**What did the Jews believe about the afterlife? By Thailer Jimerson**

For this Sunday’s article, I was nudged in the direction of discussing the afterlife due to questions concerning the resurrection sermon I preached a couple Sundays ago. Naturally, many of us are most curious about what happens after death and, particularly, what the Bible says about it. A good foundation for understanding Paul’s comments in 1 Corinthians 15, and the New Testament doctrine of resurrection overall, is first understanding what the Old Testament has to say about the afterlife as well as acquainting ourselves with the first century Jewish perspective.

What you find when you try to fix a firm grip on the Old Testament understanding of the afterlife is surprising, to say the least, because what you find is that it doesn’t say much. Taken on its own terms, what the 39 books - contained in the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets - say can be summed up in a few ambiguous verses. It’s only by reading into the Old what we have in the New that we’ve not noticed this much before.

When one surveys the OT, however, they come up with few phases in the development of thought (here summarized in a quote from N.T. Wright’s *The Resurrection of the Son of God, p.86*):

“Studies and surveys of ancient Israelite beliefs about life after death have thus tended to plot three distinct types or phases. In the early period, there was little or no hope for a life of joy or bliss after death: Sheol swallowed up the dead, kept them in gloomy darkness, and never let them out again [e.g., **Ps.88; 34; 37; Eccl.9.1-10; 1Sa.28.19; 1Kg.2.10**]. At some point (nobody knows when; dating of developments in such matters is notoriously difficult) some pious Israelites came to regard the love and power of YHWH as so strong that the relationship they enjoyed with him in the present could not be broken even by death [e.g., Ps.16;49; 73.23-27]. Then, again at an uncertain point, a quite new idea came forth: the dead would be raised. Three positions thus emerge: absence of hope beyond death; hope for blissful life after death; hope for a new bodily life after ‘life after death’."

It would be a great mistake to read into the Jewish perspective (and their Scriptures), what we think the afterlife should look like. That will not do as we try to understand their doctrine. But why does their view seem so foreign to us? Answer: Because, without even realizing it, we’ve adopted a pagan and primarily platonic way of thinking about the afterlife. See, unlike neighboring pagan religions and worldviews that were extremely fixated with the afterlife - the Jewish Bible hardly has much to say primarily because their views contrast in the sense that their blessings were very *this* worldly, e.g. seen in Abraham’s promised land. Wright says, "The nation and land of the present world were far more important than what had happened to an individual beyond the grave" (p.99).

Jews unlike Platonists viewed death as sad - an interruption rather than liberation. Even so, the earliest mention of life everlasting comes in the third chapter of Genesis (v.22, specifically) where we're given a glimpse of the tree of life - the other possibility. Man is not created immortal but had (and, unfortunately, lost) a chance at it.

All that being said, what does the Bible (and especially the Old Testament) actually say about the afterlife, and what picture can we construct from the clues? When you die, your disembodied spirit goes to an interim, temporary resting place, sustained by God himself until the day when God finally completes his purposes for humanity and raises all his to everlasting resurrection in a new re-embodied state, modeled after the resurrection of Christ himself. Here are a few verses to fill us out the resurrection belief:

* **Isaiah 26.19**: “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.”
* **Ezekiel 37.12**: “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.”
* **Daniel 12.2**: **“**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.”
* **Hosea 6.1-2**: “Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.”
* **Hosea 13.14**: “I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol; I shall redeem them from Death. O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting?”

These are only a few examples of explicit references in the Old Testament. (Notice also that one thing they all have in common is that they come from texts written late in Israel’s history.) However, Jesus teaches us that there are many more, yet hidden, when he uses Exodus 3.6 to prove the resurrection to those seeking to entrap him with questions (see Matthew 22.32). Maybe this is why Paul writes that, particularly in Jesus, we can now understand more clearly the hope we have in the life hereafter: “our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1.10).