

DID KOHELETH BELIEVE IN RESURRECTION? ECCLESIASTES IN THE CONTEXT OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

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Introduction

Mainline Christianity does not proclaim resurrection loudly enough. Some even argue that resurrection is not announced in the Old Testament, let alone in the enigmatic book of Ecclesiastes.

Much of what I am about to present emanates from my master's thesis.¹ Ecclesiastes has always been my favorite book of the Bible. I bristle when I hear scholars call it "pessimistic," "lesser theology," or the like. Have we reduced the canon from 66 to 65? Martin Luther had his "canon within a canon." I find that dangerous and degrading to the pure revelation of God. Ecclesiastes must stand as God's whole truth, even when it speaks of death and hints at resurrection.

The purpose of this article is to present the landscape of resurrection theology in the Old Testament with special and final emphasis on Ecclesiastes. If the truth of God collides with any contemporary theological positions, then a reformation moment may occur.

The Standard Texts on Resurrection in the Old Testament

The "standard" texts which speak of resurrection in the Old Testament include Job 19:25-27 ("And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God"), Isaiah 26:19 ("But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You 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"), and Daniel 12:2 ("Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt").

A secondary group of verses are more obscure in their reference to resurrection. Job 14:7, 14 speaks of "sprouting" in connection with death. Ezekiel 37 is the well-known vision of dry bones, describing an apparent national resurrection for Israel. Hosea 13:14 includes a passage quoted by Paul in his

¹ Robert L. Jones, *The Question of After-Life in Ecclesiastes*, master of arts thesis submitted to Wheaton College, 1976.

resurrection chapter of 1 Corinthians 15. Hosea says, “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?” Some would even include Psalm 73:24.

The charismatic Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha have resurrection stories as well. Each prophet raised a boy from death (1 Kings 17:17ff and 2 Kings 4:29ff), and Elisha even performed a posthumous resurrection miracle when a man’s bones were thrown into his grave (2 Kings 13:21).

This writer is thus convinced that resurrection can be found in Old Testament thought. Other texts can be added which, by inference, add further weight to the existence of such a concept. There is no need to relegate the concept to New Testament teaching alone.

A Survey of Commentary on Resurrection Texts in the Old Testament Job 19:25-27

What do Old Testament theologians have to say about resurrection and, in particular, these texts we have identified as “standard” in the presentation of the theology from the Old Testament? First of all, Walter C. Kaiser says Job is crying out for post-mortem vindication in Job 19:23-27.² The implication is that vindication is meaningless unless he personally can experience it after death.

Of course, there is the matter of the translation of the Hebrew *min* in verse 26. Is it “apart” from the body or “from inside” the body? Kaiser offers verse 27 (“my eyes shall behold [him] and not another”) as possible evidence toward the answer.³ That is in spite of the protests of “too advanced theology” from some who hold to more primitive theology being contained in the older Old Testament materials. Kaiser defers to the Egyptians and their behavior as found in the pyramids to respond to those critics.

J. Barton Payne discusses Job 19:25, 26 as Job’s understanding that the spirit goes to God at death, and the body then sees God at the Messiah’s return and kingdom.⁴ That sounds like quite advanced theology in my opinion.

Edmond Jacob states that Job 19:26 is a very advanced expression of the faith that death will be deprived of its hold over man as his number one enemy.⁵ Job feels he is about to die without being vindicated, without seeing God’s justice. Jacob sees the “dust” as the dust of the earth, not the dust of the tomb or

² Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978, 180-181.

³ *Ibid*, 180-181.

⁴ J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962, 458.

⁵ Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, New York: Harper & Row, 1958, 308-309.

of the corpse. Bodily resurrection is not in this Job text, according to Jacob.

William J. Dumbrell describes Job 19 in this manner: “he contemplates death, confident that after death there will be the possibility of contact with God, the experience he has sought.”⁶ Not a ringing endorsement of resurrection in the text, but Dumbrell allows that Job may have been thinking of resurrection as he wrote those words.

Walther Eichrodt interprets Job’s words as a hope that God will personally visit him at the moment of death.⁷ In a footnote, Eichrodt dismisses 19:25-27 as a very corrupted text that cannot be totally repaired. “But that it does not refer to resurrection and eternal life in the ordinary sense should be beyond question, in view of the train of thought in the passages that precede and follow, especially their contemplation of the doom of death.” It seems clear that Eichrodt does not see resurrection in this “classic” text.

In summary, resurrection plays to mixed reviews in Job 19:25-27. It is the opinion of this writer that resurrection can be found in this text which may have been written as early as the patriarchal age.

Isaiah 26:19

Kaiser asserts that the text teaches that believers are restored to life via bodily resurrection.⁸ Payne believes Isaiah was teaching the resurrection of the elect alone, rather than a general resurrection.⁹ Dumbrell states, “Yahweh’s control over death is now revealed.”¹⁰

Eichrodt focuses on the word “awake” as linking the post-resurrection condition to pre-death existence.¹¹ Death, he contends, did not sever body and soul, but consigned both to a shadowy existence in *sheol*. Resurrection then is bodily, the only concept that remains true to the Israelite concepts of life and death.

Daniel 12:2

An apparent development in the doctrine of resurrection in the Old Testament can be seen in this text from a later period of Hebrew theological thought. Kaiser simply points to the separation of groups involved in

⁶ William S. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: Its Expression in the Books of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1988, 220.

⁷ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament: Volume II*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967, 519.

⁸ Kaiser, 249.

⁹ Payne, 460.

¹⁰ Dumbrell, 105.

¹¹ Eichrodt, 515.

resurrection.¹² The separation reveals a group raised to shame, contempt, and doom, and another raised to life eternal. He also reminds students of the Bible to keep the introductory phrase “at that time” from 12:1 in mind as an interpretive tool. Eschatology seems to be in mind.

Payne links Daniel 12 to the New Testament doctrines of first and second resurrection, most clearly delineated in the book of Revelation.¹³ He sees the text as a useful apologetic tool against liberal attacks on total resurrection. A common liberal argument asserts that only the very good and the very bad will be raised. The word “many” as opposed to the word “all” poses an obstacle to Payne’s use of Daniel 12:2 in defense of total resurrection.

Jacob also points to the separation of participants in resurrection.¹⁴ Since the context is tribulation and suffering for God’s people, retribution makes resurrection essential for the true and final vindication of God’s faithful servants.

Eichrodt again emphasizes bodily resurrection as the only interpretation truly consonant with the Israelite views of life and death.¹⁵ The word “awake” as found also in Isaiah 26:19 is integral in that argument. Eschatological punishment awaits some, and eschatological reward awaits others, the ultimate goal being eternal fellowship with God Himself. The mechanism or process by which this transformation from death to life happens is secondary to the final product.

Dumbrell focuses on the context of Michael’s intervention on behalf of Israel in their time of distress. “The interpretation of this verse is not easy, but probable exegesis confines those resurrected to the righteous only; that is, it is a resurrection of the faithful which is being described.”¹⁶ It wouldn’t seem that such a variety in interpretation of Daniel 12:2 was possible, but, alas, unanimity again eludes us.

Other Old Testament Texts

Job 14 often finds its way into such discussions with its “sprouting” references. Job speaks of future hope for a fallen tree. “If it is cut down, it will sprout again” (14:7, NIV) connects in an intriguing way to 14:14, where, after mentioning death, Job said, “I will wait for my renewal [lit. sprouting] to come.” Is that not at least a hint of his wish or belief that life will be restored to him after death?

Kaiser points to *yahalip* as the Hebrew root in both verses.¹⁷ The union of life and death and sprouting with the simple understanding of what happens to a

¹² Kaiser, 249.

¹³ Payne, 461-462.

¹⁴ Jacob, 313.

¹⁵ Eichrodt, 515.

¹⁶ Dumbrell, 264.

¹⁷ Kaiser, 180-181.

tree stump seems to point to resurrection. Payne points out that 14:12 mentions awaking from sleep in this discussion of death.¹⁸ Eichrodt sees speculation about life and death here, as well as Job's belief that God never abandons His handiwork.¹⁹ As God does not abandon a tree, He will never abandon man, even at death. A similar thought is offered by Dumbrell who sees Job 14 as "reflection...on the possibility of life beyond this human dilemma."²⁰ The language of Job 14 requires more interpretation to arrive at resurrection, hence the disagreement over whether it is actually being asserted.

Ezekiel 37 may be interpreted as a belief in individual resurrection, or perhaps it is the spiritual and national restoration of Israel that is in view. Kaiser weighs in on the national restoration side of the argument. "This chapter does not deal with the doctrine of personal bodily resurrection but with national resurrection."²¹ Payne agrees with Kaiser, saying Ezekiel 37 "is purely symbolical and explicitly defined as a vision that refers to the restoration of Israel to Palestine after the Babylonian exile."²²

Jacob is far less dogmatic on Ezekiel 37.²³ It is about national restoration, but the door is left open to the possibility of the dead actually coming back to life. Ezekiel's question ("Won't you tell us what you mean by this?" v. 18) makes more sense if Ezekiel had the actual dead in mind rather than the obvious national restoration. He further offers the possibility that dead Israelites will participate in the national restoration. Dumbrell is also less equivocal in stating that a mighty national resurrection is here, but the question is whether it precedes or follows the individual resurrection.²⁴

Eichrodt also allows resurrection of actual dead. He writes that the chapter describes divine power to those who are as good as dead²⁵ and also that "Ezekiel himself...felt strongly the monstrous, unnatural quality of a resurrection, and at first held back from it in revulsion. Only the definite command of his God to summon by his prophetic word the power of that divine breath which throughout the world calls forth new life to an unheard-of deed of wonder leads him to experience the divine will which bursts even the gates of death."²⁶

As for Hosea 13:14, Kaiser interprets it as national forgiveness and restoration promised by God in His love for His people.²⁷ Payne finds an

¹⁸ Payne, 458.

¹⁹ Eichrodt, 515.

²⁰ Dumbrell, 220.

²¹ Kaiser, 243.

²² Payne, 461.

²³ Jacob, 310.

²⁴ Dumbrell, 136.

²⁵ Eichrodt, 486.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 506.

²⁷ Kaiser, 199-200.

implication of resurrection in Hosea.²⁸ Curiously, Jacob does not deal with Hosea 13:14, but he finds a hint of life after death in Hosea 6:1, 2.²⁹ Eichrodt's footnote alludes to Sellin's rearrangement of the text to place 13:14 between 14:4 and 14:5.³⁰ He found insufficient evidence to rearrange the text in this way which makes the hint of resurrection connect to national spiritual renewal. Dumbrell points out that this verse teaches Yahweh's power to protect from death and hell.³¹

Payne identified a few other Old Testament verses which may be construed as teaching resurrection. The most intriguing to this writer is Genesis 22:5 where Abraham promises that both he and his son Isaac will return from the mountain. Abraham knew what he was about to do. Either he believed God was going to stop him before the act was committed or he believed God would restore life to his sacrificed child of promise.

A weaker inference can be drawn from Isaiah 38:18 in the context of Hezekiah's recovery from near-fatal illness. When he speaks of the living praising God, did he understand that God would have restored him to life if he had actually died? One cannot know for certain.

Before going into the Ecclesiastes texts that infer resurrection, a summary is in order. It is clear to this writer that resurrection was absolutely not a foreign concept to the Old Testament mindset. Furthermore, it seems to have been at least a secondary concept from the earliest Old Testament writings (such as Job) and continuous to the latest (such as Daniel). But I shall rather defer to Edmond Jacob's summary of resurrection in the Old Testament:

But in the Old Testament all God's extraordinary interventions, such as prophetic utterance, the priesthood, election in general, are called to pass in scope from the particular to the universal, so that the hope of resurrection will spread through the mass from these indications, and all the more because it seemed the only solution to the problem of retribution and to the increasingly frequent crises to which this dogma was subject.³²

It is the concept of retribution that I choose to use as my primary argument for finding resurrection in Ecclesiastes.

²⁸ Payne, 460.

²⁹ Jacob, 310.

³⁰ Eichrodt, 506.

³¹ Dumbrell, 136.

³² Jacob, 312.

Koheleth on Resurrection

To begin with, it is the writer's position that Solomon was indeed the author of Ecclesiastes, but to allow the possibility that another divinely-inspired author may have been the author without affecting the contents of the book, I will use Koheleth as the name of the author.

Some scholars, such as the eminent Ernest Hengstenberg, do not believe Koheleth was attempting to write normative theology.³³ Sacred philosophy was the purpose of Koheleth, thus allowing theological difficulties to be handled in a more expedient fashion. That sounds like a "canon within a canon" kind of approach, and this writer is uncomfortable with it. Robert Pfeiffer agrees with Hengstenberg on theology, or the lack thereof, in Ecclesiastes.³⁴

Some find theology in Koheleth. Payne found normative theological statements in Ecclesiastes.³⁵ John J. Dreese agreed with Payne in his article entitled "The Theology of Qoheleth."³⁶ This writer naturally agrees with these scholars on the possibility of finding normative theology in Ecclesiastes.

To understand Koheleth's statements inferring resurrection, we must first consider how he viewed death. Woven into his "vanity" theme is the subject of death. "Koheleth seemed to have an unnatural fascination with death, for he returned to death, as the great equalizer."³⁷ How did he view *sheol*, the Hebrew word for the place of the dead? Ecclesiastes 9 may be the best picture. The dead know nothing (9:5) and there is no work, planning, knowledge, or wisdom in *sheol* (9:10).³⁸ In and of itself *sheol* seems unconnected with retribution or judgment. *Sheol* is simply the grave, the destiny of all who die.

Keeping in mind Jacob's comments about resurrection as tied to retribution, let us examine a few Ecclesiastes texts. First of all, after commenting on the injustices of the world in 3:16, Koheleth asserts that God will bring the righteous and the wicked to judgment (3:17). If a holy and fair God would not allow sin to go unpunished and righteousness unrewarded, the only solution (to this writer) is a belief in future resurrection for that very judgment. The same point is made in 12:14. There are also 8:12 and 11:9 that indicate judgment.

Koheleth seems to deny consciousness in death, while agreeing that injustice is all around in the world. He further states a future judgment. There is only one biblical concept which ties all of this together — resurrection.³⁹ If everyone is resurrected then to face their inevitable judgment from God, all of the data in

³³ Jones, 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

Koheleth comes together. To be certain, that conclusion rests on inferences, but inferences are not inherently evil.

Did Koheleth then have a grasp on a theological theme which mainline Christianity has not yet embraced, or was he rambling out of his depression? It may very well be normative theology that we have in Ecclesiastes — not only about resurrection by inference, but also about the nature of death and the time frame of God’s retributive judgment.

Do our commentators find resurrection in Ecclesiastes? Kaiser contends 3:17 is a teaching about future judgment.⁴⁰ Yet there is no direct mention of the concept. Payne does not address resurrection in relation to Ecclesiastes. Neither Eichrodt nor Jacob find anything clearly speaking of resurrection. Jacob proposes that Ecclesiastes is skeptical about man’s destiny being any different from that of animals from 3:19.⁴¹ Jacob also comments on the state of death not looking drastically different from that of life at the first moments. The elements of life — dust and God’s life-giving breath (*ruach*) — return to their original locations, the ground and God, respectively. Dumbrell acknowledges that Koheleth was questioning whether death was the absolute end or not.⁴² In spite of death’s inevitability and finality, Koheleth still wondered. Yet Dumbrell does not use the word “resurrection” in connection with his Ecclesiastes comments. I suppose that a writer specifically mentioning resurrection in connection with Ecclesiastes would be part of a significant minority of scholars who write about the book.

Conclusion

To summarize, resurrection can be clearly seen in several Old Testament authors throughout the timeline of theological thought development. Even progressive revelation must allow that it is present with some degree of sophistication before it takes on a greater clarity.

Why was resurrection not discussed more fully in the Old Testament? The Israelites were focused on this life. Koheleth certainly states such a view (see 2:24; 3:12-14, 22; 5:19; 8:15; 9:7-9). A life similar to this one beyond death? Never mind that, as long as we have this life with its attendant joys and struggles. Let the Greeks, if you will, worry about the other-worldly stuff.

Why is resurrection in Ecclesiastes not discussed more by commentators? Perhaps because the plain truth of its words is simply too challenging to current theological conventions. It is far easier to dismiss its theological accuracy under the guise of progressive revelation and imperfect revelation polluted by pessimism. I choose to disagree as politely as I can with such a view.

⁴⁰ Kaiser, 181.

⁴¹ Jacob, 151.

⁴² Dumbrell, 243.

I urge readers to examine Ecclesiastes and all of the Old Testament for resurrection, one of the more exciting concepts in all of theology. Decide for yourself if it developed over the biblical timeline. Resurrection certainly was part of the kerygma of the early church (see Acts 23:6; 24:15 for just a few examples), and it must also be a part of our kerygma if we are to be a part of the new radical reformation.