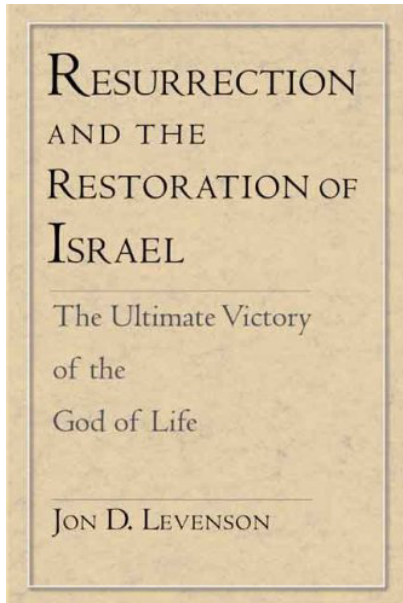


RBL 08/2007



Levenson, Jon D.

Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. Pp. xx + 274.
Cloth. \$40.00. ISBN 0300117353.

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I vividly recall my college religion professors in the early 1980s asserting that the concept of resurrection and everlasting life is virtually absent from the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish religion likewise, I was taught, is firmly convinced of individual mortality and possesses a determinedly this-worldly focus. Twenty-five years later, I still encounter the same appraisals of Scripture and Judaism in student papers and published scholarship. They are fundamentally misleading, I believe, and I am grateful to Jon D. Levenson for this intellectually sophisticated and theologically sensitive new study that attempts to show why the conventional wisdom on resurrection in the Bible and in Jewish belief must be rethought.

Although many contemporary Jews find the idea either foreign or objectionable, Levenson insists that classical Judaism has a central and deep commitment to bodily resurrection. The ancient Amidah prayer, to be repeated daily according to rabbinic law, includes in its second benediction (*Gevurot*) a fourfold affirmation that God “revives the dead.” So too, the Mishnah brands anyone who does not believe in the resurrection of the dead a heretic. Later, the rabbis of the talmudic era demonstrably affirmed that God’s eschatological designs include raising the faithful to life once more. And, in the Middle

Ages, the power of talmudic tradition forced Maimonides to recant his intimations that the resurrection will not involve truly corporeal human bodies.

The rabbinic commitment to resurrection, Levenson argues, is firmly moored in Scripture. No late accretion into the canon from Second Temple times, resurrection faith is “deeply and thickly rooted” in the both the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East. The first readers of Daniel would have experienced the new doctrine as thoroughly conservative when it appeared, since texts such as Dan 12:2 do little more than actualize the deep structure of earlier biblical theology. It is untenable to think that resurrection came into Scripture either as a borrowing from Zoroastrianism or as a reaction to the crises and martyrdoms of the Maccabean era. The idea of resurrection was already extant prior to the trauma of Maccabean times (see 1 En. 27:1–4!) and resurrection in Zoroastrianism is quite dissimilar to biblical resurrection.

The most likely precursors of Israel’s resurrection faith are certain “antipodes” to Sheol embedded in preexilic biblical tradition. By “antipodes,” Levenson means powerful symbols and realities that oppose and contradict the power of death. Levenson understands these anti-Sheols to be potentials of God that eventually become activated in Second Temple times, when they blossom in the doctrine of resurrection. Tellingly, these antipodes are to be found only in the world of the living, not in the netherworld.

The biblical antipodes to Sheol include particularly the reversals of barrenness and death wrought by the divine warrior (e.g., Isa 35:5–7); the intimations of immortality associated with the Edenic environs of the Jerusalem temple (e.g., Ps 133:3; Jonah 2:5–8); and the power of progeny and remembrance to ward off a parent’s terror in the face of death (e.g., Gen 48:11). Deep, long-established currents converge and pour forth in resurrection faith, according to Levenson. These currents all celebrate praise-filled existence *on this side of death*, not in an ethereal heaven, so that their eschatological actualization (viz., resurrection) almost inevitably ended up being physical and corporeal.

Over against the forlornness and defilement of death, God steadfastly promises, offers, and prefers life. Yet despite God’s partisanship on behalf of life, the tragic presence of death in God’s world is undeniable. Thus, Levenson notes, a fundamental tension permeates Scripture. The doctrine of bodily resurrection, when it finally crystallizes full-blown, both restates and resolves this core biblical paradox.

Levenson unearths credible antecedents to the vision of bodily resurrection in late biblical texts such as Dan 12:1–3. Most proximately, Isa 52:13–53:12; 66:22–24; and 26:19 all support the idea of resurrection, and all were of undoubted influence on the manner in which Dan 12 articulates its vision. Isaiah 26:19 presents resurrection in a way particularly

close to Daniel. Far from using resurrection as a mere metaphor for Israel's spiritual revival, it speaks specifically of the rising of the corpses of dead Israelites, namely, "your dead ones." Each in their own way, Daniel's antecedents proclaim that, in the end, God keeps faith with Israel, even with those Israelites who sleep in the dust.

Somewhat more distantly, other parts of Scripture lay the foundation for the apocalyptic belief that the dead will someday be raised. Texts such as 1 Sam 2:6 and Deut 32:39 unequivocally affirm God's sovereignty over death and Sheol. Prophetic stories from the books of Kings affirm that both Elijah and Elisha performed actual acts of individual resurrection (1 Kgs 17:17–24; 2 Kgs 4:8–37; cf. 2 Kgs 13:21). Incontestably, resurrection was thought possible in preexilic times.

Even texts such as Hos 6:2 and Ezek 37 are stepping stones on the way to Israel's commitment to eschatological resurrection. Levenson refuses to dismiss such passages as irrelevant simply because resurrection is a mere metaphor there. Effective communication requires metaphors that are relevant and compelling, he notes. If literal resurrection was not a live possibility in these texts' milieu, the image would be inappropriate and self-defeating.

Among the most helpful of Levenson's correctives to modern thinking is his insistence that resurrection in biblical theology is a strikingly communal and familial event. He should have pursued this line of argument more extensively. Traditional Israel's emphasis on family ties had more striking ramifications for how Israelites related to their dead kinsfolk than Levenson makes out in this book.

Traditional Israel insisted on kinsfolk maintaining "umbilical" connections with their progenitors in order to help ensconce the dead safe from the terrors of Sheol. Practices of land tenure, bench-tomb burial, and veneration of ancestors all helped make family ties concrete. The soul that was ensconced in kinship might huddle together in the company of living-dead ancestors (e.g., Gen 47:29–30; 49:29–30; 50:25). Such a soul might receive warmth and succor from the force of communal memory, which served to unite kinsfolk, living and living-dead, in faithful mutuality (see Deut 25:6; Ruth 4:5, 10; Ps 109:13, 15).

Family ties must perdure and triumph, old Israel believed. They must extend out in caring mutuality not only horizontally, to living relatives, but also vertically to one's parents, one's parents' parents, and even one's forebears of distant memory. Levenson cannot be correct that the ancient Israelite's deceased progenitors were really experienced as dead and gone. I find particularly inconceivable his argument that life slams its door more firmly in the face of the righteous than in the face of the sinner. How can we

suppose that those in Sheol experience a prolongation of existence but that no alternative afterlife is available for the heroes of the faith?

Ruth 1:16–17 spells out an ideal of kin mutuality that transcends death and spells togetherness in the hereafter. With steadfast love maintained, not “even death” can separate Naomi from Ruth (NRSV). The two women anticipate a place of postmortem asylum and togetherness apart from the isolating terrors of Sheol. In like manner, Samuel avoids Sheol by huddling together with an entourage of kinfolk. First Samuel 28:13 has the living-dead Samuel appear as his old self, surrounded by a company of comrades.

As in Samuel’s case, Abraham, Aaron, and Moses also all escape Sheol and are “gathered to their people” as living-dead individuals. The gathering of Abraham to his people is something that his soul experiences (Gen 25:8), not his body, since the latter is laid to rest with no one other than his wife (25:9). By the same token, Aaron and Moses are gathered to their people in an experience separate from the burial of their bodies, which were laid in individual graves outside the promised land (Num 20:24; 27:13; Deut 34:6).

Given our ample textual evidence for postmortem survival in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., 1 Sam 28; 1 Kgs 17:21–22; Isa 8:19; 14:9–10; Ezek 32:21; Gen 35:18), why is Levenson reluctant to affirm a universal a-mortality of the soul in biblical thought? I suspect his reluctance is primarily a negative reaction to certain excesses of scholars of the history of Israelite religion. His monograph quite rightly resists uncontrolled reconstructions of an Israelite cult of the dead, which harmonize Yahwism with its larger cultural milieu and portray it as a religion where practices such as necromancy, funerary reveling, and the deification of dead ancestors were licit and widely practiced.

Not merely fragile and harmonizing in nature, such reconstructions of Yahwism fail to reckon with how biblical Israel relied on the ties of kinship to keep up and out of reach of the depths of the underworld, with all their appalling, defiling, and demonic terrors (see, e.g., Num 19:11–22; Ezek 39:14–16; 43:7–9; Hag 2:13). To travel to the depths of Sheol in search of preternatural aid (see Isa 57:9) was anathema, since it meant forsaking the nearer help of one’s living kin, one’s landed patrimony, and one’s caring ancestors. All of these more proximate, community-based forces wield significant power, biblical faith maintains. Sanctioned and blessed by God, such power mounts up even to resist the dissevering blade of death.

Levenson could have acknowledged how lineage ties transcend death in biblical Israel’s faith. It would not have been caving in to the reconstructionists, since we can properly distinguish a laudable care and veneration of the dead from an occult tendency to deify, consult, and worship them. The depths of Sheol may offer apostates some preternatural

resources (2 Kgs 3:27; Ps 106:37–38; Isa 66:3; Jer 19:5; 32:35; Ezek 23:37), but they are far different from the inspiration and blessing that the living-dead offer to the faithful, who, in turn, rightly support them by maintaining familial ties (cf. Ps 16:3; Jer 31:15; Isa 63:16).

Do not be fooled by this volume's truncated index of authors, which inexplicably does not reference the endnote matter. This is a very well researched work. Well informed by previous scholarship, deeply considered, and highly reflective, this study is to be highly recommended, despite my one significant reservation just registered.