



RESURRECTION

in First-Century Jewish Thought

BY WARREN MCWILLIAMS



SPECULATION ABOUT THE MEANING of a Bible passage can be dangerous, but I have often wished I could read the minds of some biblical characters. For example, Jesus' discussion with His disciples at Caesarea Philippi was a turning-point event in His ministry. When Jesus asked them who they thought He was, Simon Peter correctly acknowledged Him as "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (Matt. 16:16).¹ Then Jesus announced He would eventually "be killed, and be raised the third day" (v. 21). I wonder what the twelve apostles believed about the possibility or probability of the resurrection of the dead. Did the typical Jew believe in bodily resurrection? If so, did the Jews believe the Messiah would die and that God would raise Him from the dead?

Jewish Beliefs in the First Century

The majority of Jews in the first century believed in a future resurrection of the dead. Jesus' disciples would not have been startled by His mention of this doctrine. Some Jews, however, rejected such a belief.² When the apostle Paul appeared before the Sanhedrin, he recalled that the Pharisees and the Sadducees, two of the major Jewish religious groups, disagreed on this issue and others. Paul stressed he was on trial for his preaching about the resurrection, and a loud argument broke out. Describing this event, Luke commented, "For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, and no angel or spirit, but the Pharisees affirm them all" (Acts 23:8).

The Sadducees's rejection of the resurrection of the dead impacted their relationship with Jesus. For instance, they told Jesus a story about a woman being married over time to seven brothers. When the woman finally died and was raised from the dead, to whom would she be married? Since the Sadducees did not accept bodily resurrection, they apparently thought this story highlighted the foolishness of the doctrine. Jesus, however, replied that they did not understand their own Scriptures or God's power (Matt. 22:23–32).

When the early Christians proclaimed Jesus' resurrection in Jerusalem, the Sadducees led the persecution (Acts 4:1–2). One reason they opposed these Christians was their own rejection of anyone's resurrection.

Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, confirmed the New Testament's report of the disagreement between the Sadducees and Pharisees. In his *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus described the major Jewish religious groups of his time. He stated the Pharisees believed in resurrection of the dead, but the Sadducees insisted that human souls and bodies both died.³



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Above: Remnants of a Roman road leading to El-Qubeibeh, which some believe to

be the location of Emmaus. At the end of the path is a church the Franciscans built in

1902 to commemorate Jesus revealing Himself to the two men after His resurrection.

Although the religious leaders debated belief in the resurrection of the dead, what would the typical first-century Jew have known about this doctrine? We can find some clues in other New Testament stories. For instance, Jesus' conversation with Martha after the death of her brother, Lazarus, points to a common affirmation of this doctrine. Martha had hoped Jesus would arrive in time to keep Lazarus from dying. When Jesus announced that Lazarus would be raised from the dead, Martha replied, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24). Martha was clearly familiar with the Jewish belief in a future resurrection from the dead. Jesus explained to her, "I am the resurrection and the life" (v. 25).

When Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem, He compared His own body to the temple and explained that His body would be raised from the dead. We do not know how well His disciples understood this comparison at that time, but after His resurrection they saw Jesus' point clearly (2:19–22).

Old Testament Background

Why did the Pharisees and Sadducees disagree on the resurrection of the dead? Part of the answer is that the Sadducees did not accept all of what we call the Old Testament as inspired. The Sadducees accepted only the first five books, the Pentateuch, as the Word of God. When Jesus responded to their story about the woman married over time to seven brothers, He quoted from Exodus to prove that even the Scriptures they accepted affirmed God is the God of the living (Matt. 22:32; Ex. 3:6,15-16).

In contrast, the Pharisees accepted the full Old Testament that Christians use today. This contains, though, only a few clear statements about a resurrection of the dead. Probably the strongest is Daniel 12:2-3. This passage points to the future destiny of both the righteous, who receive eternal life, and the wicked, who experience eternal contempt. Psalm 49:9-15 also points to a future life beyond the grave. Isaiah 26:19 states that the “dead will live; their bodies will rise.”

In early Hebrew thought the common belief was that all the dead went to Sheol, the realm of the dead.⁴ Job thought of this place as “a land of darkness and gloom... a land of blackness” (Job 10:21-22). The dead existed in this shadowy underworld with no apparent hope for bodily resurrection. Job, however, anticipated the later full-blown belief in bodily resurrection. “Even after my skin has been destroyed, yet I will see God in my flesh” (19:26). Although Bible students debate the details of interpretation of this verse, some see an affirmation of bodily resurrection.⁵

Another of the strongest Old Testament statements on resurrection actually points to the restoration of the Hebrew nation rather than individual resurrection. God revealed to Ezekiel how a valley of skeletons could become a living army. God’s “breath” or Spirit empowered the dry bones to become living beings again (Ezek. 37:4-10). God explained to Ezekiel that this army was the restored house of Israel. “I am going to open your

graves and bring you up from them, My people, and lead you into the land of Israel” (v. 12).

Some Bible students see Hosea 6:2 as an anticipation of belief in bodily resurrection. Also, Jesus compared Jonah’s experience to His death, burial, and resurrection (Matt. 12:40).

Jewish Thought Outside the Bible

Some clues to the development of Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead surface in Jewish writings not included in our Bibles.⁶ Although they are not the inspired Word of God, they reflect ideas that may have been familiar in New Testament times. For instance, the Old Testament Apocrypha is a collection of Jewish writings generally written in the Intertestamental period. Second Maccabees “includes the story of seven brothers and their mother who were put to death. The book clearly teaches a resurrection of the body, at least for the righteous” (2 Maccabees 7:9,14).⁷

The Pseudepigrapha is a collection of Jewish writings that the Jews did not consider to be inspired but to be the

Right: Tombs located on the side of the Mount of Olives, with the Kidron Valley below and the Dome of the Rock in the distance. The Jews believe that when the Messiah comes, He will raise the dead, and the resurrected Jews will follow Him through the Eastern Gate. Tradition dictates, therefore, that persons are buried in this cemetery with their feet facing the Eastern Gate (toward the Dome of the Rock).



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Rising like a flat-top volcano, Machaerus was one of Herod’s fortress palaces. Located east of the Dead Sea, this fortress gave Herod a base for military operations east of the

Jordan. According to Josephus, Herod imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist at Machaerus. When Herod later heard about the miraculous things Jesus was doing, he thought John

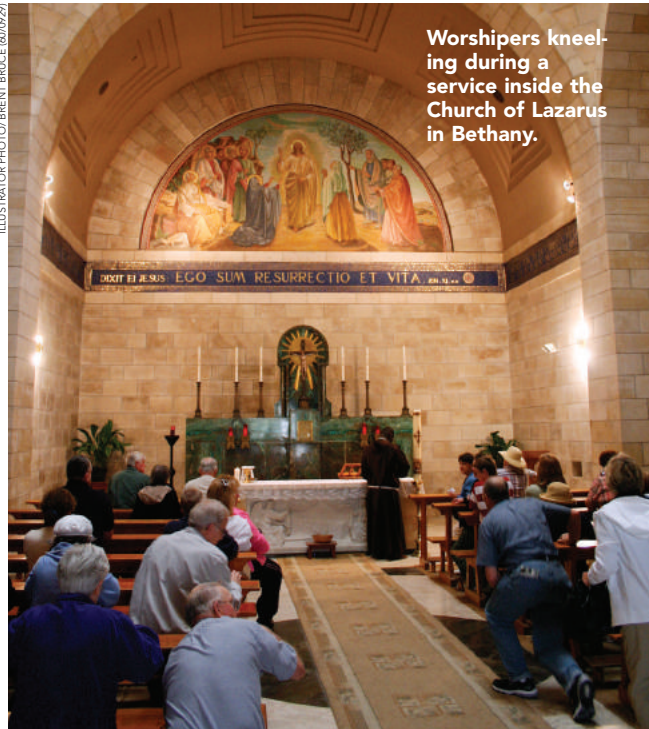
had been brought back to life: “This is John the Baptist!” he told his servants. “He has been raised from the dead, and that’s why supernatural powers are at work in him” (Matt. 14:2, HCSB).

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Right: Exterior of the Church of Lazarus at Bethany. Telling Jesus of their brother's death, both Martha and Mary said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21,32, HCSB). The chapel, built by Antonia Burluzzi in 1954, seeks to balance light and dark, life and death, and the somber and celebratory. Christians have been worshipping at the site since the 4th cent.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KRISTEN HILLER (55/64.37)



Worshippers kneeling during a service inside the Church of Lazarus in Bethany.

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report of the diversity of Jewish beliefs in the centuries surrounding the New Testament Era. The book known as 2 Baruch affirms a resurrection of the dead (21:22-25). The Psalms of Solomon also touches on this doctrine (2:31).

A Resurrected Messiah

The New Testament reflects the diversity of Jewish thought about the resurrection of the dead. Bible readers do not typically find pointed references to a Jewish belief in a dying and resurrected Messiah in the Old Testament. The

first-century Christians, however, quickly affirmed that Jesus was the Anointed One promised by God and that He was their resurrected Lord and Savior. When the risen Jesus encountered the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, Jesus was able to show them that He was the One for whom they had hoped. Jesus used the teachings of the Law of Moses and the Hebrew prophets to reassure them He was the risen Savior (Luke 24:25-27). Early Christian sermons often linked Old Testament texts and Jesus' resurrection (Acts 2:30-31 and Ps. 16:10; Acts 13:34 and Isa. 55:3).

Although contemporary Christians might want to read the minds of first-century Jews and Christians about their belief in the possibility of the resurrection of the dead, what ultimately matters is the reality of Jesus' resurrection. The two on the road to Emmaus moved from puzzlement to a recognition of the risen Savior (Luke 24:31-35). They did not ask, "Is resurrection possible?" They announced "The Lord has certainly been raised" (v. 34). Later the apostle Paul affirmed the centrality of Jesus' resurrection for our faith today (1 Cor. 15:12-19). **B**

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
2. Grant R. Osborne, "Resurrection" in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 932-33.
3. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 18.1.3-4.
4. "Death, Resurrection, and Afterlife in the Old Testament" in *Holman Bible Handbook*, gen. ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992), 364-65.
5. Robert L. Alden, *Job*, vol. 11 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 208.
6. Grant R. Osborne, "Resurrection" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 674-75.
7. Clayton Harrop, "Apocrypha" in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 70.

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