

REVIEW

Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson

RESURRECTION: The Power of God for Christians and Jews

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According to Christian tradition, history was radically transformed on a Friday afternoon in Jerusalem some 2000 years ago. A miracle-working Jewish prophet was nailed to a cross, and left there, amid taunts and jeers, to endure three hours of agony before succumbing. However, it was not only by the excruciating death of Jesus that the narrative of civilization was transformed, but by the utter miracle, three days later, of his bodily resurrection.

Naturally, there were skeptics. How could there not be? After all, as we have often been taught, the concept of bodily resurrection was alien to the Jewish tradition.

Or was it?

For a pleurably readable attempt at an answer, we now have *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* by Kevin J. Madigan, Professor of the History of Christianity—a Catholic, and Jon D. Levenson, Professor of Jewish Studies—an observant Jew, both at Harvard Divinity School. This book opens our eyes to the fact that, contrary to popular belief, Jewish tradition has powerful links to the concept of bodily resurrection.

Levenson and Madigan are the odd couple perfectly matched for this project. Madigan, whose books include *The Passions of Christ in the High Middle Ages*,¹ teaches an intensive survey seminar on the Holocaust and moreover considers himself, in an “inchoate” way, a Jew himself. “It’s as if I were destined to be a Jew,” he says, “but through some cosmic hiccup my ancestors landed in Ireland.”² And he is frank that his work is grounded in the eschatological hope that somehow the wounds of the Holocaust victims will be healed, “their deaths swallowed up forever by the God who keeps his promises, who loves, and who has never forgotten his people.”

Levenson, meanwhile, considers the present book a follow-up to his *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel* (2006)³, though in a form, he says, less technical and more accessible to the layperson. Its aim, as the book’s preface states and as is repeated often throughout the book, is to emphasize “God’s everlasting promise to Israel, the Jewish people, a promise that they would recover from even the most deadly adversity” (xii). That is, Jews will be blessed as a people, assured of ultimate restoration to Zion. Of equal importance is the sibling, rather than parent-child relationship, of Christianity and Judaism during the late Rabbinic period, when the concept of resurrection was codified. But does the book convince? It would depend on how fully the reader accepts the entire package: “the return of the *whole* person, body and soul together” (xii) (authors’ emphasis). Many modern Jews, of course, find the concept unacceptable, even risible.

¹ Oxford University Press, 2007.

² Harvard Gazette Online, March 13, 2008.

³ Yale University Press, 2006.

The authors are ready for this debunking, thoroughly detailing the arguments of the scoffers. In Jesus's time, the principal deniers were the Sadducees, "the princely elite of Judea in the late Second Temple period" (3). However, the Pharisees, "another group that emerged during the same period, affirmed it [the concept of resurrection], and it is with the Pharisees that Jesus has the most in common" (3). Similar apocalyptic expectations were expressed by the sect that left us the Dead Sea Scrolls, and a recent find—a scroll in stone referred to as "Gabriel's Revelation"—bears the message of a resurrected messiah. Clearly, then, as the authors point out, the idea of resurrection was accepted by many Jews at the time of Jesus.

The Pharisees gave rise to rabbinic traditions of the first few centuries of the common era, and here, as in the early Christian sources, the authors trace the unambiguous expectation of bodily resurrection. Consider, for example, that part of the prayer known as the *Amidah* that pronounces, "You are the one who revives the dead, powerful to save." It continues:

He sustains the living with kindness and revives the dead with great mercy, supports the falling, heals the sick, releases captives, and keeps faith with those who sleep in the dust.

Who is like You, Lord of power? And who can compare to You, O King who brings about death and restores life and makes salvation sprout?

Faithful You are to revive the dead. Blessed are You, Lord, who revive the dead (201).

"According to rabbinic law," the authors remind us, this prayer "is to be said three times each weekday; four times on Sabbaths, new moons, and festivals; and five times on the Day of Atonement...The prayer is thus as authoritative a summary of rabbinic theology as one can find" (202).

Or consider, from the Mishnah, the great law code of rabbinic Judaism (compiled about 200 CE): "All Israelites have a share in the World-to-Come, as it is written," except, it specifies, the one "who says that the resurrection of the dead is not in the Torah, [he who says] that the Torah is not from Heaven, and the skeptic" (206).

In truth, the rabbis were backed into some intricate grammatical and philological footwork to find direct allusion to bodily resurrection in the Five Books. "Given the playfulness of midrash and the joy it takes in multiple meanings, it would be dangerous to assume [that the rabbis] intended their readings to be exhaustive and exclusive," reason the authors (212). The miracles performed by God as recounted in the Five Books—in Exodus, for example—were a sign to the rabbis of "the still greater things he will do in the future consummation—a consummation that moves the Jews not merely from slavery to freedom, but quite literally from death to life as well" (209).

However, while the early Scriptures yielded only sparse allusions to life beyond death (as in the enigmatic "taking" of Enoch in Genesis 5), the later writings—Nevi'im, Psalms, and the other Kethuvim—offered rich pickings. The wonder-workings of Elijah, for instance, include the restoration to life of the dead boy in First Kings 17. And in Second Kings 4, Elisha not only predicts and magically brings about the end of the Shunammite woman's infertility (a significant biblical theme), he also restores to life the son she has borne. In a replication of Elijah's miracle, he places himself on the lifeless body, adding to the drama a sort of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Arguably, too, there is Hosea 6:2:

In two days He will revive us [*yechayyenu*]
On the third day He will raise us up [*yeqimenu*],
And we shall live [*nichyeh*] in His presence.

One can imagine the usefulness of such a verse for the early Christians. And the authors dwell at great length on Ezekiel 37:1-14 (early sixth century BCE), the famous vision of the valley of the dry bones, in which the bones are reconstituted and breathed back into life. The authors explore the manifold interpretations of this story as metaphor or miracle, but they decode it in a manner consistent with their essential Judeo-Christian theme—resurrection as redemption: “The dead bones are the people Israel, who, living in exile after the great destruction, have given up hope: ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.’ The restoration of those bones to life—the Lord’s giving them sinews, then flesh, skin, and finally the breath of life—indicates that God will open the graves of Ezekiel’s audience and restore them to the Land of Israel” (147). Interestingly, the early Christian writer Tertullian (d. 225), while arguing for both the literal and figurative resurrection described by Ezekiel, also stressed the redemptive aspect: “What does it matter to me, so long as there will be a resurrection of the body, just as there is a restoration of the Jewish state” (228)?

Moreover, it should not be forgotten among the welter of metaphors that in a “culture in which God’s creation of humankind and his gift of life were undisputed, the proposition that he could reassemble his deadened people and bring them back to life was hardly outrageous” (149). Later, as a Talmudic scholar would say, “If those who never existed can come to life, those who once lived—all the more so” (149)!

Primarily, of course, there is Daniel 12:2 (second century BCE), “the first transparent and indisputable prediction of the resurrection of the dead in the Hebrew Bible” (171):

At that time, the great prince, Michael, who stands beside the sons of your people, will appear. It will be a time of trouble, the like of which has never been seen since the nation came into being. At that time your people will be rescued, all who are found inscribed in the book. Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence. And the wise will be radiant like the bright expanse of sky, and those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever.

These “future events,” of course, have “vast implications for the Jewish people” (171), and for Christianity as well. What, after all, will be the nature of these beings in the afterlife and who can define this starry hereafter? Offering a wealth of references, from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, to Talmudic sages such as Rav, to Maimonides, the authors postulate: “It would be a mistake to imagine that the ‘eternal life’ the deserving receive is simply a restoration to their old and familiar reality, only without the pain and injustice. To ‘be radiant like the bright expanse of sky’ (Dan 12:3) is light-years away from having to reinhabit one’s old body for all eternity” (178). The key fact is not “immortality of the soul, on the one hand, and resurrection of the body, on the other” (178). It is the fact “that resurrection was thought to yield a transformed and perfected form of bodily existence and thus a state of being both like and unlike any we can know...In both the Christian and the rabbinic cases, postmortem existence is a radical transformation, and not the indefinite prolongation, of earthly life” (178).

But how to describe this postmortem existence? In an intricate chain of associations deriving from concepts of Eden as paradise, the authors arrive at the conclusion that, based on the Hebrew Bible, eternal life for the Israelites is to be found only in Zion, and only in the Temple. The Temple is nothing less than “an antidote to death, bestowing a kind of immortality on those who dwell there in innocence, purity, and trust” (89).

In this reading of immortality, individual Israelites may die and not be resurrected, “but the collective promise of life to the *people Israel* [authors’ emphasis] that emanates from Zion shall endure forever. Here, as often, Zion serves as a spatial image of the liberation from the ravages of time and decay that characterize ordinary human life.” They continue: “Death is the norm outside Zion and cannot be reversed, but within the Temple city, death is unknown, for there God has ordained the blessing of eternal life. To journey to the Temple is to move toward redemption” (91).

Thus, while weaving a web of fascinating allusions to bodily resurrection common to later scripture and the rabbinic texts, the authors prefer to emphasize what is for them the more significant concept of the resurrection as redemption—of an entire people. This expectation, they say, “is the apocalyptic expectation of a universal resurrection in a coming dispensation in which all of God’s potentials would be activated in a grand finale of stupendous miracles, very much at odds with the natural course of history” (165).

We are hugely indebted to Madigan and Levenson for synthesizing in such an accessible manner a formidable body of information, much of it obscure, and for demonstrating the intimate connections linking rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity. In the terrifying matter of the end of days, one finds oneself compelled—and consoled—by their depiction of that grand finale.