

“We believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come”

Lent 2021: St Thomas Brampton

Introduction

Welcome to our short study series, looking at the Amazing Resurrection of Jesus! Actually, “amazing” is an understatement. Jesus’ resurrection was awesome beyond our ability to describe it.

It’s an event of which most people are aware – whether or not they believe it. And as Christians, we are probably very familiar, not only with the gospel accounts but also with the New Testament writers’ dawning realisation of what this event meant for the human race. As with all that is familiar, over time we can lose some of our sense of wonder, delight and thankfulness for Jesus’ resurrection, so we hope these 4 sessions will help us understand this part of God’s plan for our salvation and the destruction of all that is evil, and so find that our faith is renewed and we shout our “Alleluias” with greater joy on Easter morning.

Session 1:

Resurrection ... as understood by the C1st Jews of Jesus’ day

Let’s begin with a question.

To what extent do you believe the line from the title above? (this comes from our creed, our statement of belief, hence “we believe...”) **What do you understand by it?**

Whatever your response, stay with us!

Ask God to speak to you through these sessions and show you new things of wonder and joy.

We are starting by looking at what people of Jesus’ day thought about resurrection and life after death and where their beliefs came from, so we come to Jesus’ resurrection and the gospel accounts in much the same place as those who witnessed it first-hand.

Resurrection beliefs in the ancient world

The Jews believed in Resurrection But not as we understand it!

For them, it was a concept that developed over time, not just as their understanding of God grew but as they absorbed, refined or rejected ideas / beliefs from other cultures and religions – the idea of resurrection was not exclusive to the people of Israel! Pagan cults and religions of the ancient world had many legends of gods dying and rising – for example Osiris in Egyptian mythology, Dionysus in Greek.

Those with particular geographical proximity to the Israelites were...

... **The Egyptians** certainly believed in an afterlife! Think of all those tombs and mummies buried with paraphernalia from their earthly lives!

If there can be a generalisation, Egyptians believed in the basic goodness of human life, so they saw no need to change this and it was thought that people lived on in much the same way as they had done before death – but with the gods, in a state of bliss. So they needed all their stuff!

But not everyone made it to bliss. *'The Book of the Dead'*, an ancient Egyptian funerary text from c 1550BC, describes the entrance to bliss as dependent on knowing the right answers to questions about moral conduct. Apparently it mattered not what your moral conduct had been: you just needed to know the right answers!

In contrast, for the **Mesopotamians**, there was no hope of survival. The gods kept life to themselves; death was simply part of human life, with no moral or religious significance and viewed with deep pessimism. So the philosophy was to eat, drink and be merry while they could...

Different again were the **Canaanite** belief in the on-going existence of the soul and the **Babylonian** concept of a shadowy existence in a bleak underworld .

Can you identify echoes of – or even parallels with – any of these ideas in beliefs / attitudes in our own time?

The people of our Old Testament were not unaware of these ideas. Some they rejected. (The Egyptian faith in the secular material world was abhorrent to the Israelites and may have been the reason the latter chose not to think much, or very deeply, about the afterlife.) But they were more ambivalent or accepting of ideas and legends from other cultures. Passages such **Isaiah 24**, (God's judgement on the earth), that we probably think of as Jewish in origin, have strong parallels with ideas from both Canaanite and Babylonian myths....

Resurrection in the Old Testament

Let's move on now to c 587BC and join the Israelites who have been carried off by the mighty Assyrians, into exile in Babylon.

Here the prophet Ezekiel – along with his compatriots longing to return to their homeland – had his famous vision of a valley of dry bones rising up from the earth, acquiring flesh and becoming human figures.

Quickly remind yourself of this in **Ezekiel 37: 1-14** .

Given his circumstances and longing – and what he heard from God – how do you think Ezekiel understood his vision?

Remembering where he was and where he wanted to be, it's not surprising that Ezekiel understood this vision as a picture of the restoration of the people of Israel and the rebuilding of the Temple – crowning symbol of God's favour towards Israel and sign of Yahweh's greatness.

But as the exile continued, people began to wonder if Ezekiel's vision was about more than "just" a return from exile.

They went on wondering this after their return, when, even after the Temple was rebuilt, Israel was far from back to a position of greatness! The reality was continued struggle for survival against powerful neighbours and no Israelite really believed all Ezekiel's prophecy had yet taken place!

So, slowly, (everything happens slowly!) the idea of resurrection as restoration of Israel's fortunes and the re-establishment of all that had been lost, was augmented by an understanding of resurrection as a metaphor for vindication for all Israel had suffered.

First vindication, then restoration! Job done ...or was it ?

The people of God were aware that Ezekiel's vision hinted at more than Israel's restoration and although it is not always easy to distinguish between the hope for Israel's survival and the hope for human resurrection, they began to pick up hints of "something more" from other passages in their Hebrew scriptures that expressed a (usually vague) hope for an afterlife.

Look at Psalms 49 & 73.

What is the hope for an afterlife expressed in these psalms?

Look at Isaiah 53

Here is another famous OT passage.

Try hard – try very hard! – to forget your New Testament for a moment. You are a Jew before the time of Jesus and you are acutely aware of your Jewish heritage -

What might this passage suggest to you about resurrection?

Along with specific passages, there are also references to *Sheol*, the place of the dead throughout the OT.

What do you understand by this word?

What image(s) come to mind?

Read **Numbers 16:31-33**

How does this very early recorded reference to sheol depict it? What do these verses tell us about people's understanding at the time?

Think about **Job** ... Can you remember his ideas about life after death?

.. and look at **Psalm 88**.

What does this psalm tell us about contemporary views of sheol?

Psalm 30 gives us a clue to a new understanding about sheol. **What is it?**

Also running through the OT and Apocrypha are explicit references to the existence of the soul as distinct from the body and more than a suggestion of resurrection as the immortality of the soul.

Psalm 49:15 brings the ideas of soul and sheol together with its idea of the soul being ransomed from the power of sheol.

Wisdom 3:1-9, verses that describe the destiny of the righteous, "running like sparks through the stubble", puts forward the belief that God holds in God's hand the souls of the righteous and no torment will ever again touch them.

With all the above bubbling away in the background for the people of the Old Testament, the first clear expression of hope of resurrection with which we can perhaps really identify comes from the **Book of Daniel**, dating c 164BC, from the Maccabean period.

(This began c 200 years before Jesus. The Maccabees were a group of Jewish rebels / freedom fighters / terrorists (depending on your viewpoint!) who fought against the Seleucid Kings who ruled Judah and who harshly suppressed the Jewish religion.)

Look at **Daniel 12**. **What is the understanding of resurrection here?**

The faith of the wise teachers, who enabled the people of God to understand and cling to their faith during a time of persecution, could risk death by speaking out against oppression. Doing the right thing according to one's faith and thus losing one's life and finding immortality is better than giving in to oppression and keeping one's earthly life.

Does this statement remind you of anything? (Hint! Think of Jesus!)

The theology expressed in **1 & 2 Maccabees** (in our Apocrypha) from much the same period of C2nd into C1st BC also focusses on this idea of resurrection for the just, when God, majestic and merciful, will judge. And **2 Macc 7** (a grisly description of the torture of Jewish people) expresses a clear hope in God raising people from the dead in a recognisable form.

From BC to AD

By the C1st BC, the idea of bodily resurrection began to gain currency in mainstream Judaism, largely due to the Pharisees. The Pharisees (one of the two opposing groups that called the shots in terms of interpreting and implementing Jewish law – the others were the Sadducees) were open to the idea of a supernatural world interacting with life on earth (Think of the comic story in Acts 12 and what is said following Rhoda's announcement) and this, together with a growing understanding of Israel's God, leads them to re-examine passages such as **Isaiah 65:17**

Perhaps resurrection was not some shadowy existence of the soul or a continuation of earthly life in a new setting.

Perhaps resurrection meant a new life in a new world !

However!

As we know, things of history are never tidy or clear cut and even as the idea of resurrection in a new bodily form began to emerge, there was still the question of how this could happen. How could a human body survive death? And many Pharisees held on to the old ideas about resurrection.

So, as we know from the C1st AD Jewish historian Josephus (and from Acts 23:7-8), as BC moved to AD, while resurrection was an important aspect of the Pharisees' theology, the latter was still overlaid by the old ideas, including the persistent hope of resurrection as God crushing Israel's enemies and restoring their former glory.

And for the Sadducees, a disembodied soul living on was the only understanding they were prepared to accept.

Think whether there are people you know who hold the same belief. What might you say to them?

Sadducees based their rejection of the idea of bodily resurrection on the fact that the Pentateuch is silent on the subject. **Deuteronomy 25:5-10** was their proof text and they would no doubt have also cited a verse from their own apocryphal writing, the **Testimony of the Twelve, Book of Jubilee, 23:31** "Their bones will rest in the earth but their spirits will have much joy".

As an interesting aside their second major reason for rejecting the concept of bodily resurrection was very probably because it was championed by their arch-rivals the Pharisees! Pharisees posed a real threat to the Sadducees, with their revolutionary ideas about establishing the kingdom of God by overthrowing existing religious order - including the Sadducees!

Resurrection was a political matter in C1st Judaism!

And whatever questions were being debated, we can say with some certainty that whatever the Jews were expecting, it was not the resurrection of a crucified trouble-maker from Nazareth. For them, resurrection based on anything other than righteous Judaism was unthinkable!

Worship

Remind yourself that wherever you are, God is beside you...

Play some music – Haydn, Hillsong, whatever – read 150 and Praise God for being God!

Take some time to reflect on scripture you have read / considered this session.

What are your thoughts?

What is God saying to you as you think ?

Thank God for Jesus – for his life, his death AND his resurrection.