
FAQ

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Resurrection, Late Belief

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Is it, or is it not, true, that the doctrine of resurrection developed rather late in Judaism?

Some passages of the Tanach could be read from the vantage point that there is to be no anticipated resurrection of the dead. Genesis 3:19 says, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Ecclesiastes 9:2-3 says, “It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean...they *go* to the dead.” And perhaps among the most problematic could be Psalm 78:39: “Thus He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not return.” Are these just reminders that human beings are but the created, or are they assertions that people live their lives, die, *and that is it*?

Various people reading these verses have concluded that there is to be no bodily resurrection of human beings after time of death, as all die and there is no return from decomposition. Others, however, would argue that a larger scope of Scripture passages needs to be taken into consideration, in order to confirm a theology of resurrection, including those in the Apostolic Writings or New Testament. While there are hints and clues of a doctrine of resurrection in the Tanach or Old Testament, it is only in the former body of writings where the significance of the resurrection of the dead is center stage, in light of the resurrection of Yeshua of Nazareth.

In a wide selection, of mainly Left-of-Center Jewish, and to a lesser extent, liberal Protestant, theological circles, it is indeed affirmed that the doctrine of resurrection is entirely a late development of the post-Biblical, meaning post-Tanach (OT) period. As is described in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*,

“Belief in resurrection began to develop toward the end of the biblical period, possibly under Persian influence, and is referred to in the *Book of Daniel* (12.2). By the end of the Second Temple period, resurrection had developed into a fundamental dogma of the Pharisees, who declared it heresy to deny, as did the Sadducees (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.1.4; *San.* 90b).”¹

Today’s Reform Judaism is well known for widely denying the doctrine of resurrection, believing it to be an import from Persia, and likely from Zoroastrianism at that. Conservative examiners of Scripture tend to conclude that clues of an individual resurrection of persons in the future Messianic Age or eschaton, are connected to Tanach passages speaking of the national restoration of Israel’s Kingdom.

For some interpreters of the Hebrew Bible, there is only one verse which unambiguously endorses the doctrine of an individual resurrection of persons. Daniel 12:2 says, “**Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.**” Passages such as Isaiah 26:19 or Ezekiel 37:6 may also give credence to a belief in some sort of resurrection, but they are tied to the prophecies of Israel’s Kingdom being restored:

¹ Martha Himmelfarb, “Resurrection,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 582.

“Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew *is as* the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits” (Isaiah 26:9).

“I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the LORD” (Ezekiel 37:6).

These second two passages, as Benjamin D. Sommer concludes in *The Jewish Study Bible*, are thought to be better taken “as a metaphor for national renewal” of Israel “as they return to their land to reestablish a commonwealth.”² For such an interpreter, being stuck with the Book of Daniel alone for Tanach support for the doctrine of resurrection may indicate that this view was something which came very late within the Biblical period. While conservatives, including this writer, will often date the composition of Daniel to the Persian era (500s B.C.E.), liberals will frequently date Daniel to as late as the Maccabean era (164 B.C.E.).³ In such a schema, this would place the doctrine of resurrection less than two centuries prior to the ministry of Yeshua! One *could* view the doctrine of resurrection as a rather late arrival in the scope of Biblical revelation.

For many interpreters of the Tanach Scriptures, “Evidence for belief in resurrection in the OT is scarce and often ambiguous” (*EDB*).⁴ To the mix of Scriptures we could probably add Job 19:25-26, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God,” but even Job has been dated by some to as late as the post-exilic period,⁵ which again for some makes the doctrine of resurrection a late invention. So in the words of George Robinson’s *Essential Judaism*,

“Belief in the resurrection of the dead, a key element in traditionally observant Judaism’s vision of the Messianic age, dates from the period of the Pharisees, and may be an outgrowth of Greek or Persian influence...According to at least one Jewish historian...the idea of resurrection of the dead gained its first currency at the time of the Maccabees, around the second century B.C.E., a period of great suffering for the Jews. In the face of such trauma...the notion of another life after death promised a final, cosmic release.”⁶

Is the doctrine of resurrection something relatively late in Biblical revelation? It would be fair to deduce that times of difficulty, such as the Maccabean crisis and the potential end of the Jewish people, certainly focused the attention of many pious individuals as to what was going to happen to them subsequent to death. More importantly, is the Tanach or Old Testament relatively silent or ambivalent on the issue of resurrection?

I personally accept Isaiah 26:19; Ezekiel 37:6; Daniel 12:2; and Job 19:25-26 as supportive of the resurrection of individuals **and that a doctrine of resurrection appears in the Biblical narrative much, much earlier than the post-exilic period.** Yet it is absolutely true that *the debate* over the resurrection did not come to major fruition until the Second and First Centuries B.C.E., with this doctrine being a major division between the Sadducees and Pharisees. The former group did not accept the doctrine of resurrection because they did not see it in the Torah, with the latter group accepting it and making it an integral part of their teachings. If the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, we should not be surprised how the Rabbinic tradition, while asserting “All Israelites have a share in the world to come,” lists the first group as those who will not share as “He who says, the resurrection of the dead is a teaching which does not derive from the Torah” (m. *Sanhedrin* 10:1),⁷ a direct assault on the Sadducees.

The one body of literature which profoundly and unambiguously affirms a doctrine of individual resurrection in the future, is the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament, **precisely because of its focus on the bodily resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah** (Matthew 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40; John 5:25, 29; 11:25; Acts 2:32-36; Romans 1:3-4; 1 Corinthians 15:12, 20-22, 42-46; et. al.). The bodily resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah, assures individual Believers of not only their future resurrection—but also of His Second Coming, the defeat of His enemies, and the full establishment of His Kingdom on Earth.

² Benjamin D. Sommer, “Isaiah,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 834.

³ Consult the entry for the Book of Daniel in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

⁴ David Rolph Seely, “Resurrection,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1120.

⁵ Consult the entry for the Book of Job in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

⁶ George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 192.

⁷ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 604.