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BELIEFS

The Case for What 'Comes as a Shock to Most Jews and Christians Alike'

By [PETER STEINFELS](#)

Correction Appended

In classical Judaism, resurrection of the dead was a central belief, essential to defining oneself as a Jew. "Today," writes Jon D. Levenson, professor of Jewish studies at [Harvard](#), that fact "comes as a shock to most Jews and Christians alike."

Apart from the Orthodox minority, most Jews, including those who acknowledge belief in the resurrection as a part of Judaism's historical legacy, seem to rush by the idea as quickly as possible, rendering it perhaps as a metaphor for how one's good works live on, but in any case ushering it to the margins of their tradition, a minor and dispensable theme in a Judaism that focuses on life.

Resurrection of the dead, it is argued, is a Johnny-come-lately notion, not found in the ancient texts of the Hebrew Bible, which treated mortality matter-of-factly. Instead, the doctrine was an innovation of the Maccabean period, found in the Book of Daniel, written between 167 and 164 B.C.E, when faithful Jews were being persecuted by the Hellenistic monarch Antiochus IV. With ideas borrowed from Zoroastrianism and other foreign sources, resurrection solved the puzzle of understanding divine justice when fidelity to the Law brought about not prosperity and length of years but martyrdom.

Professor Levenson's new book, "Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life" (Yale University Press), is a frontal challenge to this account. But the reasons that it has become a staple of modern Jewish apologetics, he allows, "are not hard to find."

On the one hand, the rejection or marginalization of resurrection offered a clear distinction between Judaism and a Christianity that celebrated the Resurrection of Jesus as the ground for human hope. On the other hand, it simultaneously aligned Judaism with the naturalistic and scientific outlook of modernity "of the sort that dismisses resurrection as an embarrassing relic of the childhood of humanity."

Professor Levenson does not deny that an unambiguous belief in resurrection of the dead makes a late appearance in Judaism, or that some groups, like the Sadducees, mentioned in the Gospels and by the historian Josephus, never accepted it.

He argues, however, that this late appearance was "both an innovation and a restatement of a tension that had pervaded the religion of Israel from the beginning." The full-fledged doctrine of resurrection was not primarily a response to the needs of the moment or the challenge of martyrdom. It flowed from "deeper and long-established currents in the religion of Israel."

To make this case, Professor Levenson works his way, step by step, through ancient texts and concepts. He explores the nature of Sheol, the Bible's gloomy abode of the departed, and whether anyone was thought to have escaped it. He illuminates differences between modern understanding of individual identity and the ancient Israelite understanding of the self as embedded in family and nation — and what, therefore, overcoming death means in each case.

For him, resurrection is distinct from the afterlife that philosophers from the Greeks to Kant have posited on the basis of an immaterial and imperishable soul or that New Age teachers envision as a result of one's own inward journeying. Resurrection is dependent on a gracious act of God, and it is intimately linked to an eschatology: a vision of the final culmination of history.

He analyzes biblical accounts of God's power to reverse life-threatening adversity — enslavement, infertility, loss of children, famine — or in exceptional cases, death itself. Many of his instances are the same ones that rabbis have cited over the centuries to support the doctrine of resurrection: from the opening of Sarah's infertile womb and the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac to the sufferings of Job, the miracles of the prophet Elisha and Ezekiel's vision of a new people arisen in the valley of the dry bones.

But Professor Levenson brings to this material the full panoply of modern critical methods for analyzing scriptural texts, placing them in historical and cultural context, drawing on archaeology and literary parallels in Canaanite mythology and Ugaritic texts.

He draws out subtle connections and makes fine distinctions, never claiming more for his evidence than what it will bear.

The argument builds by increment, layer upon layer, each repeating but varying the emerging pattern. On occasion the mound of exegesis rises so high that one fears it may topple over and engulf the reader in an overwhelming slide of details. But the prose of "Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel" is clear and often powerful, having absorbed much of the poetry and primal strength of the biblical passages it examines.

Professor Levenson has written for an audience well beyond his fellow biblical scholars. He understands those who cannot accept this belief, he said in a recent telephone conversation, but he still feels that it is a "truncated Judaism that does not reckon with resurrection."

And if a modern Jewish apologetic has contrasted a this-worldly and ethically minded Judaism against an otherworldly and superstitious Christianity, he said, many Christians have misunderstood Judaism because of their assumption that belief in resurrection is exclusively associated with Jesus.

"The stereotypes on both sides are destructive," he said, "and destroy an important bond between Judaism and Christianity." For all the differences between the two faiths — and Professor Levenson is not known for minimizing them — "early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism had no division on belief in eschatological resurrection," he said.

The most central of ancient prayers that rabbinic law prescribes to be said every day — morning, afternoon and evening — speaks several times of God's power to revive the dead, words that modern translations have often recast in ways that avoid the supernatural meaning that classical Judaism gave them. Traditionally this prayer,

the Amidah, also referred to as Tefilla or Sheoneh Esreh, was said five times on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which occurs this year from sunset tomorrow until nightfall on Monday.

Agree or disagree with Professor Levenson about resurrection, it would be challenging during those solemn hours to have his case in mind.

Correction: Oct. 4, 2006

The Beliefs column on Saturday, about a new book on resurrection of the dead as a central tenet in Judaism, misspelled part of the name of the Amidah, the daily prayer in rabbinic Judaism that includes references to God's power to revive the dead. It is Shemoneh Esreh, not Sheoneh Esreh.

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