

Greek Influence upon Jewish Views of Resurrection and Immortality

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Over the years, many people have pondered one of life's big questions: "What happens when I die?". The Jews were no exception, and over time they developed ideas of resurrection and immortality. The standard account of this development¹ states that the Jews borrowed ideas from Zoroastrianism (the official religion of Persia) during their exile there. When the Greeks conquered Persia under Alexander the Great, they are said to have introduced the philosophy of the 'intermediate state' or the immortality of the soul. This theory is being increasingly challenged, for example, Glasson describes ways that the ideas of resurrection could have been obtained from Greek religion (e.g. Orphism²). More recently, Wright³ has argued that the idea of resurrection came from within Judaism rather than external influence. He claims that the Jews started to believe that the love of YHWH, the God who created humans in the beginning, could stretch even beyond the grave, leading to a future hope of being raised bodily and justice at last being done. Nickelsburg has also written extensively⁴ on these topics but whereas Wright finds much evidence of resurrection and little of immortality of the soul, Nickelsburg finds them in roughly equivalent quantities.

It is important for us to understand how and when these beliefs came about so we can investigate the extent to which Judaism was

1 e.g. Sanders 1992, p.298

2 Glasson 1961, pp.26-33

3 Wright 2003, ch.3

4 Nickelsburg 1972

influenced by other cultures, and also how we should view the Christian claims of Jesus' resurrection: what did the early Christians mean by the phrase Χριστὸς ἐγήγερται ἐκ νεκρῶν (1 Cor 15:20), and was there any precedent for this? Therefore the question we are addressing in this essay is the extent of Greek influence upon Jewish conceptions of the afterlife.

To approach this question, we will start by looking at early Jewish beliefs about the afterlife and then survey the Greek views. We will then come to later Jewish beliefs which fall neatly into three broad groups and look for the 'hallmarks' of Greek beliefs in these groups.

Jewish Views of Resurrection and Immortality

From early Jewish thinking, death is a consequence of sin⁵. There is little consideration of true life after death, but simply Sheol:

*There the wicked cease from troubling,
and there the weary are at rest...*

*The small and the great are there,
and the slaves are free from their masters.*

Job 3:17,19

*The dead do not praise the Lord,
nor do any that go down into silence.*

Psalms 115:17

We see an eternal, restful, shadowy existence in Sheol. Death was not

⁵ Gen 3:19

something which one worried about excessively, indeed Job saw the after death existence as better than this life because he would have rest from his sufferings (Psalm 88 is at the opposite end of the spectrum but is not as pessimistic as much Greek thought).

Despite being in Sheol forever, it is quite clear that a ghost of a dead person can be summoned. Saul tries to kill off the practise (in accordance with the law⁶), but later can still find a witch to invoke Samuel's spirit upon his request⁷. There are other texts which may refer to God removing people from Sheol, for example:

*You do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit*

Psalm 16:10

However, this seems to be a metaphor speaking about God granting someone a long life, as in another Psalm the writer speaks of being delivered from Sheol even though he has obviously not been resurrected!⁸

From this, we observe that ancient Israel focused on the present life and the physical blessings and curses associated with obedience and disobedience to the laws⁹. As Wright summarises, "if one can see nation and land flourishing, one can go to the grave in peace."¹⁰

⁶ Lev 19:31, 20:6, 20:27; Deut 18:11

⁷ 1 Sam 28

⁸ Ps 86:13

⁹ Deut 28-31

¹⁰ Wright 2003, p.100. Perhaps this helps to explain a rise in resurrection belief during exile and post 70AD as people started to believe that God was judging them too harshly in the present age and would recompense them somehow.

In spite of this there are some hints of consequences after death.

The wicked:

*... are destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors!
They are like a dream when one awakes;
on awaking you despise their phantoms.*

Psalm 73:19,20

But the righteous say to God:

*You guide me with your counsel,
and afterwards you will receive me with honour¹¹.*

Psalm 73:24

This view is not frequent in the Bible and later Jewish thought closely links resurrection and judgement.

We turn now to ideas of resurrection in the Bible. We will only survey the two clearest passages¹², which are later texts and represent a development of Hebrew thought. The earlier passage is in Isaiah:

*Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a radiant dew,
and the earth will give birth to those long dead.*

Isaiah 26:19

¹¹NRSV footnote gives 'in glory' as an alternative translation, and this understanding could have given rise to views of a place better than Sheol.

¹²Other passages may be Hos 13:14 and Is 53:7-13. Ez 37 was also read as a resurrection passage cf 4Q385. Job 19:25-7 is uncertain as it is very difficult to translate. Wis 3:1-10 should also feature, but it is too complicated to discuss in this short space.

This passage contains the idea of resurrection as the reversal of the “sleep” of death. As the metaphorical sleep is physical, so will be the metaphorical awakening. This is a promise that the curse in Genesis 3:19 will be reversed in the future. Additionally, it is stated that God will “swallow up death for ever”¹³ in other words, this resurrection will be eternal.

Borrowing many of these themes, Daniel writes:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 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.

Daniel 12:2-3

As in Isaiah, the resurrection body is everlasting, but Daniel has the theme of judgement added in: this immortality will either be in “everlasting life” or “shame and contempt”¹⁴. Against Persian ideas of astral immortality, we should note that the construction of the comparison with stars is a simile and that “star” in the Bible is kingly¹⁵. Thus, we see in these two Biblical texts the ideas of bodily resurrection and immortality of that body are firmly linked. This is true throughout Jewish literature: whenever resurrection is found, the resurrection body is immortal¹⁶.

13 Isaiah 25:8a

14 Possible echoes of the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28-31

15 e.g. Num 24:17

16 Wright 2003 pp.127-8

Greek Views of Resurrection and Immortality

The earliest author that we have a reasonably detailed knowledge of is Homer, and his epics include two passages about the underworld. In the *Iliad*, there is a visitation from the ghost of Patroclus, a warrior who had died but not been buried¹⁷. Achilles is surprised and tries to grasp the ghost but it disappears “like a vapour/smoke” (καπνὸς). He concludes that there “is the spirit and phantom somewhat, albeit the mind be not anywise therein”. Similarly, in what might be considered a conflation of necromancy, Odysseus sails to a highly personified Hades in order to communicate with the shades¹⁸. In this scene, there is hopeless despair amongst the inhabitants. As in Hebrew thought, this is a place of no escape. Most people are idle, although several are busying themselves with tasks (e.g. Minos) and some are being punished. In later Greek mythology, Hades continued to be a depressing place as shown by the names of the rivers: Woe, Hatred, Fire, Forgetfulness and Lamentation¹⁹.

Later, Plato attempted to show the afterlife as better than life. He proposes the removal of all scenes in Homer which talk about afterlife asking “If he [a warrior] believes in the reality of the underworld and its terrors, do you think that any man will be fearless of death and in

¹⁷*Il.* 23:65-107

¹⁸*Od.* 11

¹⁹Greek names: Acheron, Styx, Phlegethon, Lethe, Cocytus

battle will prefer death to defeat and slavery?"²⁰ Against Homer, who said that the true self is the body, Plato writes that upon death "the real self of each of us, and which we term the immortal soul, departs to the presence of other gods."²¹ He transforms Hades into a place where there is much to delight in (especially philosophy) and says that people don't return because it is so good.

The extent of Homer and Plato's influence upon common people is debatable, and the evidence suggests a broad range of popular views about the afterlife. On one hand, there are many tombs where everyday objects were buried with the deceased, which implies some people thought they would have need of them. On the other hand, there are numerous tombstones inscribed "I wasn't, I was, I am not, I don't care."²² Certainly there was a popular belief and fear of ghosts running through Greek society until the time of Hadrian as Phlegon of Tralles writes "the ghost took hold of the child, forced back most of the men, hastily tore the child limb from limb, and began to devour him."²³

The closest idea to resurrection in Greek thought is transmigration (the theory that at some time after death the soul goes into another body). Plato's "Myth of Er"²⁴ says that a warrior

²⁰*Rep.* 3.386-7

²¹*Laws* 12.959b

²²A phrase so well known it was often reduced to its initials.

²³*Book of Marvels*, 2:10

²⁴*Rep.* 10.614b-621d

named Er died and after 12 days was about to be cremated when he “revived” (ἀνεβίω). Er claims to have returned without having drunk from the river of Forgetfulness which all other souls must do before they are allowed to return to a different body. These ideas are also found in mystery cults such as Orphism or the Pythagoreans, but according to these cults one is able to escape from the cycle and go to eternally live in the spiritual realms. Glasson claims that this is the origin of resurrection²⁵. He breaks down the views of these cults into (a) recompense in the underworld, with different treatment for good and evil; and (b) the final return of the soul to the divine realm. However, this proposal is flawed because it overgeneralises and oversimplifies the beliefs of these cults. It is clear they do not envisage a final bodily return to earth, but rather transmigrations followed by a spiritual escape to 'heaven'. It is true that transmigration is appealed to by some of the church fathers to support the idea of resurrection²⁶, but only when they are trying to argue from beliefs already existent in the Greek world.

Another attempt to account for resurrection beliefs is that of dying and rising Gods. Many were known throughout the ancient world and were used to explain seasonal development (e.g. Proserpina spent six months in Hades and 6 months in life giving us summer and winter). But whilst dying and rising could be expected of

²⁵ Glasson 1961, p.28

²⁶ e.g. Tertullian *Res.* 1

gods, mere humans could not expect such privileges²⁷.

There were other beliefs about the afterlife, such as those of the Epicureans (the soul survives but the universe is reborn periodically) and the Stoics (the soul breaks into its component atoms upon death). Still others believed they would become gods or stars upon death. Resurrection came up rarely, although never in a serious way; for example in Aristophanes' play "The Frogs", but this is a comedy ridiculing the idea.

The only example of popular belief in resurrection is that upon Nero's suicide, three people claimed to be the revived Nero²⁸. One even managed to rally support from his old troops. It is dubious whether the troops even believed this, more likely they sought a figurehead for their power-seeking objectives.

The Spectrum of Greek Influence

We will now turn to later Jewish literature and see the positions it adopts with reference to resurrection and immortality. First though, we must remember that all Jewish literature was in some way influenced by the Greek thought pervading Palestine, even if this influence was a reaction against it. Interest in the afterlife seems to have exploded during the second century BC and continued for

²⁷Why is resurrection a late Jewish development? Wright 2003, pp.126-7 suggests that Israel could only start thinking in resurrection terms after they were separate from the Canaanite vegetation cult, to avoid misunderstandings.

²⁸Tac. *Hist* 2:8,9, Dio Chrys. *Orat.* 21:9-10

several hundred years, which is probably a sign of Greek influence. This was perhaps increased by the Septuagint translating 'Sheol' as 'Hades' and hence assimilating the two ideas in people's minds.

Blissful Disembodied Existence with No Hope of Resurrection

We will spend the most time on this group of texts as they have the most obvious influence from Greek thought. They deny traditional Jewish views on resurrection and immortality and instead affirm a Platonic-style spiritual afterlife. Interestingly, most of these texts probably originated outside Palestine, implying they are the work of diaspora Jews who are integrating into Greek society.

The main proponent of this group is Philo. He was a highly philosophical Alexandrian Jew who merged Jewish observances and expectations with Greek philosophy (especially Plato). He believed that the soul is divided into parts, one of which is immortal, and that the body is a prison in which the spirit (as breathed into humans by God) is trapped²⁹. Therefore the main calling in life is to point the soul or spirit towards God and stay away from sensuality. Eventually God will rescue the soul from its bodily prison and it will become ἴσος ἀγγέλοις (“equal to the angels”)³⁰. It is difficult to tell how far Philo's views represented those of the wider Alexandrian community, but it

²⁹Quaes. Genesis 3.11

³⁰Sacrificiis 5

would seem reasonable to say that there were a number of diaspora Jews who accepted Greek philosophy to a similar degree.

Pseudo-Phocylides is a pseudepigraphical text written some time after the third century BC³¹. It is clearly Jewish, but tries to hide this (e.g. it only lists those commandments from the OT which the majority of Greeks would agree with³²). It has clear Stoic influence and is written in hexameter. It claims:

*... the spirit is a loan of God to mortals, and (his) image.
For we have a body out of earth, and when afterward we are
resolved again into earth
we are but dust; and then the air has received our spirit.*

106-108

Here we can see a prime example of Greek influence: the passage has aspects of Genesis (the image of God, the body being taken out of the earth and then returning to dust) but there are also elements of Platonism (the spirit as a loan which finally the air receives). There is no mention of resurrection, simply an eternal disembodied bliss.

4 Maccabees³³ displays similar tendencies. It is development on 2 Maccabees 7, but the author has removed any mention of bodily resurrection. 2 Maccabees has many references to future resurrection, but the hope for martyrdom in 4 Maccabees is punishment for the oppressors and that “Abraham and Isaac and

³¹Van der Horst in Charlesworth 2.567-8

³²*Ibid.* 2.568-70

³³Anderson in Charlesworth 2.531-564

Jacob will welcome us, and all the fathers will praise us.” (4 Mac 13:17)

There are several other examples of blissful immortality of the soul³⁴. The important thing to notice is that they are all the work of diaspora Jews. These people would be more influenced by the Greek teaching than those who lived in Palestine. Indeed a survey of the tombstones of ancient Jews reveals those outside of Palestine were much more pessimistic, and used more Greek ideas about death than those within³⁵.

No Bodily Resurrection

The only group in Judaism which denied the afterlife in all forms were the Sadducees³⁶ who originated around 200BC and lived in Palestine. They were the aristocratic ruling party of the day, and to keep their positions they wanted to maintain peace at all costs. From Daniel onwards resurrection was linked to martyrdom, so the Sadducees wanted to avoid it, probably because someone is not as likely to revolt if they believe that this life is all. They based their theology solely on the Pentateuch, and there is no strong evidence for resurrection in these texts. The book of Sirach is often thought of as Sadducaic³⁷.

34 e.g. *Test. Abraham* (Recension A)

35 Horbury et al 1999, pp.90-91

36 Cf Acts 23:7-9, *Ant.* 18:16

37 e.g. 14:16-19

Resurrection with Immortal Bodies

Finally, the vast majority of literature that we have is firmly in support of the traditional views of bodily resurrection leading to immortality which we have seen above³⁸. The Pharisees clearly believed in this, and Herod fears that Jesus is John resurrected from the dead³⁹. 2 Maccabees has many references to resurrection, for example the fourth brother says to his torturers “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!” (2 Mac 7:14).

The strangest and arguably most important development, is that of the Septuagint. The translation probably originated in Alexandria, but unlike other works from there, is much more pro-resurrection⁴⁰. For example, Job 14:14 is changed from the question “if a man dies shall he live again?” to a positive statement. We see similar tendencies in the Greek translation of Sirach: although the Hebrew denies any afterlife, the Greek translation leaves the question open. Perhaps the Septuagint is a reaction against the assimilation of Greek philosophy into Judaism⁴¹.

38 e.g. 1 Enoch, the righteous will rise again (91:10), be transformed (108:11-15), and live forever (103:4) (cf 25:4-7, PssSol 3:11f, 4 Ezra 7:28-32)

39 Lk 9:7-9

40 Schürer 3.474-93

41 It would be interesting to do a full research project on the Septuagints' views of resurrection.

Conclusion

As we have seen, there was not much Greek influence upon Palestinian Judaism before AD70, but there was much assimilation occurring in the diaspora, particularly in Alexandria. There are of course exceptions to this, for example 2 Maccabees, a text which emphasises resurrection, was based on a work by Jason of Cyrene (i.e. a diaspora Jew) whereas Josephus, an educated Palestinian Jew, knows much about Greek philosophy (although how much he is influenced by it remains an open question).

In the end I agree with Wright against Nickelsburg that resurrection of immortal bodies remains a thoroughly Jewish idea. Therefore, the early Christian movement was based on modified Jewish beliefs rather than merging of Greek ones: instead of resurrection happening at the end of time as Judaism had always believed, Christians claimed that it had happened to their Messiah in the middle of time⁴². It would be very beneficial to study how the early Christians engaged with and influenced Greek and Jewish views of resurrection and immortality.

⁴² 1 Cor 15

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