

Resurrection in the Old Testament

Introduction

One of the ideas that Scripture discusses *at length* is the concept of resurrection. In essence, Scripture tells us that after we die, we will eventually be brought back to life – so that we will **live again**, on the earth. To be more specific, the Bible states that Jesus, himself, will resurrect people, after he returns to the earth.

There are many, *many* passages in Scripture which discuss this concept of resurrection. For example, consider the following passages:

John 6:40 (ESV):

⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

1 Thessalonians 4:13-16 (ESV):

¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

John 11:25 (NKJV):

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.

Romans 8:11 (ESV):

¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

John 6:54 (ESV):

⁵⁴ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

Acts 24:14-15 (ESV):

¹⁴ ...I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, ¹⁵ having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.

John 5:28-29 (ESV):

²⁸ Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

Luke 14:13-14 (ESV):

¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

Revelation 20:6 (ESV):

⁶ Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

Revelation 20:5 (ESV):

⁵ The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.

The above passages all *explicitly* state that dead people will be **resurrected**, in the future.

Of course, all of the above passages have one thing in common – they are all from the New Testament. So, that raises a question – does the Old Testament have anything to say about resurrection?

It is well-known fact that **almost all** of the information listed in the New Testament is **directly related** to information in the Old Testament. So, given the fact that there are *so many* passages about resurrection in the New Testament, one would certainly expect that it is mentioned in the Old Testament as well.

Not only that, but the passage from Acts 24, above, is very instructive. In that passage, the Apostle Paul states that he believes everything written in “the Law and the Prophets” – i.e., in the “Old Testament” – and that that belief gives him a hope of resurrection from the dead. That is a clear indication that resurrection is, indeed, mentioned in the Old Testament.

So, let’s examine passages from the Old Testament, to determine if it has anything to say about the concept of resurrection.

References in Ezekiel

First, consider the passage below from Ezekiel. That passage details a rather well-known prophecy:

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (ESV):

¹ The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. ² And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³ And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” ⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ And I looked, and behold, there were

sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

¹¹ Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord."

Of course, the above passage is the famous "dry bones" prophecy. The prophecy begins with Ezekiel seeing a multitude of **bones** in a valley; and God tells him that those bones are "the whole house of Israel" – i.e., they represent dead Israelites.

God then causes the bones to come together; and He then causes **sinews** to attach to them, and covers them with **skin**. So, at that point, the bodies of the Israelites have been "reconstructed" – but the "breath of life" is **not** present in them yet, so they are just "corpses" at that point. Finally, God causes **breath** to come into the Israelites' bodies – and as a result, they all come *back to life*.

So, the above passage is a very *detailed* and *graphic* prophecy, about God **resurrecting** dead people. In fact, there is very distinct "parallel" between this prophecy, and the account of God creating Adam. As listed in Genesis 2:7, God **first** created Adam's physical body, from the dust of the ground. At that point, Adam was **not** alive – he was just a dead body. **After** that, God caused the "breath of life" to enter Adam – and that caused Adam to *become* **alive**. Of course, that very **same** "order of events" is listed in the passage above.

It should be noted that some people believe that this prophecy is **actually** about the Holocaust. Basically, some people link the "dry bones" with Holocaust survivors, who then *emigrated* to Israel – and who ended up prospering there. Of course, many of the Holocaust survivors were **extremely** malnourished – i.e., they were "skin and bones", so to speak – so there is *somewhat* of a parallel between those survivors and the "dry bones" mentioned in the prophecy.

However, the prophecy explicitly states that God will "open the graves" of the Israelites, and will "raise them" from their graves. So, that indicates to me that this prophecy is about resurrecting people who are actually **dead** - rather than about healing Holocaust survivors (who were **alive**). In fact, the prophecy in John 5:28-29, above, uses very similar language ("all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out") – and that prophecy is *definitely* referring to resurrecting dead people.

So, the "dry bones" prophecy in Ezekiel 37 certainly appears to be a reference to **resurrection**, in the Old Testament.

References in Isaiah

The prophet Isaiah also has references to resurrection in his writings. Consider these passages:

Isaiah 26:19 (ESV):

¹⁹ Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise.
You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a dew of light,
and the earth will give birth to the dead.

Isaiah 25:8 (ESV):

⁸ He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.

The first passage is very *explicit*. It starts off by bluntly stating that “your dead shall live” – making it as clear as possible that dead people will be brought *back to life*, in the future. The Hebrew of that phrase is also quite **unambiguous**: “yi-chai-u mei-te-cha” – “shall live your dead”.

The passage goes on to tell us that “you who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy”. There are several “cross references” to be aware of in that sentence. First, the reference to “dwelling in the dust” is *another* reference to Adam. In Genesis 3:19, God told Adam that “you are dust, and to dust you shall return”. As a result, throughout Scripture – including in this passage – dead people are referred to as “dwelling in the dust”.

In addition, note the reference to “**awake** and sing for joy”. Across the entire Bible, death is compared to sleep. In essence, dead people are said to be “sleeping in the dust”. One very well-known comparison of death to sleep can be found in John 11:11, in which Jesus tells the disciples: “our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him”. So, dead people are said to be sleeping; and when they are resurrected, they “awaken” from their sleep – which is why this passage states “awake and sing for joy”.

The second passage is also quite interesting. That passage states that God will “swallow up death forever”. That indicates that in the next age, death will eventually be completely “abolished” – so that **no one** will ever die again! In fact, the apostle Paul references that very passage in 1 Corinthians 15:54; he paraphrases it as “death is swallowed up in victory”.

That passage also tells us that God will “wipe away tears from all faces”. Certainly, during the next age – with no death, and everyone at peace – there will be no cause for *any* sadness. Revelation 21:4 refers to that *very* fact – it states that God will “wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

So, the above passages in Isaiah definitely refer to **resurrection** – and they also state that in the next age, there will be **no** death (or sadness) at all!

References in Daniel

There is also a very “famous” passage about resurrection in the book of Daniel. Consider the following passage, which discusses events that will occur in the “end times”:

Daniel 12:1-4 (ESV):

¹ “At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. ² And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ³ And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. ⁴ But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.”

Verse 2 of that passage begins as follows: “many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground shall awaken”. As mentioned earlier, Scripture frequently compares death to “sleep” – and it also states that dead people “dwell in the dust”. So, the fact that this passage refers to “sleepers in the dust” who then “wake up” is a *clear* indication that this passage refers to resurrection.

There is another important item to note about that passage as well. Verse 2 continues on to state that during the resurrection, some people will be raised to “everlasting life”, while other people will be raised to “shame and contempt”. This is a clear indication that our **actions** during this age will **affect** our lives in the next age. In other words, our behavior during our current lives will have “consequences” during our resurrections.

This concept – that people’s current actions **affect** their resurrections – is also explicitly mentioned in Acts 24:14-15 and John 5:28-29, above. The passage in Acts refers to the resurrections of the “just” and the “unjust”; and the passage in John refers to the “resurrection of life” and the “resurrection of judgment”.

So, the above passage in Daniel clearly refers to the **resurrection** of dead people. In addition, it also tells us that people’s behavior will determine what “type” of resurrection they will have!

References in Job

Finally, consider the following, very *inspiring* passage from Job, in the context of *resurrection*:

Job 19:23-27 (ESV):

²³ “Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
²⁴ Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were engraved in the rock forever!
²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
²⁶ And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God,
²⁷ whom I shall see for myself,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!

In verse 25, Job professes his faith that God – our *ultimate* Redeemer – is alive; **and** that in the next age He will dwell on the earth with mankind.

Job then immediately follows that with his belief that “after his flesh is destroyed (i.e., after his body has decomposed), in his flesh he will see God”. He then verifies that it is he, himself who will see God – *not* “someone else”. For example, this is not a prophecy about one of Job’s **descendants** seeing God – it is a prophecy about Job, himself, seeing God – on the earth – in the **next** age.

This definitely indicates that Job believed in the resurrection. Here is my “paraphrase” of the above prophecy from Job:

“I know that at some point I will die; and that my body will subsequently decompose. However, I also know that in the **next** age, God will “reconstruct” my body, and will fill my body with the breath of life – so that I will live again. At that time, I – **myself** – will see God, on the earth”.

Note that the book of Job is probably the **oldest** book of the Bible – i.e., it is the book that was written earliest in time. From the above passage, we can see that believers *already* had faith in the resurrection of the dead, even in the very oldest part of Scripture!

Conclusion

As shown above, there are some very *explicit* references to resurrection in the Old Testament – just as there are in the New Testament. One of the reasons why this is important is that it shows us – once again – that the Old and New Testaments agree with each other. In other words, it shows us that both testaments are part of a single, unified whole – as opposed to them having “contradictory” information in them.

There is one other item to bring up, on that very point. As mentioned above, in Acts 24:14-15, Paul tells us that he believes everything written in “the Law and the Prophets” – and *because* of that, he believes in the resurrection of the dead. The “Law” refers to the **Torah** – i.e., to the first five books of the Bible; while the “Prophets” generally refers to the rest of the Old Testament.

Of course, all of the Old Testament references listed above are from the “Prophets” – i.e., those references are in books outside of the Torah. So, that raises a question – are there any references to resurrection **in** the Torah? After all, since there are **many** references to resurrection in the Prophets and in the New Testament, one would expect to see some indication of resurrection in the Torah as well.

Interestingly, that *exact* issue is addressed in the New Testament. During the time of Jesus, one of the Jewish sects that existed was called the “Sadducees”. That group believed that only the Torah was inspired by God – i.e., they did **not** believe that the Prophetic books were inspired. The Sadducees had many other beliefs as well – and one of those beliefs was that there was **no** resurrection – i.e., that people will never come back to life at all, after they die. (Note that some **modern-day** Jewish groups also deny the resurrection!)

The New Testament records an argument between the Sadducees and Jesus, about the resurrection. In that argument, Jesus demonstrated that the Torah, itself, indicates that people will be resurrected. (In this case, Jesus needed to show resurrection in the **Torah** – because the Sadducees did not accept the Prophets as inspired.)

In essence, Jesus points out that in the Torah, God refers to Himself as “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” – even after all three of those men had died. Here is the passage in Matthew, in which Jesus mentions that fact to the Sadducees:

Matthew 22:31-33 (ESV):

³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ³² 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." ³³ And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

In the parallel passage in Luke, Jesus refers to one *specific* account in the Torah, where God calls Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the account of Moses and the burning bush (in Exodus chapter 3):

Luke 20:37-40 (ESV):

³⁷ But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. ³⁸ Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him." ³⁹ Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." ⁴⁰ For they no longer dared to ask him any question.

In the above passages, Jesus tells us that God is not "the God of the dead", but rather "the God of the living". Also, God calls Himself "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", long **after** those men had died. So, **if** there were no resurrection from the dead, then that would mean that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would never come back to life – i.e., that they would be "permanently" dead. That, in turn, would mean that God would not call Himself the God of those men – since God is **not** the God of the dead.

In other words, the fact that God does call Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob indicates that they will come back to life – i.e., that they will be **resurrected** – because God is the God of the **living**!

So, in the above passages, Jesus provides a brilliant exegesis of Scripture – in order to demonstrate that resurrection is indicated *even* in the Torah!

I hope that this article was useful to you!