

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Resurrection in the Bible

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by

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Introduction and Thesis

The word resurrection comes from the Latin *resurrectio*, meaning “rising again”; a return to life after having died; and typically refers to the resurrection of Christ.¹ Christian’s have spoken and written of resurrection since Christ rose from the dead some two thousand years ago. The Apostle’s Creed announces a core Christian belief with the declaration, “I believe in...the resurrection of the body”. “The resurrection of the body is declared doctrine in Augustine’s *Enchiridion*, where he writes, ‘Now, as to the resurrection of the body, [. . .] that the bodies of all men—both those who have been born and those who shall be born, both those who have died and those who shall die—shall be raised again, no Christian ought to have the shadow of a doubt’ (chap. 84).”² This raises an important question: Who is the subject of these doctrines of resurrection? Christians often speak of resurrection in very narrow terms. In sermons, hymns, contemporary songs, and books the term resurrection is typically focused on the resurrection of those New Testament believers who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. Biblical terms such as “salvation”, “everlasting life”, and “eternal life” are often thought of as synonymous with “resurrection.” However, the term resurrection has a much broader meaning when viewed through the lens of the entirety of scripture. This paper will show that the Bible actually teaches that all human beings will be resurrected after death, not just those who have placed their faith in Jesus; however, the ultimate eternal state of each individual is dependent on the nature of their relationship to the Christ.

¹ Burns, J. L. (2012, 2013, 2014). Resurrection. In J. D. Barry, et al., (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

² Karmen MacKendrick, "Eternal Flesh: The Resurrection of the Body," *Discourse 27*, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 67-83.

The Biblical Concept of Resurrection

Resurrection is a key theme found throughout the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments. The Bible speaks of resurrection in two main forms: the resurrection of those who have died and then are brought back to life to a natural physical state through a miraculous act of God, but who will eventually die again; and those who have died and then are resurrected into a new state of being in the afterlife and who will live for eternity.

There are several examples of this first type of physical resurrection (reanimation) or people being raised from the dead, in both the Old and New Testaments. In the book of 1 Kings, the prophet Elijah resurrects (raises from the dead) the son of Zarephath's widow (1 Kings 17:17-24). In 2 Kings, the Bible has the account of the prophet Elisha resurrecting the son of a Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:32-35). Perhaps the strangest account of resurrection in the Old Testament is also found in 2 Kings. In Chapter 13, there is an account of a man raised from the dead by simply coming into contact with Elisha's bones (2 Kings 13:20). It is noteworthy to mention the Old Testament prophets Enoch and Elijah, both of whom were taken into heaven without actually experiencing physical death in this world (*cf.* Genesis 5:25, 2 Kings 2:1, 11, Hebrews 11:5). While not examples of resurrection, these are examples of God's miraculous power over human life.

The New Testament also contains examples of physical resurrections performed by both Christ and the apostles. Matthew and Luke write of the account of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter from the dead (Matthew 9:25, Luke 8:40-56); Luke writes of a widow in the town of Nain whose son Jesus resurrected (Luke 7:11-16); and John tells of Christ's resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:38-44). The Gospel of Matthew describes the resurrection of "many holy people who had

died” at the moment of Christ’s death on the cross but before his resurrection three days hence (Matthew 27:52).³ In Acts, the Apostle Peter raised Tabitha after she died from sickness (Acts 9:40-41) and the Apostle Paul raised a man named Eutychus who had died of a fall from a third story window (Acts 20:9-11). All of the proceeding examples in both the Old and New Testaments represent the earthly, physical type of resurrection where the resurrected person came back to life, but whom eventually died again. While these miraculous events are important in demonstrating God’s power over human life, they pale in comparison with the importance and impact of the second type of resurrection, which will eventually happen to all people.

The Jewish view of resurrection is that “[whether] it was the righteous, or all of Israel, or all mankind righteous and wicked alike, the resurrection in Jewish thinking always had reference to the general resurrection of the dead, never the resurrection of an isolated individual.”⁴ This idea that resurrection applies to all humans is not isolated to Jewish views. The Roman Catholic Church teaches in the Baltimore catechism that “[by] ‘the resurrection of the body’ is meant that at the end of the world the bodies of *all men* will rise from the earth and be united again to their souls, nevermore to be separated.’ (Vol. 3, Lesson 14)” (emphasis added).⁵ This type of resurrection is that the person who dies will experience a transition into a new form after death, while keeping the same personal identity, or self, that they had while alive in this world. “The very same person who exists on earth is to exist in an afterlife... Not only is there to be individual existence in the resurrection, but the very same individuals are to exist both now and

³ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

⁴ William Lane Craig, "On Doubts About the Resurrection," *Modern Theology* 6, no. 1 (October 1989): 69.

⁵ Karmen MacKendrick, "Eternal Flesh: The Resurrection of the Body," *Discourse* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 67.

after death.”⁶ Continuity of the self is critical to the Biblical understanding of resurrection. If this were not the case, then the person who lived life in this world would not be the same person who finds himself or herself alive again in the afterlife. Thus the reward of heaven or the punishment of hell would have no meaning. Without a continuity of self, God would simply capriciously assign individuals to eternal bliss or eternal damnation without regard to the actions or decisions of that person in life. The question of salvation in Christ would have no meaning. There are multiple Bible passages that show this is the case. In the Old Testament, the passages of Genesis 25:8, 35:29, and 49:33 use the phrase “gathered unto his people” show that after death, the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) were found among their friends and family in heaven. In 2 Samuel after grieving for his dying son, David remarks, “But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me” (2 Samuel 12:23). In the New Testament in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has an encounter with Moses and Elijah on a mountain where he spoke with them “about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:28-30). In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul writes about his prayer before “the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name” (Ephesians 3:14-15). This continuity of self is described as the human soul. The soul is the immaterial self that continues beyond the first life in this world. “The body is separable from the person and the person can continue even if the body is destroyed... The soul...is the necessary core which must continue if I am to continue; it is the part of the person which is necessary for his continuing existence.”⁷ Clearly the Bible shows that there is a

⁶ Lynne Rudder Baker, "Persons and the Metaphysics of Resurrection," *Religious Studies* 43, no. 3 (September 2007): 339.

⁷ Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 146.

continuity of self, or soul, that consists of memories and of experiences from life in this world that continues in the after-life.

The Biblical concept of resurrection also entails the resurrected having a physical body. While “post-mortem bodies are different from pre-mortem bodies in that they are said to be ‘spiritual’, ‘incorruptible’, or ‘glorified’...those who live after death will ultimately be embodied, according to Christian doctrine.”⁸ The idea that the resurrected will have physical bodies is taught throughout scripture. Job 19:26-27 says, “And after my skin has been destroyed, *yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another*” (emphasis added). The Prophet Isaiah writes, “But your dead will live, Lord; *their bodies will rise—let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy—your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead*” (Isaiah 26:19, emphasis added). Christ speaks of his bodily resurrection in Mark, when he says, “The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later” (Mark 9:31b). Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:42-43). Here, Paul is not referring to a non-corporeal (spiritual) body, but rather the word here, *pneumatikos*, is pertaining to the Spirit or of spiritual conduct and a pattern of life controlled by the Holy Spirit. “The resurrection body will be one adapted to its new spiritual environment. The physical body is weak, dishonorable, and perishable. It will be raised in Christ as spiritual, glorious, powerful,

⁸ Baker, “Persons and the Metaphysics of Resurrection”, 340.

and imperishable.”⁹ The resurrected body (of believers) will be a physical body that is glorified and no longer subject to being controlled by the fallen world.¹⁰

The Types of Resurrection

The Perfect Model: The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Unarguably the most important resurrection to be studied is the resurrection of Jesus Christ; the linchpin of Christian doctrine. The Apostle Paul writes in his first letter to the church in Corinth, “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:13-14). While a full discussion of the evidence for Christ’s resurrection is beyond the scope of this paper, “...at the center of the historical issue regarding the resurrection appearances is that Jesus’ disciples were totally convinced that they had seen the risen Jesus.”¹¹ The New Testament and the Apostles’ Creed “unhesitatingly speak of Jesus’ resurrection in terms of being raised bodily.”¹² The post-mortem appearances of Jesus convinced his disciples that he had been raised from the dead in a genuine physical form. They were so convinced of this fact that they were willing to die for this truth. What is important to note is “[the] Gospel accounts of Jesus’ resurrection show that He now possesses a body that is similar to His former state but yet is

⁹ D.S. Dockery, “The Pauline Letters”. *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 559.

¹⁰ René A. López, "The Nature of the Resurrection Body of Jesus and Believers," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 170, no. 678 (April-June 2013): 153.

¹¹ Gary R. Herbert Herbert "Experiences of the Risen Jesus: The Foundational Historical Issue in the Early Proclamation of the Resurrection," *Dialog* 45, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 294.

¹² Samuel Oyinloye Abogunrin, "The Language and Nature of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ in the New Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 24, no. 1 (March 1981): 55.

different from it.”¹³ The New Testament shows that Christ’s resurrected body was a physical body in every sense of the word and not spiritual or immaterial. Christ walked with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35); he ate with his disciples (Luke 24:41-43); and his body still bore the scars from his crucifixion on his hands and feet (Luke 24:39; John 20:27). “No so-called ‘spiritual’ or immaterial body would have physical scars.”¹⁴ Yet despite these obvious physical characteristics, Christ’s resurrected body has traits that are beyond a normal, non-resurrected, non-glorified body. For example, on the evening of the Sunday on which Christ was resurrected, the disciples were together in locked room “for fear of the Jewish leaders”, and Christ “came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’” (John 20:19). In this case, it seems Christ was able to move about the physical world in a manner that was not constrained by the normal laws of physics. In the aforementioned “road to Emmaus” passage, Jesus’ disciples do not immediately recognize him. The Bible says, “they were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:16). This is also the case when Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Jesus outside his tomb (John 20:14) and when the disciples see the resurrected Christ standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (John 21:4). Christ’s resurrected body, while physical in nature, has additional glorified traits that are “uniquely different, since now time and spatial barriers do not limit it.”¹⁵ Christ is the one to which those who have placed their faith in him can look to as the perfect example.

13 López, "The Nature of the Resurrection Body", 144.

14 Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 667.

15 López, "The Nature of the Resurrection Body", 153.

Resurrection of New Testament Believers

Scripture teaches that New Testament believers can look forward to having resurrected bodies like Christ. John writes, “But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Because Christ has lead the way, those who have placed their trust in him can have confidence that they, too, will be resurrected in a manner like him. The Apostle Paul writes, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:20-22). Here Paul is assuring the believers in Corinth that “[just] as the firstfruits presented to God on the first day of the week following Passover guaranteed the coming harvest (Lev. 23:9–11), so Christ’s resurrection guarantees the resurrection of believers.”¹⁶ Christ makes several references to resurrection in the Gospels. In Matthew, he is confronted by the Sadducees (“who say there is no resurrection” [12:18]) and answers their challenge by telling them “When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given to marriage...[God] is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Mark 12:25, 27, *cf.* Matthew 22:23-23, Luke 20:27-40). In 1 Corinthians, Paul provides a clear statement regarding the believer’s resurrection when he writes, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:51-53). In the Gospel of John, Christ makes one of the most emphatic statements regarding the resurrection of believers when he says, “Jesus said to her [Martha], ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in

¹⁶ Dockery, “The Pauline Letters”, 559.

me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25–26). Here, Christ is saying that “eternal life is not just an indefinite period of time that begins at the death of believers. It is the quality of relationship with Christ, the depth of love between God and God’s children, and an existence that beings at the moment of redemption.”¹⁷ It is clear that New Testament believers, those who have placed their faith in Christ since his birth, death, and resurrection some two thousand years ago, can have confidence that they will experience a physical, bodily resurrection after their life in this world is over.

Resurrection of Old Testament Believers

Perhaps one of the more challenging aspects of Christianity is what to make of Old Testament believers. These individuals lived hundreds, if not thousands of years, before Christ. They had no way of knowing him or placing their faith in him before their deaths. If, as the book of Acts says, in order to be saved you must “believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31b), what hope do those who lived in Old Testament times have? It seems even those who believed in God did not have knowledge of Jesus Christ. “The content of the Jewish conception always concerned a resurrection of the dead after the end of human history.”¹⁸ Yet we also see examples in the New Testament of Old Testament prophets if not existing in resurrected bodies, at least in heaven. As previously noted, there are several Gospel accounts of Jesus encountering Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-3, Mark 9:2-4, Luke 9:28-30). At the very least, these two Old Testament saints were not condemned for their lack of knowledge of Christ. In the Book of Daniel, the prophet writes regarding the end times:

¹⁷ Francois Bovon, "The Soul's Comeback: Immortality and Resurrection in Early Christianity," *Harvard Theological Review* 103, no. 4 (October 2010): 399-400.

¹⁸ Craig, "On Doubts About the Resurrection," 69.

“At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:1-2).

Here, Daniel is saying that those whose name is written in the Book of Life (*cf.* Philippians 4:3, Revelation 13:8, 17:8, 20:12) will be delivered, and all who have died (e.g.: “who sleep in the dust”), will be resurrected; yet some will spend eternity in heaven with God while others will be eternally separated from God in hell. The prophet Isaiah also writes of a resurrection in the Old Testament: “But your dead will live, Lord; their bodies will rise—let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy” (Isaiah 26:19a). This passage “is a critical passage in the so-called Isaiah Apocalypse, because it describes a future reanimation of the dead.”¹⁹ While Old Testament believers did not have the knowledge of Christ, “to those who lived before his coming, the belief in a future life was a hope, grounded in their faith in the faithfulness of their God, but still only a hope.”²⁰ This hope is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ who “died for all” (1 Corinthians 5:15).

Resurrection of Non-Believers

Perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects of scripture are passages that discuss the resurrection of non-believers. The majority of the New Testament speaks to the hope of salvation and resurrection for those who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ. Christians typically think of resurrection as something that is reserved for believers. However, the Bible

¹⁹ Philip C. Schmitz, "The Grammar of Resurrection in Isaiah 26: 19a-c," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 145.

²⁰ Gabriel Herbert, "Hope Looking Forward: The Old Testament Passages Used by the New Testament Writers as Prophetic of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.," *Interpretation* 10, no. 3 (jul 1, 1956): 269.

does teach that those who have rejected God and Christ will someday be resurrected as well. “The resurrections of the just and of the unjust, however, are separated by a period of time, which fact is revealed in this Scripture.”²¹ In Revelation 20, John is writing about the tribulation saints who rejected the mark of the beast and were killed for their faith in Christ. They “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4). In Verse 5, “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.” These “rest of the dead” represent the non-believers who are resurrected after the thousand-year reign of Christ. These individuals will be judged before the white throne “according to what they had done as record in the books” (Revelation 20:12b). Those who are condemned then face the “second death” (verse 14), and “Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire” along with Death and Hades (Revelation 20:15). The church father Tertullian believed that despite the fact that “the soul is corporeal, possession a particular kind of solidity” which “enables it to both perceive and suffer...it will still need the flesh...because it is necessary that it should possess such a faculty along with the flesh.”²²

Conclusions

The concept of resurrection is found throughout the Bible. The Old Testament prophets wrote of the hope of the future resurrection, certainly not having a complete understanding of God’s plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. Yet they had hope. The wisdom literature of Psalms speaks of themes of resurrection (Psalms 17:15, 49:15, 71:20). The Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote both of the coming Messiah and his death and resurrection; and of the

²¹ C. F. Lincoln, "The Believer's Resurrection," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 113, no. 449 (January 1956): 53.

²² Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, trans. Peter Holmes Ante-Nicene Fathers (n.p.: n.d.), 3:1, accessed November 7, 2014, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel>, Chapter 17.

general resurrection to come. The New Testament authors wrote extensively on the resurrection of Christ and the hope for resurrection of those who have placed their faith in Christ. The Apostles clearly placed their faith in the fact of Jesus' resurrection, and believed, often on pain of death, that he really did rise bodily from the grave and forty days later ascended to heaven. They clearly believed that "[resurrection] is not a return to earthly life, but the union between those who have died a martyr's death and King Christ."²³ Through Christ, all who place their trust in him have the hope of an eternal future secured by his death, burial, and (most importantly) resurrection. Christians can be assured that their future state will be one where their souls continue on to be united with a resurrected body. Those who have not placed their faith in Christ will eventually be bodily resurrected, only to face final judgment. Thus it has been shown that the Bible actually teaches that all human beings will be resurrected after death, not just those who have placed their faith in Jesus; however, the ultimate eternal state of each individual is dependent on the whether or not he or she has placed their trust in Jesus Christ and accepted, or rejected, the free gift of salvation that God offers every human being.

²³ Markus Vinzent, *Christ's Resurrection in Early Christianity and the Making of the New Testament* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Pub Co, 2011), 128.

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