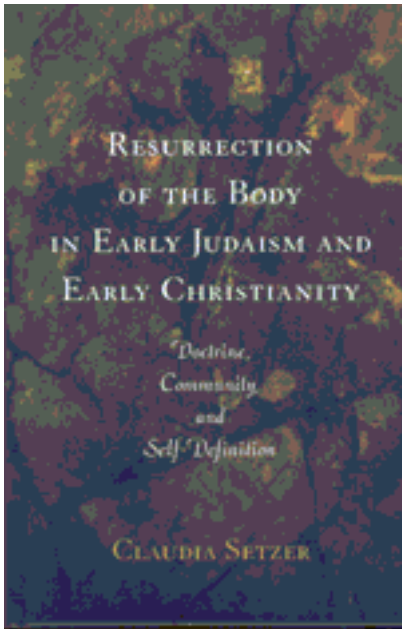


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Setzer, Claudia

Resurrection of the Body in Early Judaism and Early Christianity: Doctrine, Community, and Self-Definition

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Eric Noffke
Waldensian Church
Forano (RI) Italy 02044

Claudia Setzer's book leads the reader in a fascinating journey through the development of the doctrine of resurrection of the body in early Judaism and early Christianity: from the birth of the concept to its development in Christianity, from Paul to Irenaeus.

The author organizes her book around a specific thesis: far from being a doctrine standing by itself, the concept of resurrection of the body was a key concept to understand the specific interest of specific groups, "how these groups saw themselves, how they saw others, and how they coped with political and social realities" (1) The concept of resurrection of the body is only the revealing top of a theological iceberg.

Setzer's approach stands in continuity with the research on the political reading of the New Testament and Middle Jewish texts brought forth by scholars such as Richard Horsley, Neil Elliot, Warren Carter, and others. It is a research promising interesting developments but that sometimes risks stressing as political statements also biblical passages or theological concepts that, frankly, seem to point in other directions.

In chapter 1 we find the historical overview on the concepts of afterlife, pointing to the Hellenistic time as the moment in which the idea of resurrection of the body is clearly

stated; before that time we find nuances toward the idea in Old Testament texts such as Ezek 37:1–15, Isa 25:8, and Dan 12:1–3. Works such as Ethiopic *Enoch*, *Jubilees*, *Psalms of Solomon*, and the *Sibylline Oracles* are here examined as well. At the end of this first chapter, Setzer underlines how the idea of bodily resurrection is used to identify specific groups. She draws the following important conclusions, which will be deepened in the rest of the book: (1) “There is no direct and steady unfolding of the doctrine of resurrection over time, without detours” (20); (2) the boundary between the idea of resurrection and the immortality of the soul is very thin, and the two concepts very often overlap; (3) reference to the afterlife can also be unexplicated; in that case we are never sure the text is referring to the resurrection; (4) one can encounter in the same author or group of texts a mixed reference to different ideas of afterlife; and (5) resurrection is always “part of an ever-shifting constellation of ideas. Many ideas seem to emerge in tandem with it. It functioned in various contexts in various ways. For this reason I am not writing a history of the idea of resurrection, but am looking specifically at how it was used, limiting myself to contexts of self-definition, boundary making, and polemic” (20).

Chapter 2 deals with the concept of resurrection in early Judaism, especially as a marking sign of the Pharisees and the early Christians. It is seen as a biblically founded concept, a mark of the truly biblical faith (the Sadducees are dismissed as not faithful to the New Testament because they did not believe in it). Her study of the sources underlies the fact that faith in resurrection, according to the Pharisees, meant faith in God’s sovereignty, providence, and care for the world. It testified among the population their faithfulness to the teachings of the Torah and, finally, “was part of a strategy that allowed the Pharisees to negotiate their position as mediators between the Romans and the people” (35) because it could seem an innocuous belief to Rome but summarized the whole of Jewish faith to the people. “Resurrection, I suggest, confers authority on those who promote it because it is recognizable to a significant number of Jews as a shorthand for their cultural values, and because it is part of an effective strategy to solve some problems created by their subjection to Rome” (47). In this way the concept was also a “useful symbol for the integrity of the community” (52).

Chapter 3 deals with resurrection among believers in Jesus. Setzer first emphasizes that in Jesus’ preaching resurrection had a marginal role, because for him it was not necessary to stress an already-popular belief. It became central in Paul’s teaching for two reasons: (1) because it was a new and strange doctrine for the converted pagans; (2) because it was the major demonstration of God’s ruling power, as shown in Jesus’ resurrection. Setzer explains, “Paul replaces the old pyramid of patronage, and its sense of trickle-down benefits from the emperor to his subjects, with the crucified Jesus whom God raises in power. If he has been raised, so too must his subjects receive the same benefit” (66). In early Christianity, too, resurrection served as a symbol for a broader faith statement.

Resurrection in early Christianity is the topic of chapter 4: first the apostolic fathers, then Justin and Athenagoras. In these writers as well Setzer sees resurrection as a tool to express a broader field of faith, especially useful in the polemic against opponents, usually difficult to define.

Chapter 5 examines the point of view of the pagan opponents of the Christians, such as Celsus and Minucius Felix's Caecilius. In both cases we can see, among the different critics, offense at the idea of a God involved in human affairs and resurrecting something so negative and impure as flesh. This chapter plays an important role in the structure of the whole essay because it offers an interesting complement to the previous exposition.

Chapter 6 moves from the field of literature to the one of the material evidences of resurrection (e.g., inscriptions, iconography), a good choice, given that essays such as this one usually concentrate only in literature. Indeed, if we want to meet the real people and not just the ancient theologians, we can gain a good deal of information and a point of view alternative to the literary works from the archaeological remains. What strikes the reader is the scarce evidence for resurrection: on the whole, only 3 percent of the Jewish inscriptions mentions afterlife, even fewer when we consider the Christians remains before the fourth century! We find the same problem with other material evidence, which points toward a picture of uniformity where few people stressed their different point of view, "a picture of generalized Roman culture, in the face of which certain groups felt compelled to distinguish themselves by defending, in their writing and preaching, their distinctive teaching of resurrection" (124) My only criticism is that the issue could have been developed even further by Setzer because it seems seriously to question the diffusion among the people of the doctrines that seem to be so important in the writings of a few people.

The seventh chapter goes back to the Christian writers, and now it is the turn of two among the apologists: Irenaeus and Tertullian. In Irenaeus, the starting point is creation: while developing and presenting ideas already present in former apologists, such as Justin, he stresses in his theology the idea of creation by God, to whom resurrection is strongly linked. The human is a connection of body and soul, neither of which can live by itself. Only those who recognize resurrection are considered true interpreters of scripture. The conflict against the Gnostics is clearly in the background. A similar role is played by resurrection in Tertullian, where we can see how the concept was developed also as a rhetorical tool to clarify and defend Christian theology.

The conclusions are gathered in the final chapter. An appendix on resurrection in selected Nag Hammadi documents closes the volume, together with a good and comprehensive bibliography and indexes of references and names.

Setzer's book is very interesting and has the specific advantage of offering a great deal of information in a small number of pages. As she clearly states at the beginning of her work, she did not want to write a comprehensive study on the topic but to stress the role of the concept of bodily resurrection in the political and theological strategy in specific religious groups, such as Pharisees and Christians. Nevertheless, the book offers to the reader a good introduction to the general topic.

About the basic thesis of the book, I think it is stimulating but not fully convincing. While in the main it sounds quite right and a good starting point for future studies, I have the impression that the idea of the resurrection as a "shortcut" for a more complex system just does not work very well. The concept was too widespread and above all vague to really identify a political and theological system. Just to use her examples: What did early Christianity and Pharisaism hold in common, beside the idea of resurrection? And, given the wide variety of theological nuances present in the two groups, what could be said about them just referring to resurrection?

Also, the comparison between Pharisees and Christians seems to me in some way incorrect: the first was a well-defined religious party with a long history and different schools in its midst. Christianity, at its beginnings, was not exactly a party but was more a movement that could cross and involve people belonging to specific religious parties.

I also see the political value of the resurrection idea as more limited than stated in this book. It was a theological tool that could sustain the most intransigent zealot as well as the more isolated and peaceful person seeking God in the desert. It could well be part of a resistance strategy, but it all depended on the political attitude of the movement or the person. The idea of resurrection in itself is not enough to identify a theology of political resistance.

Beside these observations, Setzer's book is a very interesting, stimulating book, a sound research on the topic. It is recommended to everyone interested, being a book of easy access also to the nonscholarly reader.