

Was Resurrection a Zoroastrian Idea?

Bart Ehrman

I have been arguing that at some point before the middle of the second century BCE, Jewish thinkers developed the idea that death was not the end of the story, that people did not simply end up in the netherworld of Sheol for all eternity, a place of no pleasure, pain, excitement, or even worship of Yahweh. Instead, at the end of the age, God would raise people from the dead, and the faithful would be rewarded with eternal bliss.

There is a lot to say about the idea of resurrection as it developed in Judaism and then, especially, in Christianity. But first I have to address the question of origins. Where did the idea come from?

I was always taught what I imagine every critical biblical scholar for the past century was taught, that the idea of resurrection came into Judaism from the Persian religion known as Zoroastrianism. In fact, several readers of the blog have asked me just this question (or made just this assertion), about Zoroastrianism as the source of the idea. The logic is as follows:

(a) There was nothing in the Jewish tradition that would lead someone to think that resurrection of the body was a possibility, since Israelites had always held to the idea of an eternal Sheol;

(b) Resurrection was, however, part and parcel of ancient Zoroastrian thought, which was avidly dualistic in its thinking, with the forces of good and evil waging massive cosmic battles that would come to a climax at the end of time and all who had sided with good would be rewarded by being given new life at a resurrection of the dead;

(c) Israel had been for a time subject to the Persian Empire, for about two centuries, from 538 – 323 BCE, that is, from the time Persia defeated the Babylonians and took over their territory up to the time of the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century.

(d) Therefore it makes best sense, by this logic, to think that Jews got the idea of a future resurrection from the Persians. Hey, they had to get it from somewhere, right?

That, as I have said, is what we were all taught and it's what I thought (and taught) until about, well, six months ago. As a preliminary to a couple of more detailed comments, let me make two general points.

The first involves a problem I've thought about for a long time: Our tendency to think that every idea has an external "source" just can't be right (in bald terms), as if every idea has to start somewhere else other than where we find it. That is to say, suppose we argue that resurrection came to the Jews from the Persians. OK, then, where did the Persians get it? Suppose they got it from the X's. Then where did the X's get it? From the Y's? Where did the Y's get it? From the Z's? Where did.... As you can see, it's an eternal regress. Someone, at some time, in some place, comes up with a new idea. And so it's actually not necessarily the case that Jews got the idea from anywhere. In theory, some Jewish someone could have made it up!

My second comment is the realization that I had six months ago, when thinking about such things in reference to Jews getting the idea of resurrection from Persians. The dates don't work. Israel was subject to Persia from the late 6th to the late 4th century BCE. Do we see any evidence of a belief in resurrection in Jewish texts from that period? Well, actually, no we don't. When do we see such a belief? Starting in the Maccabean period a full century and a half after Israel was controlled by the Persians. If the Jews had been having extensive contacts with Persians (and presumably their religion) in the 160s, it would make sense that they borrowed their idea of resurrection. But in fact, the influence at the time, and for a long time before, was entirely Greek. And Greeks did not have any notion of a future resurrection of the dead. Quite the contrary, when (later) Greeks heard of such an idea they consistently and roundly mocked it as a piece of hilarious nonsense.

So the idea that the idea came into Israel from somewhere else is certainly possible. But there doesn't seem to be much evidence of it.

And there are even bigger problems. It turns out we don't actually know much about Zoroastrianism during the period we are interested in (say, 200 BCE to 200 CE). That's because we have lousy sources of information. I first discovered this by reading one of the most learned discussions of the afterlife in Jewish and Christian traditions, by Dutch historian Jan Bremmer (his book: *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife* [New York: Routledge, 2002]).

Bremmer points out that our oldest manuscript of the Zoroastrian texts in question, the Avestas, dates from 1288 CE, and all the surviving manuscripts appear to go back to a copy that had been produced in the 9th or 10th century CE. Since the Zoroastrian tradition was living and constantly changing over time, there is no assurance that the teachings of the later Avestan manuscripts were ancient. Moreover, there is only one reference in all the oldest forms of the Avestan writings to the glories of a later life, and this reference doesn't say anything about a future day of judgment (as in Jewish apocalyptic thought).

After some detailed comments, Bremmer concludes: "There ... is little reason to derive Jewish ideas about resurrection from Persian sources. Their origin(s) may well lie in intraJewish developments" (p. 59).

In other words, the Jews who first pronounced the idea, during the Maccabean period, may have come up with it themselves. This appears to be the newer consensus on the matter, as seen in a more recent work on the afterlife by a New Testament scholar Outi Lehtipuu who in her book, *The Afterlife Imagery in Luke's Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus* (Brill: Leiden, 2007; p. 124), makes the same basic point.

I will need to do more work on the matter before coming to a final conclusion. My next step, when I have the time to do so (I'm reading other things just now), will be to read the following two articles, which I cite in case any of you is inclined to pursue the matter:

James Barr, "The Question of Religious Influence: The Case of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity" *JAAR* 53 (1985).

G. Widengren, "Leitende Ideen und Quellen der iranischen Apocalypptik." In Hellmholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen, 1983) 77-162.

A New Blog Podcast! Daniel and a New Doctrine of Resurrection from the Dead