrection, the Sadducees present to Jesus a story about an extreme case of application of the levirate law in Deuteronomy 25:5–6. As a proponent of the resurrection of the dead, Jesus responds and refutes the stand of the Sadducees by appealing to another text in the Torah:

²⁶ And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? ²⁷ He is God not of the dead, but of the living.

(Mark 12:26–27)

God’s self-disclosure to Moses in Exodus 3:6, in which he identifies himself as the God of the fathers, might, at the first look, appear as a weak argument in favour of resurrection of the dead. However, Jesus draws from the scriptural testimony the fundamental theological recognition that God is the God of the living, and from this follows implicitly and with necessity that he will raise the dead.

Biblical Theology versus History of Religions Approach

One of the most conspicuous books in biblical theology published in recent years has taken its title exactly from Jesus’s saying in Mark 12:27: *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*. This monograph was written in closest cooperation by two professors at the University of Göttingen, Germany: the Old Testament scholar Hermann Spieckermann and his New Testament colleague Reinhard Feldmeier.⁵ Implicit in the title is the claim that God’s character of being God of the living is at the very heart of the Bible’s witness about him, as it is unfolded in biblical theology from the Torah, through the Prophets and the Writings, to the New Testament.

This conviction challenges the widely held *religionsgeschichtlich* position that the belief in the resurrection of the dead is an idea from Persian religion that only at a late stage found its way into some strands of early Judaism. According to this view the only clear evidence for such a belief in the Hebrew Bible is found in the apocalyptic text Daniel 12:2–3:

of Christ from the dead as a salvific event that has already taken place, with the future (bodily) resurrection of the believers.

⁵ Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *Der Gott der Lebendigen: Eine biblische Gotteslehre* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). The English translation appeared in the same year: Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011). For their treatment of Mark 12:18–27, see *God of the Living*, 520–25.

² Many of those who sleep in the dust of 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 for ever and ever.⁶

Another prominent proponent of biblical theology who has challenged the notion that the resurrection of the dead is merely a late idea in Judaism imported from outside is the German scholar Peter Stuhlmacher. In his inaugural lecture as a professor of the New Testament at the University of Tübingen in the spring of 1973 he spoke about “The confession of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead and biblical theology.”⁷ Taking the hope for resurrection of the dead in early Judaism not as a speculative imported idea but, on the contrary, as an ultimate expression of Israelite faith in God,⁸ Stuhlmacher traces the inherent traditional-historical links in the Bible that culminate in the belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Tradition History of the Resurrection of the Dead in the Old Testament and Early Judaism

It is Israel’s confession of old that YHWH has power over life and death that from an early stage prepares and paves the way for the belief in the resurrection of the dead. This confession has found a classic expression at the very heart and center of Hannah’s hymn of praise: “The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down the Sheol and raises up” (1 Sam 2:6).⁹

In the Book of Psalms we encounter statements of firm confidence in the power and will of God to care for those who trust in him in ways that transcend the limitations of this world. An impressive example is Psalm 73:23–26:

²³ Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. ²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterwards you will receive me with honour. ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.

Other examples are Psalms 16 and 22. It is definitely no coincidence that they are drawn upon in the New Testament as scriptural proof related to Jesus’ resurrection. In particular, the last

⁶ For a broad history of religion’s approach to the matter see the chapter “After Death: The Destiny of the Individual” in Heikki Räisänen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs: The Thought World of Early Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 114–33, with accompanying endnotes 349–54. Regarding Daniel 12 and the Persian link he writes: “In Daniel 12 the reference to resurrection life is ambiguous, but it would seem that it will be lived on this earth [...]. Surely this is where bodily resurrection conceptually (and, in its Iranian setting, originally) belongs, even though precisely the corporeal character of the resurrection mentioned in Daniel 12 is controversial” (118).

⁷ Published as “Das Bekenntnis zur Auferweckung Jesu von den Toten und die Biblische Theologie,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 70 (1973): 365–403. This article was reprinted in Peter Stuhlmacher, *Schriftauslegung auf dem Wege zur biblischen Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 128–66. In 2018, forty-five years after professor Stuhlmacher’s programmatic inaugural lecture in Tübingen on biblical theology, his *opus magnum*, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2 volumes, 1992/1999 (latest editions 2005 and 2012) will finally be published in English: Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, forthcoming 2018).

⁸ Stuhlmacher, 383: “[B]ei der Hoffnung auf die Auferweckung der Toten durch Gott (handelt es sich) nicht um eine spekulative religionsgeschichtliche Anleihe, sondern vielmehr um einen Spitzensatz der israelitischen Gottesglaubens.” Many of the biblical texts referred to and cited in the following exposition are mentioned by Stuhlmacher on pp. 383–86.

⁹ See the comments on Hannah’s psalm in 1 Samuel 2:1–10 in Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God of the Living*, 544–47. See also Deuteronomy 32:39: “See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand.”

verses in these psalms—Psalm 16:9–11¹⁰ and Psalm 22:28–32 (ET 22:27–31)¹¹ respectively—are formulated in such a way that they are open to a reception that points towards or even explicitly expresses belief in the resurrection of the dead.¹² Another example of firm confidence in God’s power and care, with a potential for being applied to belief in the resurrection of the dead, is found in Job 19:25–27:

²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; ²⁶ and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, ²⁷ whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

The prophet Ezekiel compares the restitution of the people of Israel with the bringing to life of dead bones filling up a whole valley in the conspicuous vision in Ezekiel 37:1–14. This act of bringing the dry bones back to life is proclaimed as a demonstration of God’s very character that is revealed and recognized in this way:

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.*¹³

The biblically significant tradition of God’s kingdom on Zion (e.g., Exod 15:17–18; Pss 48:2–3 [ET 48:1–2]; 99:1–2) is brought to its peak in the wonderful vision of the Lord’s banquet for all nations on Mount Zion in Isaiah 25:6–8:¹⁴

⁶ On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. ⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; ⁸ *he will swallow up death for ever.* Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.¹⁵

¹⁰ Psalm 16:9–11: “⁹ Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. ¹⁰ For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. ¹¹ You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.”

¹¹ Ps 22:30 (ET 22:29): “To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.”

¹² Ps 16:8–11 (LXX 15:8–11) is quoted in Peter’s speech at Pentecost in Acts 2:25–28 as David’s prophecy about the resurrection of the Messiah. The conspicuous ending of Psalm 22, which talks about how the rescue of the “I” in the Psalm, applied to Jesus (see the quotation of Ps 22:2 [ET 22:1] in Mark 15:34 and Matt 27:46), is made known to all nations and generations, past, present and future. Because of its structure and climactic ending Psalm 22 was drawn upon especially by the evangelists Mark and Matthew as a major tool for a biblical interpretation of Jesus’s passion and resurrection. See Jostein Ådna, “Der Psalter als Gebetbuch Jesu nach der Darstellung des Markus- und Matthäusevangeliums: Aspekte biblischer Theologie,” *Theologische Beiträge* 41 (2010): 384–400, esp. 395–400.

¹³ My italics. How God is recognized as “the God of the living” by bringing the dead back to life is repeated in vv. 12–13, where the vision of the dry bones in the valley is transferred to the graves where the people are buried: “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 That “this mountain” (vv. 6, 7) refers to Mount Zion and the Lord’s reign there as king is explicitly stated in Is 24:23: “Then the moon will be abashed, and the sun ashamed; for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory.”

¹⁵ Hartmut Gese, “Death in the Old Testament,” in *Essays on Biblical Theology*, trans. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 34–59, distinguishes three stages of the Old Testament in Relation to Death: 1. Deliverance from Death (41–46), 2. Eternal Life (46–53), 3. Resurrection (55–58). Among the biblical texts discussed in the section “Eternal Life” are Ps 73 and Job 19:25–27, and in the section “Resurrection” Ps 22, Ezek 37:1–14 and Isa 25:6–8.

The confidence that God's righteousness will materialize in his victory over death finds strong and moving expressions in the texts about the martyrs of the Syrian persecution in the second century BC (see, *inter alia*, 2 Macc 7:1–23¹⁶ and 4 Macc) as well as in the passages about the suffering righteous ones in the early Jewish wisdom writing, Wisdom of Solomon 2–3.¹⁷

In the opinion of Peter Stuhlmacher, on the background of the biblical tradition history, exemplified in the preceding "review" of Old Testament and early Jewish texts, the belief in the resurrection of the dead appears as the ontologically deepest expression of confidence in the Lord's power and righteousness.¹⁸ Actually, this strand of biblical tradition culminates in the second benediction of the *Shemoneh 'Esreh*, originating in the first century AD:

Thou art mighty, humbling the proud; strong, and judging the violent; thou livest for ever and raisest the dead; thou blowest the wind and bringest down the dew; thou providest for the living and makest the dead alive; in an instant thou causest our salvation to spring forth. *Blessed art thou, Lord, who makest the dead alive.*¹⁹

In his exposition about Abraham as the ancestor of the believers in Romans 4, Paul describes "the God in whom [Abraham] believed" as the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (v. 17). At this point there is harmonious continuity between what Paul had believed and confessed as a devout Pharisee and his present Christian position. However, new in the apostle's exposition is the application of this confession to the resurrection of Jesus: We "believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (v. 24).

¹⁶ ¹⁹ And when he [i.e., the second of seven brothers] was at his last breath, he said: '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.' ... ¹⁴ When he [the fourth brother] was near death, he said, '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!' ... ²³ [the mother of the seven brothers speaking:] Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws."

¹⁷ See esp. Wis 3:1–8: "¹ But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. ² In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, ³ and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. ⁴ For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. ⁵ Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; ⁶ like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt-offering he accepted them. ⁷ In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble. ⁸ They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them for ever."

¹⁸ See Stuhlmacher, 385: "Die Auferweckungshoffnung wird also zum ontologisch tiefsten Ausdruck des Zutrauens zu Jahwes Macht und Gerechtigkeit." See also Stuhlmacher, 386–87: "Man kann und darf die Entwicklung des jüdischen Auferstehungsglaubens als einen Weg der Aufweitung des Jahweglaubens verstehen. Auf diesem Weg wird der Jahweglaube nicht etwa mit Hilfe von Anleihen bei der parsistischen Mythologie synkretistisch depraviert. [...] Im Auferweckungsglauben Israels wird vielmehr vom Vertrauen auf Jahwes allumfassende Gerechtigkeit her ein echter theologischer Denk- und Sprachgewinn erzielt, auf dem dann die christliche Theologie fußt und weiterbaut."

¹⁹ This version of the second benediction belongs to the Palestinian recension of the *Shemoneh 'Esreh* and is presented in Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, A New English Version, revised and edited by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar and Matthew Black. Volume II (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), 460, as the text version presumably coming closest to the wording of the Prayer around AD 70–100 (italics in Schürer). As "[t]he chief prayer of Judaism," that "every Israelite, including women, slaves and children is required to recite [...] three times a day," (Schürer, 455–56), the *Shemoneh 'Esreh* is strong evidence for the belief in the resurrection of the dead as a quintessential element of Jewish faith. The more expanded Babylonian recension of the second benediction reads: "Lord, thou art almighty for ever, who makest the dead alive. Thou art mighty to help, thou who sustainest the living out of grace, makest the dead alive out of great mercy, supportest those who fall, healest the sick, freest the captive, and keepest thy word faithfully to them who sleep in the dust. And who is like thee, Lord of mighty deeds, and who is comparable to thee, King, who makest dead and alive and causest help to spring forth. And thou art faithful to make the dead alive. *Blessed art thou, Lord, who makest the dead alive*" (Schürer, 456, italics original).

Observing how the belief in God as the one who makes the dead alive (cf. *Shemoneh 'Esreh*, benediction 2) is inextricably interconnected with the confession that he has raised Jesus from the dead in Romans 4, we have come full circle back to 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul argues the imperative interconnection between Jesus's resurrection from the dead as a fulfilled salvific event, spoken of in past tenses, and the (general) resurrection of the dead to happen in the future.²⁰

Conclusion: The Belief in the Resurrection of the Dead is an Inherent Element of Biblical Theology

Although it has not been possible in this short sketch to undertake any detailed exegetical analyses of the pertinent biblical texts or to interact with the innumerable scholarly contributions to the topic, a case is made for the view that Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead did not originate in foreign, extra-biblical influences, but is deeply rooted in the biblical tradition itself. There is an inextricable, inherent link between Israel's experience of God through the ages, testified in the different layers of biblical texts, and the explicit belief in the resurrection of the dead, expressed in the second benediction of the *Shemoneh 'Esreh* and shared by Jesus and the early Christians. What comes to the fore in the first century AD, runs like a scarlet thread through the preceding biblical tradition, finally reaches its culmination in the belief in the resurrection of the dead.

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²⁰ Feldmeier and Spickermann have put their exposition of Paul (referring to 1 Cor 5, Rom 4 and other texts) under the heading "The deus iustificans as deus vivificans" (528–33), thus, encapsulating nicely the connection between God as the one "who justifies the ungodly" (Rom 4:5) and "who gives life to the dead" (Rom 4:17). Rightly they point out full correspondence between Paul and Jesus in this regard: "The fact that Paul and (the Markan) Jesus respond to the question of the resurrection by pointing to God as the condition for the possibility of eternal life, and do so with remarkable agreement in terms of content, merits specific emphasis. For both, the ground of hope is the God who is, first, the Creator of life and, second—as the God of Abraham and the Father of Jesus Christ—the God who binds himself to his people. The God attested in Scripture and experienced in the present as Creator and Redeemer will demonstrate himself to his people as the 'God of the living' (Mark 12:27), as the 'God who brings the dead to life' (Rom 4:17)" (532–33).