Chapter 2

Resurrection of the Dead: Exploring Our Earliest Evidence Today

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Scholars now have more information than ever before about the origins and development of one of the most shocking claims in the history of religions: God supernaturally raises dead bodies from the grave and restores them to life again. At least two factors have contributed to our recent increase in knowledge on this important topic. First, increased study of the Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha over the last thirty years has gradually broadened our understanding of what writings like 2 Maccabees, 1 Enoch, the Psalms of Solomon, and other writings can teach us about ancient resurrection hope. Second, exciting new documents mentioning the resurrection have also been dramatically revealed among the Dead Sea Scrolls and only fully published within the last decade. Furthermore, epigraphy and archaeology have also broadened our understandings of ancient burial practices and the various epitaphs...
with which Jews living in Hellenistic and Roman times inscribed the graves of the deceased.³

The promise of academic study in these fields is an unprecedented knowledge of early Jewish resurrection hope, prior to the origins of the Jesus movement and Christianity. This knowledge gives us greater sensitivity and meaning for appreciating the early Christian proclamation that God had raised the Messiah from the dead and would soon awaken all the dead to new life at the culmination of history. Understanding our earliest evidence for the resurrection hope also allows us a much broader range of vision into a belief that currently remains shared among the three great world faiths in the West. Throughout this book, we return to our earliest evidence for ancient belief in the resurrection and explore what the resurrection hope originally meant to those who held steadfastly to it, amid the tumultuous historical crises of Hellenistic and Roman times. The present chapter provides an introductory survey of some of our most interesting evidence for early beliefs about the resurrection and concludes with some reflections on how these materials help us better appreciate the resurrection theology of the apostle Paul and his successors.

Definitions and Clarifications

Before discussing our earliest evidence for the resurrection, a few qualifications and caveats are necessary. As a brief survey of popular literature on “life after death” will reveal, ideas about what happens to us after we die can range far and wide.⁴ This was so in ancient times, just as it is today. In the present study, however, we are concerned only with ancient beliefs about resurrection of the dead. For this reason, we must exclude a number of related concerns that might otherwise distract us from our true goal.

First, the term “resurrection” as used in this survey will not refer to “dying and rising deities,” like Adonis or Osiris,
well known from a number of mythological systems and made forever popular in Sir James George Frazer’s classic *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion.* Such mythological traditions have undoubtedly influenced the history and theology of Early Christianity. Our earliest traditions about the resurrection, however, are concerned with the deaths of real human beings, not deities.

Second, the term “resurrection” implies more than simply belief in immortality of the soul or life in paradise. These ways of describing the afterlife, abundantly common in early Judaism and Christianity, may accompany resurrection hope. To qualify as a resurrection, however, something must happen to the lifeless body of one who has died.

Finally, in order to appreciate our earliest expressions of resurrection hope, we must not expect that these beliefs always conform to a systematic and complete vision of theology. The sayings of the Jewish poet Pseudo-Phocylides, for example, contain references to resurrection, immortality, and divinization, without a full explanation of how these all fit together. Our earliest evidence for the resurrection hope is often fragmentary, incomplete, occasionally inconsistent. Nevertheless, our evidence displays the fervor and dynamism of an emerging hope that has not yet fossilized into more static systems of theology.

Such conservative definitions will keep our feet on the ground; otherwise, we might float aimlessly into forbidden realms of the afterlife and never return to the current topic. The taxonomy proposed by James H. Charlesworth in the current volume (ch. 1) helps us appreciate with greater precision how the resurrection hope was distinctive from other available visions of the afterlife in ancient times.

*Our Earliest Biblical Evidence?*

Scholars today remain divided as to our earliest biblical evidence for resurrection of the dead. If there is a consensus
on this question, it is that Dan 12:1–3, composed sometime during the Maccabean Revolt (167 — 164 BCE), provides our earliest definitive literary evidence for resurrection in the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible). Others, however, have suggested that certain passages that antedate Daniel already preserve evidence for belief in the resurrection.

One intriguing passage originates from a section of the book of Isaiah often called the “Isaianic Apocalypse,” chapters 24–27. Although its precise date remains unknown, most proposals situate its origins before the composition of Daniel. At least two passages of this work have been cited as evidence of the resurrection hope:

Your dead shall live, their [or “my”] corpses shall rise.
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a dew of lights,
And the earth shall bring forth the shades. (26:19)

Elsewhere in these chapters we read that God “will swallow up death forever” (25:8) — a passage that the apostle Paul understood in terms of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:54). The highly poetic and mythological language of these chapters, however, raises questions about whether or not their author is really describing a resurrection of the dead here. We may simply be reading an exultant piece of poetic literature, which hails the future glory of the people of Israel.

Another pre-Danielic text that has often been cited as a resurrection prophecy is Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37). This prophetic vision graphically describes an army of human bodies being reconstituted, bone by bone, and sinew by sinew; it was widely regarded in antiquity as a portrayal of the future resurrection of the dead. At least one Dead Sea Scroll was of this opinion, as we shall see. Even the perennially opposed houses of Hillel and Shammai could agree that this was a resurrection prophecy (Gen. Rab. 14.5; Lev. Rab. 14.9), as did the Lives of the Prophets (3.11–12), a biographical work of the late first century CE. Tertullian provides an excellent example of similar readings from an
early Christian apologist \( (\text{Res.} \ 29–30) \). Ezekiel’s point in this remarkable chapter, however, is not that there will be a future resurrection of the dead — but rather, that God will restore the exiles to political nationhood in their own land. They will pass, not literally from death to life, but from the national extinction of the exile to a glorious political restoration. Both \( \text{Isa} \ 24–27 \) and \( \text{Ezek} \ 37 \), thus, resemble Charlesworth’s type 1, rather than 15 (see ch. 1).

We are, therefore, more judicious to turn to \( \text{Dan} \ 12:1–3 \) as our earliest definitive literary evidence for the resurrection hope in the Bible. As James Crenshaw suggests in his own contribution to this volume (ch. 3), these texts from Isaiah and Ezekiel clearly illustrate the Hebrew Scriptures’ claim that Yahweh possesses supreme power over life and death, including the life and death of the political nation of Israel. We have also indicated that future generations of ancient readers would often look back to these texts as resurrection prophecies. When searching the Scriptures for our earliest definitive evidence for belief in a literal resurrection of the dead, however, we are on surer ground when we turn to the book of Daniel.

Daniel

The concluding chapters of the book of Daniel (Dan 7–12) recount the sage’s apocalyptic dream visions about the rise and fall of the great world empires. These visions were probably composed during the violent political and religious upheavals of the Maccabean Revolt (167–164 BCE), when Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his supporters within Judaism attempted to Hellenize Jewish life with unprecedented aggression. In chapters 11 and 12, Daniel reports what an angelic messenger discloses to him about the future (10:9–11:1). After a period of cosmic unrest inspired by the notorious Greek king Antiochus (11:21–45), this evil enemy of the Jewish people will finally come to his end; and Michael,
the archangelic prince, will arise and spare all the righteous whose names are found written in the heavenly book (12:1). At this point the prophecy of a future resurrection emerges:

And many of those who sleep in the land of dust shall awaken:
Some to everlasting life,
and others to everlasting reproach and derision.
But those who instruct in wisdom shall shine
like the shining of the firmament.
And those who turn the multitudes to righteousness,
like the stars forever and ever. (Dan 12:2–3)

This brief passage is by no means a treatise on the resurrection. Nevertheless, its basic assumptions clearly imply that dead bodies sleeping in the dust of the earth shall be awakened in the future by divine power.

Who will be raised in this passage? It may surprise us to find that a partial, not a universal, resurrection seems to be envisioned. “Many” but not all who sleep shall awaken. This partial resurrection addresses, specifically, those who have fallen in the recent tumults of the Maccabean crisis. Two groups are directly mentioned as those who will be raised to “everlasting life”: first, “those who instruct in wisdom”; and second, “those who turn many to righteousness.” The two groups are the same people who have recently fallen while trying to resist the rule of Antiochus and his supporters, as an earlier prophecy describes (11:31–35). These wise teachers probably represent the same groups of conservative sages and scribes who resisted Antiochus’s Hellenizing program in Judea and who shaped the book of Daniel itself. For the author of Daniel, God would not allow the enemies of these righteous sages to have the final word over their lives; they would, instead, awaken from the dust into resurrection life.

To what shall the dead be raised? An almost formulaic statement declares the divided fates of those who awaken: some to everlasting life, others to everlasting reproach. The formulaic nature of this expression implies that it declares
in abbreviated form a belief that had already enjoyed an extended prehistory in the author’s historical context. The author of Daniel, therefore, did not invent the resurrection hope. Perhaps, as Charlesworth suggests in the current volume, the author of 1 En. 22–27 (c. 200 BCE) may already have believed in some form of resurrection prior to Daniel; yet it should be recognized that Daniel is far clearer on this matter than its Enochic predecessor. For the righteous, Daniel envisions the future life as a resurrection into everlasting life; but for the wicked, the resurrection will lead to everlasting “reproach and derision.” It is likely that this last expression stands for some unnamed punishment or retribution beyond the grave. By including the fate of the wicked, the author reveals his concern that justice be secured for both the just and the unjust in the world to come.

What shall the resurrected existence be like? Our author does not provide a treatise on the resurrection body. Nevertheless, a few details of the apocalypticist’s visionary imagery may suggest that he viewed the resurrected existence as a transformation of the deceased body. The righteous will “shine forth” like the heavenly bodies of the firmament in an existence that has been supernaturally transformed into a new state. Where will the resurrection life exist? Although a transformed existence upon the earth cannot be ruled out completely, our author probably understood the resurrection as an exaltation into the heavenly world, where the righteous would literally be immortalized “like the stars.” This “astral immortalization,” for the author of Daniel, may also have implied a transformation into angelic existence, since elsewhere in the book he understands angelic beings dwelling among the stars (8:10). Immortalization into astral beings was a popular belief in Greek and Roman philosophy and mythology, and Daniel may well have understood the resurrection of the dead in similar terms — as a supernatural transformation of the deceased body into a new and starlike existence in the heavenly world. Other early Jewish traditions that envision life after death as a translation into astral existence include
the Similitudes of Enoch (=1 En.) 58.2–3); the Pss. of Sol. 3.12; 2 Esd. 7.97; and 2 Baruch. Nowhere does Daniel suggest that the resurrection is simply a restoration of the same old, tired body one had before death.

2 Maccabees

A second group of writings that emerged from the Maccabean crisis is presented in the histories of 1, 2, and 4 Maccabees. These writings, though quite different from one another, commonly heroize the exploits of those who remained faithful to the laws during the rampages of Antiochus IV and his Hellenizing supporters within Judaism. Among these histories, 2 Maccabees goes out of its way to accentuate its pious adherence to the resurrection hope. Apocalyptic writers, like the author of Daniel, were thus not alone in their hope in the resurrection; historiographers, too, could appeal to this hope as they tried to make meaning of the tumultuous course of Jewish history. Although there have been multiple proposals for its date, reasonable consensus suggests that 2 Maccabees was composed before the Romans took Palestine in 63 BCE.

The author of this work tells us the story of seven brothers who were martyred by the Greeks during the Maccabean revolt, because of their refusal to eat foods prohibited by the Torah. Six times in 2 Maccabees 7, which Collins has called “the centerpiece” of the entire book, the martyrs openly proclaim their faith in a future resurrection of the righteous (7:9, 11, 14, 23, 29, 36). The brothers are all killed in a series of grotesque physical mutilations:

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 cut off his scalp and cut off his hands and feet…. The king [then] ordered them to take him to the fire, still alive, and to
fry him in a pan. The vapor from the pan spread far and wide.
(2 Macc 7:3–5 NRSV)

The graphic nature of these deaths is central to this author’s understanding of the resurrection. Before their deaths, the brothers make a number of stirring speeches, which accentuate their faith in a future resurrection. Repeatedly, the brothers claim that their own dismantled body parts will be reunited in a future resurrection:

When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, and said nobly, “I have received these things from heaven,… and from heaven I hope to receive them back again.” (7:10–11)

Later in the work, an older martyr named Razis prays, even as his entrails are falling out of his physical body, that God will restore them (!) to him again in the resurrection (14:37–46).

The result of such grotesque death scenes is the most graphically physical portrayal of the resurrection that we have in all of ancient literature. The author insists that the resurrection will literally be a supernatural reunification of the very members of the physical body lost in death. This apparently even includes the bodies of those who are vaporized, as one of our previous citations suggests. Nowhere does the author suggest that the resurrection will be a transformation of the old body into a new kind of physical existence. This distances his understanding of the resurrection from that of Daniel, who envisions the resurrection state as an exaltation to a new heavenly existence in the stars. One thus senses early on in the history of resurrection hope a difference of opinion as to whether the resurrection body will be a restoration of the same old body lost in death (e.g., like 2 Maccabees) or a radically new transformed existence (e.g., like Daniel). The dramatic death scenes of 2 Maccabees may seem a bit melodramatic to the contemporary reader, and at points its author’s vision of the resurrection almost reminds us of a Frankenstein movie. Yet the author does reveal at least two
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assumptions about the resurrection that warrant more serious theological consideration.

First, our author understands the resurrection as a recreation of the physical body and relies directly upon creation theology to support his understanding of the resurrection. In one of the speeches given by the mother of the seven martyrs, this becomes strikingly clear as she affirms the resurrection hope in terms that foreshadow the later Christian doctrine of creatio ex nihilo (creation out of nothing). She says to her sons:

“I know not how you came into being within my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who ordered the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the origin of humankind and devised the genesis 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….I beg you, my child, look at the heavens and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that previously existed….Accept death, so that in God’s mercy I may receive you back again along with your brothers.” (7.22–23, 28–29)

As Creator, God is fully capable of raising the dead, even under the most extreme circumstances of mutilation and dismemberment. The author’s creation faith is, in fact, so strong that he can even claim that God created the world out of no preexisting thing. Reconstituting the bodies of the martyrs is, thus, not beyond the divine power. Centuries after the composition of 2 Maccabees, later Christian apologists have repeatedly turned to creation in order to demonstrate how it is possible for God to raise the dead (e.g., Athenagoras of Athens, Res. 3). Such arguments were not exclusively used by Jewish and Christian thinkers: Centuries later, Muhammad would make a similar argument affirming the resurrection, based upon the precedent of God’s power in creation (Koran 22:5–10; 23:12–22).

Second, our author reveals that he is especially concerned with how the resurrection allows him to address the pressing question of theodicy: How can God be benevolent and
almighty, yet allow evil and suffering in the world? In a passing comment, the author reveals his concern with this urgent theological problem:

Now I urge those who read this book not to be depressed by such calamities, but to recognize that these punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people. . . . [God] never withdraws his mercy from us. Although he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people. Let what we have said serve as a reminder. (2 Macc. 6:12–17 NRSV)

The author relies upon his resurrection faith to help him come to terms with the pressing theological problem that the martyrdoms of the Maccabean age have left behind: Why do the righteous suffer, and what is God going to do about it? Thus, underlying the grotesque melodrama of 2 Maccabees, we find the hand of an ambitious theologian at work.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

In the last decade, two manuscripts from among the Dead Sea Scrolls have dramatically expanded our range of ancient texts mentioning the resurrection. The earlier of these manuscripts, On Resurrection, also known as the Messianic Apocalypse (4Q521), dates palaeographically to the early first century BCE; the later Pseudo-Ezekiel (4Q385–388, 391), dates from the middle of the same century. Since both manuscripts are copies of preexisting works, there is reason to set the context of their original composition in the latter half of the second century BCE. Thus, they provide us with important insights into how the resurrection continued to enjoy a broad variety of development in the generation just after the composition of Daniel.

On Resurrection is one portion of a previously unknown exhortation that is heavily fashioned by apocalyptic themes. This work presents the resurrection of the dead as one among many coincident signs that will inaugurate the future eschatological time of salvation and deliverance for Israel. In
chapter 1 of the present volume, Charlesworth has provided a translation of fragments 2 + 4. In this striking passage, God will “revive the dead” as one among a number of great reversals that will inaugurate the eschatological age. Later in the same writing, God is also described as the one who “revives the dead of his people” (frgs. 7 + 5). One can immediately sense the significance of this writing for understanding the Palestinian Jewish backgrounds of earliest Christianity: It is the only manuscript we have, dating prior to the origins of Christianity, that mentions both Messiah and resurrection within the same immediate context (cf. 1 En. 37–71).

Although this writing is fragmentary, it reveals a number of important assumptions about the resurrection. First, the resurrection will be part of a grand reversal that will turn the fortunes of the righteous from suffering into glory. This reversal will be so radical that even the righteous dead will be revived into newness of life. Second, the resurrection is envisioned as an act of divine justice for the righteous. In the future, the fruit of a good work will no longer be delayed, but even the righteous dead will receive the reward that is their due. God is, therefore, just, even to those who have not lived to see the full reward of their goodness. Third, this document presents the resurrection for the rhetorical purpose of consolation. It calls upon its readers to strengthen themselves in pursuing God, by remembering the future rewards that await the righteous. Finally, the author tells us only of a resurrection of the dead of God’s people. This may suggest that the author envisioned only a partial resurrection of the righteous, as opposed to a general resurrection of all the dead. Later, a fragmentary portion of this writing refers to “the heavens welcoming the righteous, and the presence of angels.” Thus, On Resurrection may well have envisioned the resurrection as heavenly existence, not unlike Daniel. Other references to “the valley of death” and “the bridge of the Abyss” also suggest that our author envisioned cosmic realms of punishment for the wicked, who seem to perish without a resurrection.
In the writing known as *Pseudo-Ezekiel*, we find a clever interpreter of Scripture at work. This document provides a rewritten version of many of Ezekiel’s visions, including the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37). We have already mentioned that for Ezekiel this vision was a prophecy of national restoration, not a portrayal of the resurrection of the dead. Our scroll’s author, however, does not care what we have to say about this point. He has his own interpretation of Ezek 37, one that makes it clear that he understands this chapter in terms of a future resurrection that will reward the righteous for their faithfulness. This is the earliest example we have of someone interpreting Ezekiel in this way. Reminiscent of *On Resurrection*, the author of *Pseudo-Ezekiel* was concerned with the reward of the righteous and the timing of their eschatological destiny (cf. 4Q521 frg. 3); and he has the biblical prophet Ezekiel inquire directly of God regarding these questions:

I have seen many in Israel who love your name and walk on the paths of righteousness. When will these things happen? And how will they be rewarded for their loyalty?

Such striking and aggressive questioning of the Deity is found nowhere in Ezekiel; yet like the author of the later apocalypse of 2 Esdras (=4 Ezra), our author burns to know the answers to these great questions.

He finds an answer in Ezek 37, which describes the physical reconstitution of human bodies out of scattered bones that lie in the grave.

And he said, “Son of man, prophesy over the bones and say, ‘May a bone connect with its bone and a joint with its joint.’” And so it happened. And he said a second time, “Prophesy, and sinews will grow on them and they will be covered with skin all over.” And so it happened. And again he said, “Prophesy over the four winds of the sky and the winds of the sky will blow upon them and they will live and a large crowd of men will rise and bless the LORD of Hosts who causes them to live…” And I said, “O Lord, when will these things be?” (4Q385 frg. 2)
If our author is reading Ezek 37 as a prophecy about the resurrection, then he likely understood the resurrection as a physical reconstitution of the same body that had been lost in death. Nowhere does this writing refer to a transformation of the deceased body into a new state of existence. It thus is possible that our author may have shared a graphically physical understanding of the resurrection comparable to that of 2 Maccabees. In answer to Ezekiel’s questions about the timing of the resurrection, God finally promises, “I will not disappoint you, Ezekiel; I will shorten the days and years of the world, that the children of Israel may inherit their land” (4Q385 frg. 3). Like On Resurrection and 2 Maccabees, our author is especially concerned with theodicy; and the resurrection is his answer to the question of how God will reward the faithful for their righteousness.

The Origins of Resurrection Hope

Pseudo-Ezekiel illustrates an important point about the origins of resurrection hope. A long-standing theory about the origins of the resurrection hope is that it emerged from early Zoroastrian influences in Iran, as did a number of other Jewish apocalyptic beliefs. This theory gained prominence during the great generation of the history of religions school (Religionsgeschichtliches Schule) in the early twentieth century, especially through the work of epoch-making scholars such as R. Reitzenstein. Today many scholars continue to affirm it in various ways. Although this theory of Persian origins cannot be completely explained away, our literary evidence for Zoroastrian religion is notoriously late, dating from the fifth to the ninth centuries CE. It thus is precarious to attribute the origins of the resurrection hope solely to Zoroastrian influences.

Another theory for understanding the origins of apocalypticism takes a different approach. P. D. Hanson has argued that the origins of apocalyptic beliefs emerged through
a radical intensification of beliefs already present in prophetic literature.\textsuperscript{27} This intensification involved a literalization of certain mythical and poetic notions found in the prophetic writings. The newly discovered \textit{Pseudo-Ezekiel} document lends strong support to Hanson’s theory. Here, we find a biblical interpreter of the prophet Ezekiel literalizing and intensifying the visionary imagery of Ezekiel into a literal belief in the supernatural resurrection of the dead.

Other texts we have surveyed may also provide independent corroboration of this tendency. Several expressions in the Hebrew of Daniel’s resurrection prophecy, for example, can be traced together only to Isa 26:19, as Nickelsburg has shown.\textsuperscript{28} This may indicate that Daniel’s own resurrection prophecy was shaped by a literalizing reading of this portion of Isaiah. The prophecies of \textit{On Resurrection} also bear the clear influence of Isa 61 and other texts. Writing in the first century CE, the apostle Paul would anchor his own theology of the future resurrection in the promises of Isa 25–26 and Hos 13:14 (in 1 Cor 15:54). One may also compare the manner in which the Synoptic Gospels defend the resurrection hope through a radicalized reading of Exod 3:6 (Matt 22:23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–40). \textit{Pseudo-Ezekiel}, together with these other writings, invites us to understand the origins of the resurrection hope as a later intensification of the promises and prophecies of earlier prophetic writings. Crenshaw’s contribution to the present volume (ch. 3) lends further support to the possibility that the origins of the resurrection hope are to be found within Israel’s own sense of “a profound sense of community with Yahweh that could withstand any obstacle and the conviction that there was no limit to this object of devotion’s power.”

\textit{How Widespread Was Ancient Resurrection Hope?}

Our survey thus far has illustrated the passion and imagination with which some of our earliest evidence envisions
the resurrection of the dead. One may ask, however, How widespread was early belief in the resurrection?

A survey of texts dating from the Maccabean Revolt to the end of the first century CE yields at least thirteen literary specimens of resurrection hope (see the table on p. 47). The New Testament and Josephus broaden this number considerably. In comparison with the entire corpus of early Jewish and Christian literature, this is substantial — but not overwhelming. To these texts, we may also add other kinds of evidence, such as epigraphy. We find, for example, this playful inscription upon a tomb of the period: “Have a good resurrection.”²⁹ Such inscriptions provide important incidental details in our study, but they do not prove that virtually every Palestinian Jew believed in the resurrection.

Furthermore, within the Old Testament and other sources we can identify traditions that explicitly deny the resurrection or at least severely call it into question. The book of Job, for instance, contains one grim meditation that explicitly denies life after death (14:7–12). One may also cite the perspective of Ecclesiastes: “A living dog is better than a dead lion. The living know they will die; but the dead know nothing” (9:4–5).³⁰

We must also account for differing attitudes toward the afterlife among the three great philosophical traditions of early Judaism — the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. According to Josephus and the New Testament, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes held differing views on the afterlife. These sources allege that both Pharisees and Essenes held strong support for the afterlife, while Sadducees refused to acknowledge any form of life after death. Josephus’s reports about the beliefs of these early Jewish religious movements are informative and yet problematic. To cite only one example among many others, Josephus claims that Pharisees believe the following about life after death:

Every soul is immortal, but only the soul of the good transmigrates into another body; but the souls of the wicked suffer everlasting punishment. (War 2.163)
They believe that souls have power to survive death and that there are rewards and punishments under the earth for those who have led lives of virtue or vice; eternal imprisonment is the lot of wicked souls, while the souls of the good receive an easy passage toward revivification. (Ant. 18.14)

A close reading of Josephus’s reports suggests that Pharisees believed in something like *metempsychosis*, the transmigration of the soul out of one body at death and into a different body in the future (cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 70c–d, 72a).

The New Testament, however, states that Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead. A similar report is found in Hippolytus of Rome (*Haer.* 28): “They also confess to a resurrection of the flesh.” Josephus’s account confirms the mere fact that Pharisees believed in some form of life after death; however, it seems clear that he has distorted the actual nature of that belief through a Hellenizing portrayal that provides apologetical praise for Judaism in the eyes of Greek and Roman audiences. This apologetical tendency suggests that Josephus felt at least a little embarrassed about portraying the resurrection in stark terms. Despite the Hellenistic cast that Josephus has given this report, at least one feature of his description is interesting in light of other ancient evidence: Pharisees seem to believe only in a partial restoration of life, just to the righteous. This feature of Pharisaic belief is consistent in both the reports of the *Jewish War* and the *Jewish Antiquities*. According to these reports, not everyone will be restored to bodily existence, only the righteous.

Josephus’s reports on the Essenes are similarly corrupted by his apologetical tendencies (*War* 2.153–58; *Ant.* 18.18). He claims that the Essene movement perished during the Great Jewish Revolt of 66–70 C.E., but not without the comfort of the afterlife:

Smiling in their sufferings and making sport of their torturers, they cheerfully released their souls, supposing that they will receive them again.
For, indeed, this teaching has strength among them: while bodies are corruptible and their matter not enduring, souls persevere, forever immortal; and emanating to and fro from the finest Aether, they become entangled in bodies as in prisons, so to speak, having been pulled down by a kind of natural spell; but when they are sent back from the bonds of the flesh, then, as though set free from their long slavery, they rejoice and are borne high into the air.

Now as for the good, they propound that an abode beyond the sea is set apart (for them), agreeing together with the sons of Greece — a region weighed down neither by rain nor snow nor heat; but which refreshes (itself) from the eternally gentle west wind, as it blows in from the ocean. But for the wicked, they set apart a dark and wintery chamber, filled with never ceasing punishments.

It seems to me that according to the same conception the Greeks set apart the Isles of the Blessed for their own courageous (men), whom they call heroes and demigods, and the region of the wicked down in Hades for the souls of the impious, where, their mythologists relate, some are punished, such as Sisyphus, Tantalus, Ixion, and Tityus, affirming first that souls are everlasting, and then the pursuit of virtue and the deterrence of vice. For the good become better through life by the hope of reward even after death; but the passions of the wicked are hindered, since they expect to undergo immortal punishment after death, even if they should escape it in this life. These, then, are the things that the Essenes believe regarding the theology of the soul, whereby they irresistibly attract all who have tasted of their philosophy. (War 2.153–158)

They regard souls to be immortal. (Ant. 18.18)

Josephus reports that Essenes, like the Pharisees, believed in some form of life beyond death; but his description of their beliefs is clearly Hellenized, with blatant poetic allusions to the Homeric “Isles of the Blessed” (see Od. 4.561–569; and Hesiod, Op. 170–172; cf. History of the Rechabites). It is unlikely that the Essenes themselves read Homer very often.

Recent research on the Dead Sea Scrolls preserved by the Qumran Essenes has yielded conflicting results regarding how the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls envisioned the future life. The most comprehensive study is by É. Puech, who
argues that the Qumran Essenes accepted a variety of notions regarding the future life, including the resurrection of the dead; and that Hippolytus’s ancient description of the Essenes as believing in the resurrection is thus essentially in accord with Qumran writings (Haer. 27.1–3).31 Other scholars have argued that one must distinguish between (1) the documents composed by the Qumran Community, such as the Rule of the Community, the Thanksgiving Hymns (or Hosoiot), and the War Scroll; and (2) other works of uncertain origin, such as On Resurrection and Pseudo-Ezekiel, which may originally have been composed outside of Qumran and were only later copied and studied by the sect.32

The debate between these two positions continues; and Josephus’s problematic description of the Essenes has not helped to resolve it. Amid the uncertainty, it seems safe to offer the provisional assessment that the Qumran Essenes probably envisioned a variety of notions about the future life, and they may not always have been consistent in doing so. Whether they were authored by the Qumran Community or not, On Resurrection and Pseudo-Ezekiel strongly suggest that some members of the Community could accept the resurrection hope and were not opposed to it. In addition to these two documents, the Community also adopted other writings, like Daniel and 1 Enoch, which contain references to the resurrection.33 Furthermore, the men of Qumran may well have read biblical passages of the Psalms or even Ezek 37 as containing references to resurrection. Nowhere do we find any evidence that members of the Community denied the resurrection hope, as the universally maligned Sadducees are reported to have done (Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:6–10; cf. Josephus, War 2.165; Ant. 18.16).

Apart from the three great religious movements within early Judaism, a number of other texts and traditions seem to have been content to enjoy immortality without explicitly subscribing to the resurrection hope. The book of Jubilees provides a good example of this, as it claims, “Their bones shall rest in the earth, but their spirits shall have much joy”
(23.31). Several inscriptions from Jewish tombs encourage a more Epicurean approach to death: “Be of good cheer, no one is immortal.” During the period of Christian origins, we find that even some believers saw no need for a future hope in the resurrection. The apostle Paul, for example, writes to some at Corinth who said there is no resurrection from the dead (1 Cor 15:12), and to others who had serious questions about what form of body believers would inherit in the world to come (15:35).

In examining this evidence, two conclusions seem to be necessary when assessing how widespread the resurrection hope was. First, we now have a substantial amount of evidence that many ancient authors from different sectors of Judaism needed the resurrection hope to make sense of the reality of their world. Second, we also have evidence that many other groups ignored, opposed, or were generally confused by the resurrection hope. In light of these conflicting tendencies, it seems safe to conclude that, during the period of its origins, hope in the resurrection of the dead was a popular, yet insurgent, and even controversial belief. What is most surprising about the resurrection hope is that in spite of the controversies and misunderstandings it has provoked over time, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic orthodoxy have consistently aligned themselves with the resurrection hope. Perhaps this is due to the fact that no other vision of the future life combines God’s care for the physical body, theodicy, and the value of personal existence in the same way that the resurrection hope does.

**Pauline Hope in the Resurrection: An Appreciation in Light of Earlier Texts**

In reflection upon the texts and traditions considered thus far, I would like to conclude with a few personal observations on how these materials help us better appreciate the original context of St. Paul’s teachings on the resurrection.
Paul explicitly addresses the issue of a future resurrection in two of his letters: 1 Thessalonians 4, and 1 Corinthians 15—although one recognizes that resurrection implicitly pervades the assumptions of his theology as a whole. For the sake of economy, I will confine my comments to 1 Corinthians 15. In the present volume (ch. 5), Hendrikus Boers provides a more thorough exegesis of key passages in Paul’s theology of the resurrection.

Throughout the entire epistle of 1 Corinthians, we find Paul dealing with a community of believers that he perceives as having largely misunderstood the gospel. In page after page of this letter, the apostle patiently, and sometimes impatiently, attempts to correct a number of Corinthian beliefs and practices. Paul’s problems with the Corinthians ultimately culminate in an eschatological controversy over the resurrection.

At Corinth, two issues about the resurrection seem to have been the focus of Paul’s concern: First, some Corinthians claimed, “There is no resurrection of the dead” (15:12); second, others were confused about what manner of body would exist in the resurrection (15:35). Paul deals with each of these issues in turn. In his defense of the resurrection, he reveals a number of tendencies reminiscent of the evidence surveyed in the present chapter.

First, one senses the controversial nature of the resurrection hope in this episode. Apparently, some Corinthians were perfectly willing to subscribe to an interpretation of the good news that saw no need for hope in a future resurrection of the dead. After all, why should a predominantly Gentile group of believers living in the progressive cultural environment of Corinth weigh themselves down with an outdated and superstitious apocalyptic belief, simply to please Paul? And why was it necessary to have a future resurrection, when the living Lord was already experienced as present with believers in worship?

Paul could simply have ignored this problem. Elsewhere in his letters, he is abundantly willing to accommodate the good
news to the varied settings and needs of the Gentile believers. But on the question of the resurrection, he will not budge. Nor will he even be content with afterlife traditions that accentuate immortality without accepting resurrection. For Paul, the legitimacy of his gospel rests upon God’s power to raise the dead — not only in the past resurrection of the Messiah, but also in the future resurrection of the dead. Paul’s conscientious stubbornness on this point illustrates in a distinctive way how powerfully his own background in Pharisaic Judaism could continue to live on in his interpretation of the gospel. Strikingly, this former Pharisee was glad to preach to the Gentiles a law-free gospel; he refused, however, to preach to them a resurrection-less one. We should not forget this when assessing the complex relationships between Paul’s theology and his own background in apocalyptic Judaism. In this sense, the classic approach to Paul’s theology by W. D. Davies remains fruitful even today and may be further updated by the new evidence for resurrection from Qumran.  

Second, Paul may well have taught only a partial resurrection of those who are dead “in Christ.” Though a firm believer in God’s wrath (Rom 1:18), Paul nowhere refers to a general resurrection of all the dead for divine judgment. Consistently, he interprets the resurrection in the context of the believer’s unbreakable unity “with Christ.” The believer’s unity with Christ is one that embraces both the death and the resurrection of the Messiah. Thus, Paul may well have agreed with traditions like Daniel and On Resurrection, which seem to feature only a partial resurrection. Furthermore, Josephus’s reports, as we have seen, suggest that Pharisees believed only in a partial resurrection, just for the righteous dead — and after all, Paul had once been a proud Pharisee. This may only be a coincidence; nevertheless, it is a striking one.

Third, the resurrection was a matter of theodicy for Paul, even as it was for 2 Maccabees, On Resurrection, and Pseudo-Ezekiel. If there is no resurrection, then death would have the final word over all believers and over the created order as a
whole. The believer’s unity “in Christ” would ultimately be broken by the power of death. God’s work in Christ would fail to defeat the cosmic powers of sin and death; and evil would have triumphed. If this is the case, then Paul suggests believers should all just give up and go have a drink: “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’” (15:32 NRSV). However, God has determined that the Messiah must reign even over the last enemy — death. Believers must therefore continue vigilant in faith, until God’s triumph over death culminates in resurrection. Through the resurrection, their “labor in the Lord is not in vain” (15:58).

Fourth, Paul’s treatment of the resurrection body gravitates more toward those earlier traditions that envision the resurrection as a transformation into a new state of existence. For Paul, the resurrection was not simply the restoration of the same old physical body lost in death. He would probably have disagreed with the author of 2 Maccabees on this point. One might even find him disagreeing with Luke’s portrayal of Jesus’ resurrection body, in which the risen Jesus eats a meal together with his disciples (Luke 24:42–43; cf. Acts 2:31). Paul insists that in the resurrection the old physical body will be radically transformed into a new and exalted state of existence. Hence, “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 15:50 NRSV).

Paul refers to this new state of existence, paradoxically, as a “spiritual body” (15:44). This problematic term is laced with both brilliance and mischief. It stands as a brilliant balance of both continuity and discontinuity in the portrayal of the future life. On one hand, it is we who will live, and we will continue to live in an embodied existence that is continuous with our present bodily life. On the other, we shall all be changed, since our present mortal bodies are not fully able to receive the glory of the world to come. One senses, however, that Paul’s paradoxical cleverness probably confused the Corinthians even more than they already had been.

Our earliest traditions about the resurrection prior to Paul, however, help shed some light on what he was at least trying
to do. We find the apostle more closely aligned with earlier traditions like Daniel, which describe the resurrection as a transformation of the deceased body into a radically new mode of existence (cf. 2 Bar. 50–51; 2 Esd 7). Yet Paul’s “spiritual body” does not consist in astral immortalization, as in Daniel and other apocalyptic visions of the resurrection. Instead, the “spiritual body” was already represented by the resurrected Messiah himself, into whose glorious image God had predestined that all believers would ultimately be conformed. Thus, our appreciation of Paul’s own theological instincts is expanded through the study of our earliest traditions about the resurrection.

Paul’s theology of the resurrection has left behind a fascinating heritage in the later history of Christian doctrine that continues into the present. In the centuries following Paul, some creedal formulations would actually bypass Paul’s language of “body” and specify the more materialist language of “resurrection of the flesh.” Tertullian ranks among the most important apostolic fathers to have favored such language; Athenagoras’s apology on the resurrection presses a materialist understanding of the resurrection hope to its farthest possible bounds. Other thinkers, like Origen, would take Paul’s paradox in a more immaterial direction. Thus, if Paul was trying to solve an important problem at Corinth, he was simultaneously creating new ones for the entire later history of Christian thought. The work of an apostle was not easy.

In defense of the apostle, however, one may say that most problems that have arisen in the later history of Christian doctrine have been the result of affirming either too little or too much about Paul’s original paradox. Theologies of the resurrection that have overemphasized the spiritual nature of the resurrection at the expense of material existence have often found themselves on the wrong end of ecclesiastical councils. To the contrary, theologies that have been overzealous in their affirmation of material existence have often found themselves in the center of a hopelessly puzzling snafu of philosophical anthropology that is even more difficult to cope
with than Paul’s “spiritual body.” Perhaps the apostle would have reminded his successors, “I had it right the first time.”

In recent theological inquiry, the resurrection of the dead continues to be a topic of stimulating discussion. In the present volume (ch. 7), W. Waite Willis Jr. traces the history of theological discussion regarding the resurrection in the modern era. To cite only one provocative example of the latest reflection on the resurrection, Sir John Polkinghorne, physicist and theologian, illustrates the usefulness of Paul’s concept of the resurrection in the contemporary discussion of science and theology. \(^{37}\) Faced with the very real and inevitable possibilities of meteor impacts, supernova explosions, and red giants, Polkinghorne must admit that our universe is condemned to ultimate futility. Reasoning within the shadows of such inevitable doom, responsible theology must be able to reconcile two opposing claims: (1) Our material universe will change, and that change will inevitably result in the end of all we currently know. (2) The Creator remains faithful to human life and to the goodness of the creation.

Polkinghorne identifies Paul’s notion of the “spiritual body” as a starting point for negotiating these two realities. On the one hand, we shall all be changed. Our world cannot always remain what it is, nor can human life. The only viable hope for the future is, therefore, a transformative one, one in which we can only continue to exist in a new reality discontinuous from the old. On the other hand, God has not forsaken the material reality of the creation and of our bodies. In the world to come, it is we who shall be changed, and when we are changed, our existence will remain a bodily one. Polkinghorne illustrates the fact that Paul’s resurrection theology remains a flexible hope, one that continues to guide Christian theology even in the face of cosmic annihilation. Our earliest traditions about the resurrection, thus, continue to make an important contribution to the history of ideas, as we consider the ways of God in a changing and frequently hostile universe. I think the apostle would be pleased.
Resurrection of the Dead

Texts Mentioning the Resurrection
(c. 200 BCE–c. CE 100)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew Bible</th>
<th>Pseudepigrapha</th>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
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<td>2 Maccabees</td>
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<td>On Resurrection (4Q521)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudo-Ezekiel (4Q4Q385–88, 391)</td>
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<td>[possibly others]</td>
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Notes


7. See Pseudo-Phocylides, Sentences 99–117. His statements on the afterlife occur in the context of ethical instructions regarding the bodies of the dead. Resurrection from the dead (103–104), immortality of the soul (105–108, 111, 115), and divinization (104) are all represented within the compass of about twenty lines. On these passages, see P. W.


18. In addition to the passages treated below, note that even Judas himself believes in a future resurrection of the dead (2 Macc 12:38–45), an attribution attested nowhere else in the Maccabean traditions, nor in Josephus.


21. The bulk of this chapter is probably an insertion, as Habicht and Doran suggest. Yet the precise origin remains debated. The insertion was probably the work of the same epitomist who abridged the work of Jason of Cyrene. C. Habicht, 2 Makkabäerbuch (JSHRZ 1.3; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus G. Mohn, 1976), 175ff.; Doran, Temple Propaganda, 22; idem, “The Martyr: A Synoptic View of the Mother and Her Seven Sons,” in Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms (ed. J. Collins and G. Nickelsburg; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), 189–221; U. Kellermann, Auferstanden in den Himmel: 2 Makkabier 7 und die Auferstehung der Märttyer (Stuttgarter Bibel-Studien 95; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1979), 13–17. On the history of approaches to this textual problem, see Puech, La croyance, 1:85n144.


29. For this and other examples, see van der Horst, Ancient Jewish Epitaphs, 114–26; Park, Conceptions of Afterlife in Jewish Inscriptions; Puech, La croyance, 1:182–99; Cavallin, Life after Death, 99–101, 166–70.

30. For other denials of life after death in the Hebrew Bible, see Prof. Crenshaw’s contribution to the present volume (ch. 3).


33. See also the discussion of numerous biblical and pseudepigraphic writings (possibly) attesting resurrection in the Community, in Puech, *La croyance*, vol. 1; and J. Hobbins, “Resurrection in the Daniel Tradition and Other Writings at Qumran,” in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, 2:385–420.


