

The Valley of Dry Bones and the Resurrection of the Dead

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הפטרה – שבת חול המועד פסח

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Originally an allegorical vision about the future return of Judeans to their land, Ezekiel's vision (ch. 37) becomes one of the cornerstones for the Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead. The early stages of this development are made clear in a little-known Qumran scroll called Pseudo-Ezekiel.

Prof. Devorah Dimant^[1]



Ezekiel and the Valley of Dry Bones (1979), courtesy of Richard McBee

The scene of a valley full of dry bones, resurrected before the mental eyes of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 37:1-14), is one of the most enigmatic apparitions experienced by this prophet, who is famous for his other unusual visions.

The vision begins when God sets Ezekiel down in a valley full of bones (vv. 1-2) and asks Ezekiel if they can be brought back to life, to which Ezekiel responds that only God knows that (v.3). God then tells Ezekiel to speak this prophecy over the bones (vv. 4-6):

<p>הַעֲצָמוֹת הַיְבֹשׁוֹת שָׁמְעוּ דְבַר יְ-הוָה. כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְ-הוָה לַעֲצָמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה הִנֵּה אֲנִי מְבִיא בְּכֶם רוּחַ וְחַיִּיתֶם. וְנָתַתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם גְּדִים וְהֶעֱלֵתִי עֲלֵיכֶם בָּשָׂר וְקִרַמְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם עוֹר וְנָתַתִּי בְּכֶם רוּחַ וְחַיִּיתֶם וַיִּדְעֶתֶם כִּי אֲנִי יְ- הוָה.</p>	<p>O dry bones, hear the word of YHWH! Thus said the Lord YHWH to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again. I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with flesh, and form skin over you. And I will put breath into you, and you shall live again. And you shall know that I am YHWH!</p>
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Ezekiel does as he is told, and the bones begin to come together and to grow flesh. But they were still not alive (vv. 7-8). God then tells Ezekiel to offer another prophecy, this time to the רוּחַ, “breath” or “wind” (v. 9):

<p>מֵאַרְבַּע רוּחוֹת בָּאֵי הַרוּחַ וּפְחִי בַּהֲרוּגִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיְחַיּוּ.</p>	<p>Come, O breath, from the four winds, and breathe into these slain, that they may live again.</p>
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The wind comes and the corpses breath and come to life again in great numbers (v. 10).

The Symbolic Meaning of the Vision

God then explains the vision (v. 11-14):

<p>בֶּן אָדָם הַעֲצָמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה הִנֵּה אֲמָרִים יְבֹשׁוּ עֲצָמוֹתֵינוּ וְאֶבְדָּה תִקְוֹתֵנוּ נִגְזְרָנוּ לָנוּ. לִכֵּן הִנְבֵּא וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְ-הוָה הִנֵּה אֲנִי פֹתֵחַ אֶת קְבֻרוֹתֵיכֶם וְהֶעֱלֵיתִי אֶתְכֶם מִקְבֻרוֹתֵיכֶם עִמִּי וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל אֲדַמַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל..."</p>	<p>O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.” Prophesy, therefore, and say to them: “Thus said the Lord YHWH: ‘I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel....’”</p>
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Critical scholars generally understand these summary verses to mean that the vision is a dramatic image, expressing that the exiled Judeans, who feel that all hope is lost, will actually be revived as a *people* and return to their land—it is a prophecy about national restoration rather than individual resurrection. Some early rabbinic interpreters, however, understood it as about individual resurrection.

For example, a *baraita* (tannaitic source) in the Babylonian Talmud (b. *Sanhedrin* 92b) records a debate about the visions meaning:

<p>רבי אליעזר אומר: מתים שהחיה יחזקאל עמדו על רגליהם, ואמרו שירה ומתו....</p>	<p>Rabbi Eliezer says: “The dead whom Ezekiel resurrected stood on their legs, sang a song [of praise], and died.”....^[2]</p>
<p>רבי יהודה אומר: אמת משל היה....</p>	<p>Rabbi Judah says: “In truth, it is a parable.”....</p>
<p>רבי אליעזר בנו של רבי יוסי הגלילי אומר: מתים שהחיה יחזקאל עלו לארץ ישראל, ונשאו נשים והולידו בנים ובנות.</p>	<p>Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Yossi the Galilean says: “The dead whom Ezekiel resurrected moved to Israel, got married, and had sons and daughters.”</p>

As we will see below, some Second Temple Jews also interpreted it as a reference to individual resurrection in the messianic age.

Resurrection of the Dead in the Bible

The concept of resurrection of the dead is almost entirely absent in the Bible!^[3] One ambiguous passage in Isaiah may refer to resurrection:

ישעיה כו:יט יחייו מתוך נבילתי
 יקומו הקיצו ורננו שכני עפר כי טל
 אורת טלך וארץ רפאים תפיל. Isa 26:19 Oh, let Your dead revive! Let corpses arise! Awake and shout
 for joy, you who dwell in the dust! For Your dew is like the radiant dew;
 You make the land of the shades come to life.

The verse appears in a section in Isaiah (chs. 24-27) discussing the end of days.^[4] Whether it is speaking metaphorically or literally, the rabbis, at least, understood it to be a literal description of resurrection.^[5]

The only biblical passage that *unambiguously* refers to resurrection is found in the final chapter of the book of Daniel (12). The chapter opens with a description of the future redemption, which will take place during the worst time the world will ever have experienced (v. 1). The text continues by describing other wonders that will occur at that time:

דניאל יב:ב ורבים מישני אדמת עפר
 יקיצו אלה לחיי עולם ואלה לחרפות
 לדראון עולם. Dan 12:2 Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will
 awake,^[6] some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting
 abhorrence.

Daniel is the latest biblical book, the final version of which is dated to around 167 B.C.E. And thus, we can say with confidence that by the second century B.C.E., the concept of resurrection clearly entered Jewish discourse, though how widely it was accepted is less clear.

Pharisees Versus Sadducees

Despite the paucity of biblical evidence for resurrection, or perhaps because of it, the question of whether resurrection of the dead will occur was the focus of intense debate during the last centuries of the Second Temple era. Josephus writes that the Pharisees accepted resurrection while the Sadducees rejected it (Josephus, *Antiquities*, xviii; Whiston trans.):

Now, for the Pharisees... They also believe that souls have an immortal rigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again... But the doctrine of the Sadducees is this: That souls die with the bodies...^[7]

This view is confirmed in an anecdote recorded in the book of Acts about how Paul defended himself against charges of heresy when he was preaching in a synagogue about the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 23:6-9; NRSV):

When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.” When he said this, a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge all three.) Then a great clamor arose, and certain scribes of the Pharisees’ group stood up and contended, “We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?”^[8]

Rabbinic Judaism adopted the principle of resurrection and a future life as a key element of Jewish faith. Ironically, it even threatens people who do not believe in the resurrection—ostensibly a reference to the Sadducees—with no future life (m. *Sanhedrin* 10:1):

... כל ישראל יש להם חלק לעולם הבא... [9] And these are the ones who have no share in the World to Come: Anyone who... האומר אין תחיית המתים מן התורה... says: "There is no resurrection according to the Torah"^[10]

The rabbis are so adamant that this is a biblical concept that they created a host of midrashim to prove that resurrection is hinted at in the Bible. For example:

<i>Mekhilta deRabbi Shimon bar Yochai</i> 15:1	ר' אומר אז שר משה ובני ישראל אין כן [אלא] אז ישיר משה נמצינו למדין לתחיית המתים מן התורה [רה].	Rabbi said: "Then Moses will sing' – it doesn't say 'Then Moses sang!' We learn from this that there is resurrection according to the Torah."
<i>Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy</i> 33:29	יחי ראובן ואל ימות והלא מת הוא אלא ואל ימת לעולם הבא מיכן לתחיית המתים מן התורה	'Let Reuven live and not die' – but did he not already die? Rather, he should not die in the world to come. This proves that there is resurrection of the dead according to the Torah. ^[11]

The rabbis even instituted a blessing about the resurrection of the dead, to be said as part of the three times a day *Amidah* prayer:

... ברוך אתה יי' מחיה המתים. Blessed are you, o Lord, who resurrects the dead.

The rabbis' view is in keeping with that of the Pharisees who many scholars believe were the rabbis' spiritual predecessors.

Did the Essenes Believe in the Resurrection of the Dead?

In contrast to what we know about the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the evidence about the third contemporary party, that of the Essenes, is less clear. According to Josephus "they teach the immortality of souls" (*Antiquities*, xviii, 18). Yet, if we take the Dead Sea Scrolls as belonging to a library held by the Essenes, nothing about resurrection surfaced in the specific literature composed by the members of this sect.

Even so, two non-biblical Hebrew texts, Messianic Apocalypse and Pseudo-Ezekiel, found among the Scrolls do speak explicitly of resurrection of the Dead.^[12] Their presence in the Qumran library, together with six copies of the book of Daniel, shows that the sectarians were cognizant of the belief about resurrection of the dead and were interested in reading and studying works that elaborated this notion.

The unambiguous references to resurrection in the two Dead Sea Scroll documents attest to the growing popularity of this notion in the late Second Temple period.

Messianic Apocalypse

Messianic Apocalypse (4Q521) is a fragmentary text, dated paleographically to the early 1st cent. B.C.E., that lists the works or wonders that will take place in messianic times. In this text, God is twice described as one who resurrects the dead:

4Q521 2 ii 12 כי ירפא חללים ומתים יחיה [F]or he heals the slain and the dead he resurrects.

In contrast to Daniel, which distinguished between the righteous and the wicked, the resurrection here seems to be applied to the entire people of Israel, a notion implied in Ezekiel 37.

Pseudo-Ezekiel

Four fragmentary copies (4Q385, 4Q385b, 4Q386, 4Q388) of a previously unknown composition that reshapes the prophecies of the biblical Ezekiel were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The attestation of this document in four copies attests to its importance in antiquity.

The composition, now labeled Pseudo-Ezekiel and dated to the second century BCE^[13] contains a reworked Vision of the Dry Bones, which is one of the best-preserved portions of this work, attested by three copies, 4Q385 2; 4Q386 1; 4Q388 7. In this reworking, the vision of dry bones is not presented as a divine initiative, but as God's answer to Ezekiel's own question (4Q385):

2	[ואמרה י-הוה] ראיתי רבים מישראל אשר אהבו את שמך וילכו בדרכי [לברך. וא]לה מתי יהיו והיככה ישתלמו חסדם.	[And I said: "O YHWH!] I have seen many (men) from Israel who have loved your Name and have walked in the ways of [your heart. And th]ese things when will they come to be and how will they be recompensed for their piety?"
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In response to this question, God promises a clear answer:

4	ויאמר י-הוה 4 אלי אני אראה [] את בני ישראל וידעו כי אני י-הוה	And YHWH said to me: "I will make (it) manifest [] to the children of Israel and they shall know that I am YHWH."
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God then presents Ezekiel with the vision of the Dry Bones as his answer to the question. In a manner typical of late reworking of the Bible, the Qumranic work skips the description of the actual valley with bones, apparently assuming that its readers are familiar with it, and instead goes directly to the description of their revival. The text also truncates the vision by omitting the materialization of the various stages in the process of the revival, and replacing this part with by a fulfillment formula "and it was so."

The resurrection comes in three steps:

1. Joining of bones	5 [ויאמר] בן אדם הנבא על העצמות ואמרת ויק'בו עצם אל עצמו ופרקו. 6 [אל פרקו ויהי] כן.	[And He said:] "Son of man, prophesy over the bones and speak and let them be [j]oined bone to its bone and joint [to its joint." And it wa]s so.
2. Covering of bones with soft tissue	ויאמר שנית הנבא ויעלו עליהם גדים ויקרמו עור 7 [מלמעלה ויהי] כן	And He said a second time: "Prophecy and let arteries come upon them and let skin cover them [from above." And it was so.]
3. The breath of life	ויאמר שוב אנבא על ארבע רוחות השמים. יפחו רוח 8 [בהרוגים ויהי] כן. [ויח]יו עם רב אנשים ויברכו את יהוה צבאות אש[ר 9 חים]	And He said: "Prophecy again over the four winds of heaven and let them blow breath [into the slain." And it was so,] and a large crowd of people came [to li]fe and blessed the Lord Sebaoth wh[ose had given them life.]"

text, Daniel 12, we can see that by the second century B.C.E., the idea that in the future, individual Israelites would be resurrected—whether all of them or only the pious ones—was already taking a firm hold as a core belief among at least certain groups of Jews.

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[1] The material about resurrection in the Bible and Rabbinic Literature was expanded by TheTorah.com’s editors with permission from the author.

[2] As will be discussed later in the Pseudo-Ezekiel section, this image of resurrected people standing up and bursting into song is likely inspired by Isaiah 26:19.

[3] For a detailed description, and slightly different view of the biblical attitude toward individual resurrection, see Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale, 2008).

[4] Most scholars consider this section to be a later supplement to Isaiah 1-39.

[5] See, for example, *Targum Yonatan* (ca. 2nd-3rd cent. C.E.) to this verse:

את הוא מחיי מיתין גרמי נבלתהון את מקים יחון וישבחו קדמך כל דהוו רמן בעפרא ארי טל נהור טלך לעבדי אוריך ורשיעי די יהבתא להון גבורא ואינון עברו על מימך לגהנם תמסר:	It is you who resurrect the dead, the bones of their corpses you raise, they will live and speak praises before you, all who were lying in dust. For your dew is radiant dew for those who keep your Torah, but to the wicked, whom you have given might but who violated your commands, you will hand over to Gehinnom [hell].
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[6] The phrase in the second blessing of the Amidah prayer, “who maintains his faithfulness with those who sleep in the dust” (ומקים אמונתו לישני עפר) derives from this verse.

[7] See also his *Jewish War* ii, 163-165.

[8] For other references to the resurrection controversy in the New Testament, see Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 24:15.

[9] This first line does not appear in all the manuscripts of the Mishna and may have been added later.

[10] See also *’Abot R. Nat. A*, 5

[11] The Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 91b-92a) contains a list of such proofs. For example:

תנו רבנן: אני אמית ואחיה יכול שתהא
מיתה באחד וחיים באחד כדרך שהעולם
נוהג – תלמוד לומר מחצתי ואני ארפא,
מה מחיצה ורפואה באחד – אף מיתה
וחיים באחד. מיכן תשובה לאומרין אין
תחיית המתים מן התורה...

Our Rabbis taught: 'I put to death and bring to life' – perhaps this means he puts some to death and others to life? The verse teaches: 'And make sick and I heal' – just like illness and healing is the same person, so too death and life is the same person. From here there is a response to those who say there is no resurrection according to the Torah...

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: מניין לתחיית
המתים מן התורה – שנאמר אשרי יושבי
ביתך עוד יהללוך סלה, יהללוך לא נאמר
אלא יהללוך – מכאן לתחיית המתים מן
התורה....

R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: "How do we know there is resurrection according to the Torah? For it says (Psalms 84:5): "Happy are the dwellers in your tent, they will praise you, *selah*." It does not say "they praised you" but "they will praise you" – from here there is proof of resurrection according to the Torah..."

[12] The relationship between Messianic Apocalypse and the sectarian community is debated, but in my view it is not sectarian. Similarly, Pseudo-Ezekiel, which does not carry any sectarian markers, is generally not believed to be sectarian.

[13] Cf. Devorah Dimant, *Parabiblical Texts, Part 4 Pseudo-Prophetic Texts; Qumran Cave 4. XXI*, DJD XXX (Oxford: Clarendon 2001), 7-88.