

Afterlife in the Ancient World: the Uniqueness of Resurrection
“23” – Berkeley Covenant Church
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“The Incredulity of Saint Thomas” by Caravaggio, 1601-02 Sanssouci, Potsdam

Goals of the class:

1. Discuss the history of afterlife in Greek and Hebrew culture.
2. To discuss the nature of Jesus’ resurrection.

Greek beliefs in the 8th century BC

Two passages that are very influential in the Hellenistic world are found in Homer¹

- 1) Iliad - Achilles confronted with shade of friend and fellow soldier, Patroclus

Iliad 23:19

There came to him the hapless spirit of Patroclus, in all things like his very self, in stature, in fair eyes and in voice, and in raiment was he clad withal; and he stood above Achilles’ head and spoke to him, saying: “Thou sleepest, and hast forgotten me, Achilles. Not in my life was thou unmindful of

¹ See Wright, NT, (2003) *Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp 39-40; It is believed that Homer wrote the epics - the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, literary staples of the ancient world.

me, but now in my death! Bury me with all speed that I pass within the gates of Hades. Afar do the spirits keep me aloof, the phantoms of men that have done with the toils, neither suffer they me to join myself to them beyond the River, but vainly do I wander the wide-gated house of Hades. And give me thy hand, I pitifully entreat thee, for never more again shall I come back from out of the land of Hades." . . . Achilles held out his arms to clasp the spirit, but in vain. It vanished like a wisp of smoke and went gibbering underground. . . . [He said] "Ah, then it is true that something of us does survive, even in the halls of Hades, but with no intellect at all, only the ghost and semblance of a man."

- Patroclus was a spirit in Hades (only a ghost and semblance of man)
- Achilles reaches out but in vain, realizing that there is a survival after life, but it is not something to look forward to

2)Odyssey - Odysseus tries to embrace dead spirit of his mother Anticleia - but three times could not

Odyssey 11.206-08

Three times I sprang toward her, and my will said, 'Clasp her,' and three times she flitted from my arms like a shadow or a dream.

Odysseus speaks with Achilles and tries to console him by reminding him of his godlike status among mortals, and that he rules now in Hades. Achilles responds:

'Never try to reconcile me to death, glorious Odysseus. I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, some landless man with hardly enough to live on, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished.'

The ghosts in Hades are sorrowful, angry or both; there is no joy in Hades or promise of a real existence on earth again.

Important note: The Greek word "αναστασις" *anastasis* always referred to a re-embodiment of the soul and did not refer to life after death in Hades.

Returns from the underworld?

Myth of Alcestis.

In the legend, Alcestis is wife of Admetus, king of Pherae (Thessaly), to whom Apollo has been enslaved as a punishment. In return for Admetus' hospitality, Apollo tricks the Fates into granting him (Admetus) the privilege of escaping death on condition that someone else should die in his place. The only volunteer is Alcestis herself, his beloved wife. After her death and burial, she is brought back to Admetus, either by Persephone or in the better-known version, by Hercules, who fights physically with Death (Thanatos), beats him, rescues Alcestis and restores her to Admetus.²

Though interesting, it does not provide any evidence of a belief in resurrection. Although Alcestis does indeed return from the dead to bodily life, she will presumably die again, like Lazarus in John's gospel. This myth is as close as we get to resurrection

² Wright, NT (2003) Resurrection of the Son of God, pp. 65-66

in the Greek world. However, intelligent pagans contemporary with early Christianity knew about such stories, and dismissed them as mythic fictions. Celsus 'knew the old myths of returning from the Underworld', but he was perfectly capable of distinguishing these from an actual resurrection body.³ A good example of this is Paul's encounter on Mars Hill in Acts 17:32.

Plato - A Shift in the Afterlife (4th century BC)

Plato was not comfortable with Homer's understanding of Hades and the afterlife. According to Plato, the soul was the self or the true person, and the corpse is the ghost.⁴

For Plato:

- the soul is the non-material aspect of a human being and that is what matters
- bodily life is full of delusion and danger; the soul is to be tended to in the present because future happiness will depend upon how well our soul is cultivated now
- Death is defined in terms of separation of soul and body, seen as something to be desired.⁵

Plato wanted to pretty up death by speaking of rewards in the afterlife. He believed that passages from Homer (referred to above) were not good for the young men of Athens, warriors who needed to defend their state.

How will we ever get people to be good citizens, he asks, to serve in the army, to do their duty to their friends, if their view of the future life is conditioned by the epic pictures of gibbering ghosts in a gloomy underworld? Instead the young must be taught the true philosophical view: death is not something to regret, but something to be welcomed. It is the moment when, and the means by which, the immortal soul is set free from the prison-house of the physical body.⁶

As we can see here, Plato had made quite a dramatic shift. Suddenly death isn't such a bad thing. However, the greek word for resurrection 'anastasis' is not used here and still means a physical re-embodiment, something that Plato knew did not happen.

Hebrew understandings of the afterlife (?? - 700 BC)

³ Bowersock (1994), 117f. citing Origen C. Cels. 2.55

⁴ Laws 12.959b-c: the word for 'ghost' here, denoting the corpse rather than the disembodied soul is 'eidolon', which in Homer and elsewhere usually means much what 'ghost' means in modern English. See Wright, NT, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 2003, pp 48-51

⁵ e.g. Phaedo 64c; 67d; 106e; 107d-e; Gorg. 524b. Celsus quotes Heraclitus as disparaging physical bodies, which 'ought to be thrown away as worse than dung'. See Wright, NT, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 2003, p 49

⁶ Phaedo 80-85, Phaedrus 250c; See Wright, NT, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 2003, p 48

The primary way life continued after death for ancient Hebrews was through their offspring.

As a Hebrew, losing your name was probably the greatest tragedy that could happen to you. Your name must continue even through your brother if possible.

"If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel." (Deuteronomy 25:5,6)

Death doesn't look much better. The afterlife consisted of residence in a place known as "Sheol." In Hebrew, Sheol (שְׁאוֹל, Sh'ol) is the "abode of the dead", the "underworld", "the common grave of humankind" or "pit".⁷

A few references from the Old Testament are:

"I shall go down to my son a mourner unto Sheol" (Genesis 37:35). – Jacob referring to the death of Joseph

"Therefore Sheol has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure; And Jerusalem's splendor, her multitude, her din of revelry and the jubilant within her, descend into it." (Isaiah 5:14) – personification of Sheol

"Just as a cloud dissipates and vanishes, those who go down to Sheol will not come back." (Job 7:9)

The New Testament follows the Septuagint in translating sheol as hades (compare Acts 2:27, 31 and Psalm 16:10). The New Testament thus seems to draw a distinction between Sheol and "Gehinnom" or Gehenna. The former is regarded as a place where the dead go temporarily to await resurrection (according to some traditions, including Jesus himself), while the latter is the place of eternal punishment for the damned (i.e. perdition). Accordingly, in the book of Saint John's Revelation, hades is associated with death (Revelation 1:18, 6:8), and in the final judgment the wicked dead are brought out of hades and cast into the lake of fire, which represents the fire of Gehenna; hades itself is also finally thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

In Luke 16:19-31 (the story of Lazarus and Dives), Jesus portrays hades as a place of torment, at least for the wicked. Jesus also announces to Peter that "the gates of hades" will not overpower the church (Matthew 16:18), and uses hades to pronounce judgment upon the city of Capernaum (Matthew 11:23).⁸

Second Temple Judaism (516 BC - 70AD)

What was the hope during Jesus' time for the afterlife and resurrection? There are various levels of belief. For example, the Sadducees did not believe in any kind of resurrection or afterlife whereas the Pharisees believed in a bodily resurrection.

⁷ Metzger & Coogan (1993) *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p277

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheol>

The Sadducees originated from the Maccabean revolt of 167 BC and were the high priests and leaders after they were free of Greek rule.

The Hasmoneans ruled as “priest-kings”, claiming both titles high priest and king simultaneously, and like other aristocracies across the Hellenistic world became increasingly influenced by Hellenistic syncretism and Greek philosophies: presumably Stoicism, and apparently Epicureanism in the Talmudic tradition criticizing the anti-Torah philosophy of the “Apikorsus” (i.e. Epicurus) refers to the Hasmonean clan qua Sadducees. Like Epicureans, Sadducees rejected the existence of an afterlife, thus denied the Pharisaic doctrine of the Resurrection of the Dead.⁹

Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees also believed in the resurrection of the dead in a future, messianic age. The Pharisees believed in a literal resurrection of the body¹⁰. Since the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BC, prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel wrote about the themes of exile and restoration, part of an over-arching story during the times of Jesus. Yahweh had not returned to Zion, and his presence was certainly not in the Temple. The Jewish people were expecting Yahweh to be faithful to his covenant promises, to restore Israel, to return to Zion and to defeat their oppressors, namely Rome. Passages such as Psalm 19 and Psalm 74 speak of creation and covenant together. Many Jews believed that when God finally acted to restore his people, he would restore not only their land, but all of creation. At least that's where Paul (a former Pharisee) begins to go in passages such as Romans 8.

Ezekiel 37, with its passage about the valley of the dry bones which acquire, sinews, flesh and ultimately breath begins to speak of a bodily resurrection. In the words of NT Wright:

Post-biblical Judaism offers a range of beliefs about life after death. Resurrection is by no means the only option; and, when it is specified, it is not a general word for life after death, but a term for one particular belief. In fact, resurrection is not simply a form of ‘life after death’; resurrection hasn’t happened yet. People do not pass directly from death to resurrection, but go through an interim period, after which the death of the body will be reversed in resurrection. Resurrection does not, then, mean ‘survival’; it is not a way of describing the kind of life one might have immediately following physical death. It is not a redescription of death and/or the state which results from death. In both paganism and Judaism it refers to the reversal, the undoing, the conquest of death and its effects. That is its whole point. That is what Homer, Plato, Aeschylus and the others denied; and it is what some Jews, and all early Christians, affirmed.¹¹

Resurrection then refers to a life after life-after-death, a re-embodiment, a defiance of death in a new body.

⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadducees>

¹⁰ Pecorino, Philip (2001). Section 3. The Resurrection of the Body. *Philosophy of Religion*. Dr. Philip A. Pecorino. Retrieved on 2007-09-13

¹¹ Wright, NT (2002) *Gregorianum*, 2002, 83/4, pp 615–635

The Resurrection of Jesus

Jesus had a bodily resurrection. Clearly, he was physical, yet he was capable of walking through walls! If the gospel writers were trying to fabricate a purely physical Jesus, they would not have written about him walking through walls etc. If they were trying to fabricate a purely spiritual or docetic Jesus, they would not have had him eating fish, being touched, etc. The verses below touch on these ideas.

‘See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. While they still could not believe it because of their joy and amazement, He said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave Him a piece of a broiled fish; and He took it and ate it before them. (Luke 24:39-43)

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ (John 20:26-27)

Regarding the first passage from Luke, it was well known in 1st century Jewish culture that ghosts or apparitions could not eat, and so it appears Luke is going out of his way to show that Jesus is not a ghost. In John’s passage, John makes the point that Jesus could appear anywhere without the natural limitations of doors. However, he also makes it clear to Thomas and the rest of the disciples that he is made of flesh and bone, and even scars! There are several other key passages of course to reference here, but due to time constraints we will digress.

But what about Paul? Some scholars have tried to make the point that when Paul talks about a spiritual body in 1 Corinthians 15, he is talking about a spiritual body versus a physical body. That could not be further from the truth. The greek for spiritual body in this case - *soma pneumatikon* - a body animated by the spirit of God and the *soma psychikon* - a body animated by the human soul are two different, yet physical entities. The resurrection body will be sown incorruptible, animated by the life of God and will not break down and wither like our current bodies.

In conclusion, I will leave you with a quote from theologian Ted Peters that sums up well several strands of what we have discussed so far.

“Scholars seem to agree what is meant by resurrection in reference to Easter is not the simple return of a corpse to ordinary life; nor is it the escape of Jesus’ soul from the body as it was for Socrates. Built into the very definition of resurrection is a prophetic expectation of Israel’s Messiah, the coming of the kingdom of God, and the rising of the dead into the new creation.”¹²

¹² Peters, Ted (2006) essay: “The Future of the Resurrection” from “The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and NT Wright in Dialogue” (Ted is Joshua Moritz’s advisor. I am thankful to Joshua for introducing me to Ted’s work.)