

The doctrine of resurrection in the Old Testament*

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This article refutes critics' attempts to claim that resurrection is not taught in the Old Testament, showing that it is clearly taught in Daniel, Isaiah, the Psalms and, in particular, Job.

SOME YEARS AGO higher critics tried for a time to exclude the idea of resurrection from the writings of the Old Testament. An attempt was made to explain away passages which seemed to refer to any life beyond the present, language being tortured, and meanings being forced, as if the critics felt a major compulsion to reject the obvious.

We can understand one who does not believe in the Lord Jesus striving to explain away all passages in the Old Testament which seem to refer to him, for there the major compulsion is evident. A man who does not believe either in the word of prophecy or in Christianity is logically bound to deny that the Old Testament makes any reference to Jesus. If there comes a time when the Messiah argument becomes too strong to be resisted and he is compelled to admit the Christian meaning, he is no longer an unbeliever. The logical compulsion towards unbelief has given way and he can deal with all passages on their merits.

The higher critics and Daniel 12

In the matter of resurrection, however, it is difficult to see the reason for the fashion which for a time prevailed in critical circles. Forty or fifty years ago, in a certain encyclopaedia which came under the control of higher critics [the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*], the reference in Daniel 12 to many rising from the dust of the earth (v. 2) was explained as referring solely to the chequered experiences of mortal life.

It meant, we were told, that, after the trouble and persecutions were over, many who had hidden in dens and caves would arise from the dust—that is, come forth from their hiding places—, some to be honoured—the life of the age—and some to be treated with ignominy—the contempt of the age'. No reference whatever to anything beyond the grave!

It is rather difficult to see why critics should ever have taken this attitude in view of the fact that Daniel's prophecy certainly looks far ahead to a time when, after a succession of empires and the struggles of many kings, the God of heaven will set up a Kingdom which will break in pieces the kingdoms of men and stand for ever (2:44); in view too of the fact that the book of Daniel closes with the words, "go thou thy way till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days". Surely they did not think it meant that the greatly beloved prophet, who must have been an old man by this time, was to have a short rest and then stand in his lot in the last feeble stage of mortal life!

It must be remembered, too, that according to the critics the book of Daniel was not written until two hundred years after the time assigned for the prophet's life. What then was the meaning of the promise that he should stand in his lot at the end of the days if he had been dead for two hundred years when the prophecy was written? It seems that the critics had made two unwarrantable assumptions which contradicted each other.

With the eleventh edition of the encyclopaedia there was a complete change of front. The passage in Daniel 12 was recognised as referring to the resurrection at the last day, and an attempt was made to use this as an argument to support the critical claim that the book was written long after the traditional date. It was affirmed that the doctrine of resurrection was learned from the Persians, and that it indicated a prolonged period of Persian influence. In support of this argument, the astonishing claim was made that this passage in Daniel 12 was the first reference to the idea of resurrection in the Old Testament.

This grotesque statement was corrected in the next edition, although without apology or admission of error. Some other false statements were corrected at the same time. But, whilst in effect withdrawing some of the most outrageous of the earlier arguments, and passing the worst

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of all in complete silence, the sceptical attitude was retained.

Such irresponsible assertions, and such perversities of biased argument, in what is supposed to be a work of reference should put students on their guard. When matters of religious conviction are involved, we can no more rely on the intellectual honesty of learned men than on the illiterate disputants of the market place.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament

In making the admission that the doctrine of resurrection is taught in other books in the Old Testament, the later edition of the encyclopaedia only mentioned Isaiah 26:19. This is certainly plain enough, for it draws a contrast between the heathen "lords" who "shall not rise" (vv. 13,14), but perish completely, and the people of God who, although having died, will rise and live again.

It must surely be admitted, however, that there are many other passages in the Old Testament where this contrast is drawn with equal force and distinctness. What did the psalmist mean by men of the world whose portion is only in this life (17:14)? What did he mean by the soul not being left in *sheol* (16:10)? How can the statement be interpreted reasonably except in the manner explained by the Apostle Peter (Acts 2:29-31)? What did he mean by his soul being redeemed from the power of the grave, in contrast to the wicked who are laid there like sheep for death to feed on them (Ps. 49:14,15)? What is the awakening with the Divine likeness which will satisfy him (17:15)? These and many other passages indicate a hope of something better than the complete triumph of death.

The book of Job

The book of Job was treated with exceptional severity in the attempt to eliminate from its pages any reference to a life beyond the grave. It is particularly difficult to understand why any student of this book should feel under a major compulsion to keep all references within the bounds of mortal life. The book is outstanding in its discussion of great moral issues, in its questions as to the meaning of human life and in its continual recognition of God.

Whenever men raise such religious problems and discuss them intelligently, it is inevitable that the question should arise, "If a man die, shall he live again?". This exact question was raised, as recorded in Job 14:14, and it would

surely be an extreme of critical perversity to suggest that "die" in this passage only meant 'be sick', and "live again" only meant 'recover health'!

Perhaps no one would go quite so far, but if it is admitted that this very natural question for worshippers of God to raise meant exactly what it said, it can hardly be denied that Job expressed the hope of a life beyond the grave, for that is the unmistakable line of thought. That is clear enough in our ordinary version. It is still more definite in the Septuagint: "For if a man should die, shall he live again, having accomplished the days of his life? I will wait till I exist again. Then shalt Thou call, and I will hearken to Thee" (vv. 14,15).

If such language were used now by any religious man, no one would doubt that the reference was to a future life. Critics would say, "Of course that is so because we know that all grades of religious people in modern times have cherished such hopes". As if such thoughts would never enter the minds of men in ancient days! We may be absolutely certain that, whenever men were intelligent enough to engage in such reasoning over moral issues, they would raise questions regarding death and the possibility of anything beyond. Such reasoning as we get in the book of Job would be a mystery if no thought of a possible life beyond the grave had ever arisen.

The hope in Old Testament times

It is indeed an outstanding fact in the Old Testament that little is mentioned regarding this matter. There is a general recognition of the fact that death is real. It is spoken of in the book of Job as "the king of terrors" (18:14). Death is exhibited as the end of life, and a dismal end it is admitted to be. Inevitably the question arose, Is it possible for men to live again? The servants of God recognised that only the Most High could answer. He alone could call the prisoners from "the pit wherein is no water"; His power alone could make them "prisoners of hope" (Zech. 9:11,12).

The great question as to a future life was bound to arise, however, and the answer is given in sober suggestions of hope in all parts of the Word. In the Old Testament there is a reverential reticence in the contemplation of these hopes, which could only be satisfied by the merciful exercise of Divine power.

When Abraham asked for an assurance that he would receive the promised inheritance, a "deep sleep" and "horror of great darkness" came upon him (Gen. 15:12), surely indicating that the

inheritance lay beyond the sleep of death and the darkness of human history. In a hundred ways the same thought is presented to a thoughtful student. Men cherished this hope of better life, but in Old Testament times they were given very little information as to how it would be revealed. All is in harmony with the central fact that man is a mortal creature, perishing in a state of sin. God had made promises involving the concept of a future life, but in Old Testament times the way was not fully revealed.

"I know that my redeemer liveth"

In the book of Job perhaps the most serious controversy has raged round chapter 19 and the familiar passage beginning, "I know that my redeemer liveth" (v. 25). No doubt this is a difficult passage to translate, and where there are verbal difficulties in poetry there may easily be disputes as to the meaning. A comparison of many translations seems to leave no doubt that in this passage Job expressed perfect confidence in the existence of a supreme redeemer, or vindicator, or judge, who at some future time would stand on earth and render justice to both righteous and wicked.

Those who tried to eliminate all reference to a future life said, "Yes, 'vindicator' is the right word, and in the end of the story the 'vindicator' was there raising Job to health and honour again. This was the judgement to which he looked with such confidence". But is anyone justified in making this claim? Was Job sure that in mortal life there was sure to be such vindication? If so, it is rather difficult to see wherein he so differed from his critics.

We have known modern men who, although believing in a future life, have had their minds so attuned to temporal things that even after the warning that comes from the book of Job they have fallen into the same error as the men there condemned. They have assumed that the unfortunate experience of a contemporary is a punishment for his sins. We have heard men who ought to have known better say of such a matter, "It is a judgement on him".

A sudden misfortune coming on any of us might be a Divinely caused chastening, for "Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment" (1 Tim. 5:24). No man, however, has the slightest right to assume that such a misfortune comes as a specific punishment, or that it indicates exceptional sinfulness. The friends of Job made such an improper assumption, and then, spurred on by the effect of argument and opposi-

tion, they reached such an extreme of slanderous abuse that they deserved to die.

Job maintained that misfortune in mortal life was no proof of exceptional sin, and in this he was right. He knew that God would bring him to death (Job 30:23). He did not say he knew that vindication would come first. In chapter 21 he clearly shows a consciousness of another fact which cannot be denied: "One dieth in his full strength, being wholly at ease and quiet . . . another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with pleasure. They shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them" (vv. 23-26). Then in the same chapter the question is raised regarding the wicked: "do ye not know their tokens, that the wicked is reserved to the day of destruction? they shall be brought forth to the day of wrath" (vv. 29,30).

Job's confidence for the future

Now without arguing the details of translation, but taking a general survey of the whole book, are we not bound to recognise that the contention of Job was against his critics on this matter? They argued that misfortune proved guilt; Job maintained that it proved nothing of the kind. The words just quoted show that he recognised a truth which we now all admit, that some men seem to have an easy life and an easy death while others encounter bitter trials right to the grave.

How then could Job be so confident that he would be vindicated in mortal life? He had no such confidence, but like all true servants of God he knew that there would be a final judgement, and he had full confidence that he would be vindicated then. He might be brought to death without any deliverance, he might die "in bitterness of soul, and never [taste] of good" (v. 25, RV). Yet his words ring out: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" (13:15). So with this confidence in the ultimate justice of God and the final triumph of righteousness he said: "I know that my redeemer liveth . . . and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (19:25,26).

There is nothing which can reasonably be regarded as a major objection to the old interpretation of this passage, nothing to justify a straining to avoid the obvious meaning. There is, on the contrary, every reason to believe that a patriarch as well enlightened as Job would cherish a hope that in ultimate judgement God would vindicate him, even though he had been hidden in the grave and his body had been destroyed.