

*Jewish attitudes to afterlife in the
age of Jesus*

There is no doubt that the ideas of resurrection and immortality were sporadically attested in the latest layers of biblical literature as well as in the early post-biblical writings of Judaism, but does this mean that they had widely penetrated the religious consciousness of the Jews of the period? In the absence of direct reports, the best we can do is to examine the contemporaneous historical sources that describe the beliefs prevalent in that age among diverse Jewish groups. Thanks to Philo, Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the oldest strata of rabbinic literature, it is possible to arrive at an approximate assessment of the religious attitudes of the society in which Jesus ministered and to which the earliest Christian message, anchored on the notion of his resurrection, was first preached.

Let us begin with the Egyptian philosopher and religious teacher Philo of Alexandria (c. 20/10 BC–AD 40/50), the quintessential representative, indeed the personification, of a fully Hellenized Jew. He professed a Greek-type doctrine of immortality. For him, the soul was incarcerated in the body during a man's life. It was 'like a prisoner in the gaol', but on death it retrieved its freedom. 'When it has gone out of this city', Philo remarks, 'its thought and reflections are at liberty, like the hands and feet of the unbound prisoner' (*On Drunkenness* 101). Even more strikingly, echo-

uncultured

ing Plato's pun, Philo equates the body (*sôma*) with a tomb (*sêma*), out of which the soul arises for true life.

When we are living, the soul is dead and has been entombed in the body as a sepulchre; whereas should we die, the soul lives forthwith its own proper life, and is released from the body, the baneful corpse to which it was tied (Allegory 108).

It should surprise no one that the notion of the resurrection of the body never appears in his vast work. For educated Hellenists, reunion of the noble and liberated soul with the vile body was a denial of the highest philosophical principles, as St Paul had to find out for himself when he engaged in debate with learned Hellenes at 'speakers' corner' in Athens (Acts 17:16–33). It would seem, therefore, that the Christian preaching focused on the cross and resurrection of Christ appealed only to uncultured Greeks. Indeed, among Paul's habitual Greek clientele 'not many . . . were wise according to worldly standards' (1 Cor 1:26).

In a similar fashion, the upper echelons of Palestinian Jewish society also appear to have been hostile to the idea of resurrection. The leading classes of the Jerusalem priesthood and their wealthy and well-schooled aristocratic allies, who together formed the party of the Sadducees, were basically traditionalists. They did not speculate overmuch about afterlife and stuck to the conventional biblical wisdom emphatically and fatalistically defined in the Apocrypha by the author of the Book of Ecclesiasticus, Jesus Ben Sira, himself probably a priest from Jerusalem:

Do not fear the sentence of death;
Remember your former days and the end of life;

materialists

This is the decree from the Lord for all flesh,
And how can you reject the good pleasure of the Most High?
Whether life is for ten, or a hundred or a thousand years,
There is no inquiry about it in Hades (Ecclus 41:3-4).

According to Josephus, himself of chief-priestly origin (although at the age of nineteen he decided to switch his allegiance to the Pharisees (*Life* 1-12)), the Sadducees rejected the idea of survival after death and did not believe in future retribution. In Josephus' own words, 'The Sadducees hold that the soul perishes along with the body' (*Ant* 18:16), that is to say, at death life is extinguished for good. He further declares, 'As for the persistence of the soul after death, penalties in the underworld, and rewards, they [the Sadducees] will have none of them' (*War* 2:165). In the Gospels the Sadducee creed proclaims, 'There is no resurrection' (Mk 12:18; Mt 22:23; Lk 20:27). In a polemical episode, to be examined later (pp. 69-72), the Sadducees ridicule the notion of rising from the dead (Mk 12:18-27; Mt 22:23-32; Lk 20:27-38).

The Acts of the Apostles goes even further than Josephus and the Gospels when it turns the Sadducees into complete materialists who denied not only the resurrection of the dead, but also the existence of angels and spirits (Acts 23:8). However, this exaggeration should probably be blamed more on the Gentile Luke's unfamiliarity with Palestinian Jewish thought than on the Sadducees, for angels are commonly mentioned in the Bible and the Sadducees were sticklers for the letter of scripture.

The stand taken by the Essenes on resurrection is more difficult to establish. Josephus, who claims to have experienced the life of this sect and studied their philosophy (*Life* 10), reports that the kind of afterlife they envisaged

was different from resurrection. His final word on the subject in *Jewish Antiquities* (end of the first century AD) was that the Essenes believed in spiritual survival, the immortality of the soul (*Ant* 18:18). In the earlier account of the *Jewish War*, Josephus, like Philo and Hellenistic Judaism, paints a detailed Platonic canvas that after death incorruptible souls receive eternal reward or punishment.

*For it is a fixed belief of theirs that the body is corruptible and its constituent matter impermanent, but that the soul is immortal and imperishable. Emanating from the finest ether, these souls become entangled, as it were, in the prison-house of the body, to which they are dragged down by a sort of natural spell; but when once they are released from the bonds of the flesh, then, as though liberated from a long servitude, they rejoice and are borne aloft. Sharing the belief of the sons of Greece, they maintain that for the virtuous souls there is reserved an abode beyond the ocean, a place which is not oppressed by rain or snow or heat, but is refreshed by the ever gentle breath of the west wind coming in from the ocean; while they relegate base souls to a murky and tempestuous dungeon, big with never-ending punishment . . . Their aim was first to establish the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and secondly to promote virtue and to deter from vice; for the good are made better in their lifetime by the hope of a reward after death, and the passions of the wicked are restrained by the fear that, even though they escape detection while alive, they will undergo never-ending punishment after their decease (*War* 2:154-157).*

If this was a true picture of the Essene representation of afterlife, a message centred on a risen Messiah (like the Jesus preached by Christians) would not have had much hope of success among them. However, for whatever it's worth, the Church father Hippolytus has left us a second

version, purported to be Josephus' account, in which a very different picture is sketched:

The doctrine of the resurrection also is firmly held among them. For they confess that the flesh also will rise and be immortal as the soul is already immortal, which they now say, when separated from the body, enters a place of fragrant air and light, to rest until the judgement . . . (Refutation of All the Heresies 9:27).

Is the difference due to the pen of Hippolytus, wishing to portray the Essenes as proto-Christians, or was Josephus guilty of twisting the evidence in order to make the Essene teaching palatable to his Greek readers? While the first view is more commonly held, there are defenders of the second, too. Clarification of the problem may be sought by means of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

However, the outcome of the study of the Qumran texts both on the subject of afterlife in general, and on resurrection in particular, is rather disappointing. The Scrolls contain a surprisingly small amount of relevant information. There are some general allusions to afterlife which may coincide with Josephus' idea of spiritual immortality. For example, the Sons of Light are promised 'eternal joy in life without end, a crown of glory and a garment of majesty in light without end' (1QS 4:7-8). They are also said to share their future destiny with angels called the Holy Ones and the Sons of Heaven (1QS 11:5-9). A couple of poetic passages may be interpreted as referring to bodily resurrection. Thus people who 'lie in the dust' and 'bodies gnawed by worms' are commanded to hoist a banner or rise from the dust to the counsel of God's truth (1QH 14:34-35; 19:12). Nevertheless, it is equally possible that the language is allegorical and no

actual bodily revival is envisaged. The only text among the hundreds of manuscripts found at Qumran which clearly refers to resurrection is the so-called Messianic Apocalypse, a verse composition that includes a line from Isaiah (61:1), to which is added a reference to the resurrection of the dead, namely that God will 'heal the wounded and revive the dead and bring good news to the poor' (4Q521, frag. 2 ii, line 12). The statement could possibly signify that the Qumran community believed in the rising of the dead, but since the manuscript exhibits no sectarian features, it may not belong to the Essenes and could represent a work akin to late biblical poetry such as Isaiah 24-27.

All in all, the available evidence does not permit us to conclude that either the Essenes, as portrayed by Josephus, or the Qumran sectaries of the Scrolls, were champions of the belief in bodily resurrection, although there is evidence that both of them contemplated an afterlife in the form of the immortality of the soul. As for Philo's notices on the Essenes, they have nothing to say on the subject.

This leaves us only with the Pharisees, who were the renowned protagonists of the doctrine of the resurrection. Josephus reports their teaching in each of his three works, the War, Against Apion and the Antiquities, and on a further occasion in the War he expresses in a speech his own Pharisaic convictions about afterlife.

His doctrine on the resurrection is not entirely homogeneous, nor does it clearly convey the teaching of mainstream Pharisaism. In his earliest summary, he brings into relief the incorruptibility of the spirit of man, but his description of the spirit's reunion with the body sounds more like metempsychosis or transmigration of the soul than bodily resurrection. He also appears to restrict corporeal revival to the righteous, as did 2 Maccabees and the

Psalms of Solomon before him (see p. 41). The pious alone are to enjoy eternal corporeal bliss, while the wicked souls, seemingly without new bodies, are to suffer everlasting torment: 'Every soul, they maintain, is imperishable, but the soul of the good alone passes into another body, while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment' (*War* 2:163).

In the same *Jewish War*, in an effort to dissuade his fellow rebels from committing suicide, Josephus assures them that taking their own lives will deprive them of new bodies in God's realm:

Know you not that they who depart this life in accordance with the law of nature and repay the loan which they received from God, when He who lent is pleased to reclaim it, win eternal renown; that their houses and families are secure; that their souls, remaining spotless and obedient, are allotted the most holy place in heaven, whence, in the revolution of the ages, they return to find in chaste bodies a new habitation? But as for those who have laid mad hands upon themselves, the darker regions of the nether world receive their souls . . . (*War* 3:374-375).

Even in his two later works, *Against Apion* and *Jewish Antiquities*, written in the AD 90s, he seems to grant the privilege of resurrection only to the good; the ungodly are condemned to remain eternally imprisoned in Sheol:

They believe that the souls have power to survive death and that there are rewards and punishments under the earth for those who have led lives of virtue or vice: eternal imprisonment is the lot of evil souls, while the good souls receive an easy passage to a new life (*Ant* 18:14).

In *Against Apion* Josephus insists that only the strict observers of the Law, and especially those who are ready to die rather than disobey the commandments, will reap the reward of the resurrection:

For those . . . who live in accordance with our laws the prize is not silver and gold, no crown of wild olive or of parsley with any such public mark of distinction. No; each individual, relying on the witness of his own conscience, and the lawgiver's prophecy, confirmed by the sure testimony of God, is firmly persuaded that to those who observe the laws, and, if they must needs die for them, willingly meet death, God has granted a renewed existence and in the revolution of the ages the gift of a better life (*c. Ap.* 2:217-18).

Shortly after the time of Josephus, around the turn of the first century AD, the rabbinic heirs of the Pharisees continued to propound, without distinguishing between the good and the bad, the doctrine of resurrection as one of the two pivotal teachings of Judaism, the other being the divine origin of the Torah. Thus the tractate Sanhedrin of the Mishnah, the oldest rabbinic code of law, declares:

All Israelites have a share in the world to come . . . And these are they who have no share in the world to come: he that says that there is no resurrection of the dead [prescribed in the Law], and that the Law is not from Heaven (*mSanh* 10:1).¹

At about the same time (*c.* AD 100) was formulated also the second benediction of the *Tephillab* (the Prayer par excellence), also bearing the title of the *Eighteen Benedictions*, recited in standing position three times a day, morning, afternoon and evening, as specific thanksgiving to God for raising the dead. It has been preserved in two versions, the

Babylonian and the Palestinian, but on this point both convey the same message:

Lord, Thou art almighty for ever, who makest the dead alive . . . Thou makest the dead alive out of great mercy . . . Thou keepest thy word faithfully to them who sleep in the dust . . . Thou art faithful to make the dead alive. Blessed art Thou, Lord, who makest the dead alive (Babylonian version).

Thou art mighty . . . Thou livest for ever and raisest the dead . . . Thou providest for the living and makest the dead alive . . . Blessed art Thou, Lord, who makest the dead alive (Palestinian version).

It would seem, therefore, that by the second century AD, faith in bodily resurrection was an essential constituent of the Pharisaic-rabbinic religion. But at first sight there is no positive evidence to indicate that this was the case during the lifetime of Jesus, the ministry of Paul or the early decades of Christianity. Yet for the evaluation of how prepared the audiences of Jesus and of the apostolic preachers were for the idea of the resurrection, it would be useful to have the means to grasp the extent of the spread of this notion in the various layers of Jewish and Graeco-Roman society in the first century AD.

To begin with, the three groups, Sadducees, Essenes and Pharisees, about whose attitude towards resurrection we know something, represent only a small fraction of the Jewish population of Palestine in the age of Jesus.

No source supplies direct information about the number of the Sadducees, who comprised the upper layers of the priesthood and their aristocratic lay supporters, but attempts have been made to estimate the size of the Temple personnel, priests and Levites. Already about

four hundred years before the age of Jesus the Book of Nehemiah refers to 1,192 priests in Jerusalem (Neh 11:10–19). Closer to New Testament times, towards the end of the second century BC, the author of the Letter of Aristeas asserted that seven hundred priests were on duty every day in the Temple, not counting those in charge of sacrifices (Aristeas 95). Since the service in the sanctuary was performed by one of the 24 weekly units, or ‘courses’, each of which was on duty twice a year, 24 × say 750 would give a total for the Jewish clergy (priests and Levites) of eighteen thousand. In the late first century AD Josephus suggests a similar figure when he speaks of four priestly tribes, each comprising upwards of five thousand men, amounting to over twenty thousand (c. AP. 21:108). While it is known that by that time some of the priests adhered to the teaching of the Pharisees, one can still suppose that a fair proportion of them held to the party doctrine laid down by the upper clergy, and were opposed to the idea of resurrection.

As for the membership of the Pharisee associations, we know from Josephus that, as a body, over six thousand of them refused to swear the oath of allegiance to Herod the Great (*Ant* 17:42). The number of the Essenes was put both by Philo (*Omnis probus* 75) and by Josephus (*Ant* 18:20) at above four thousand.

What do these figures tell us? Among those who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead we may count more than four thousand Essenes and probably a good proportion of the 15,000–20,000-strong Temple staff, together no doubt with their families and their upper-class lay allies. Against these stood some six thousand Pharisees, their families and followers. Taken together, both the opponents and the supporters of the doctrine of the resurrection formed only a small portion of the Jewish population of

Palestine in the first century AD, estimated at between 500,000 and 1,000,000, but more likely to have amounted to between 500,000 and 600,000.² It is widely maintained, however, that the Pharisees controlled most of the Jewish population of Roman Palestine, and that consequently the majority of the Jews of the Holy Land believed in the resurrection of the dead. It has even been proposed that the fairly widespread, though far from universally adopted custom of secondary burial, *viz.* the collecting of the bones of the deceased and placing them in ossuaries, was a Pharisee innovation inspired by faith in individual revival. But this is a misunderstanding that must be dispelled.

In truth, the thesis of an all-pervasive Pharisaic impact on the whole Jewish population has no evidential support. According to Josephus, the Pharisees were influential, not across the board of society, but mostly among the 'townsfolk' or the 'inhabitants of the cities' (*Ant* 18:15), that is to say, their followers were recruited among the moderately well-to-do urban artisan classes. Also, territorially, their main constituency was Jerusalem and the towns of Judaea.

But Judaea differed from Galilee, and in this connection one should recall that in the age of Jesus, Pharisee presence in Galilee was scarce, if it existed at all. It became dominant only after the resettlement of the defeated Judaeans in the northern province following the first rebellion against Rome (AD 66–70). A careful reader of the New Testament will observe that various Pharisees and scribes, mentioned in the Gospels, are explicitly said to have been visitors from Jerusalem and not Galilean citizens (Mk 3:22; 7:1; Mt 12:24; 15:1). The impression given by Mark and Matthew of a Pharisee-free Galilee is further reinforced by Josephus. He refers to the presence of only three Pharisees during

his tenure as revolutionary military commander of the province, and names them as Jonathan, Ananias and Jozar. But they were not local people. They were sent to the northern province by the chief Pharisee of the capital, Simeon ben Gamaliel, to engineer the downfall of Josephus (*Life* 197).

As far as the general influence of Pharisaic ideas was concerned, one should further remember that in both Judaea and Galilee the bulk of the population did not reside in cities, the Pharisees' strongholds, but lived in the country. They were the village farmers and agricultural workers, the 'people of the land' (*'am ha-arets*), who ploughed the fields and cultivated the orchards, olive groves and vineyards, as appears so clearly in the rural parables of Jesus. So it would seem that we simply do not know how generally accepted the doctrinal leadership of the Pharisees was in first-century AD Palestine, and consequently how widespread the belief in bodily resurrection was at that time.³

If literature provides no further assistance for an assessment of the impact of the Pharisaic belief in resurrection in wider Jewish society, can archaeology and funeral inscriptions help? Some experts have voiced a firmly negative opinion. In his monumental study of the Essene doctrine on life after death, Émile Puech declares that funerary art on tombstones and ossuaries displays no clear hint at eschatological expectations.⁴ The author of the latest monograph on funeral epigraphy, P. W. van der Horst, also complains of the 'disappointingly little information' the inscriptions yield about life after death.⁵ Such pessimistic forecasts must not, however, prevent us from re-examining the evidence.

The most common decorative figure on Jewish ossuaries

and tombstones is the *menorah*, the seven-branched lampstand. Modelled on the candelabrum of the Jerusalem Temple, taken to Rome by Titus after the fall of Jerusalem, and represented on his triumphal arch constructed in the Roman Forum in AD 81, it had become the principal symbol of Judaism. Sometimes accompanied by other decorative motives, the citron (*etbrog*), the palm-branch (*lulab*) and the scroll of the Law, it appears fairly frequently on Jewish tombs and bone boxes. There is no unanimity regarding its meaning. It can merely denote the Jewishness of the person or possibly his priestly connections. E. R. Goodenough, the leading expert on the subject, remarks however that the *menorah* was of the greatest importance for Jews to have on their tombstones and symbolized yearning for light in the darkness of the grave.⁶ It appears fairly often in the Jewish catacombs of Rome and in Beth Shearim, dating to the third and fourth centuries AD, but there are also a few earlier attestations. The oldest is on what is known as Jason's tomb in Jerusalem, but what in fact is the tomb of the priestly family of the Sons of Hezir (second or first century BC). Two more figure on Palestinian ossuaries,⁷ probably belonging to the first or second century AD. A few representations of the *menorah* may be found on Egyptian Jewish tombs, probably from the second century AD. Nothing directly connects the candelabrum with the resurrection of the dead, but there is a legitimate surmise that this symbol of illumination is meant to remind the onlooker of a bright and hopeful hereafter of some sort.

Only a small proportion of the funeral inscriptions allude to the beliefs of the deceased or of those who ordered the epitaphs. On one ossuary the idea of resurrection is firmly rejected in the Sadducee manner: 'No man

goes up [from the grave]; not Eleazar or Sapphira' (Rahmani, no. 455). Unparalleled is the invitation tainted with irony that the Roman Jew, Leo Leontius, has issued to his associates: 'Friends, I am waiting for you here' (*Amici ego vos hic exspecto*) (CIJ *32).⁸ Another inscription from Beth Shearim, 'Good luck with your resurrection', may be either cynical or a serious affirmation of belief in the reawakening of the dead (BS II, 194). As for the often repeated 'No one is immortal', a phrase that is found on pagan epitaphs as well, it expresses the outlook of the Old Testament and the Sadducees, although some detect a hopeful overtone in the exhortation, 'Be of good courage!' (BS II, 59, 127, 136, etc.) placed before it. 'May your sleep be peaceful', frequently read on Roman epitaphs, can also be interpreted as a wish for undisturbed rest in the tomb and a protection against grave robbers on whom God's judgement accompanied by a curse is again and again invoked. However, the word 'peace', sometimes written as *shalom* in Hebrew, is capable of deeper meaning, implying fullness and religious perfection.

A small number of Greek inscriptions from Leontopolis in Egypt and Beth Shearim seem to allude to the idea of immortality. The soul of Arsinoe, a young Jewess who died in labour when she was producing her first child, 'has gone to the holy ones', we read on an inscription dating to the twenty-fifth year of Augustus or 5 BC (CIJ 1510). Rachel, aged about thirty years, entertains a good hope in God's mercy, which implies expectation of some form of future life (CIJ 1513), and in a Hebrew inscription from Antinopolis a Jew called Lazar expects his soul to find rest in the 'bundle of the living' (CIJ 1534). In a similar Greek epitaph from Beth Shearim someone wishes that the souls of his or her parents 'be bound in the bundle of immortal

life' (BS II, 130), while a certain Hesechios, also from Beth Shearim, threatens with the loss of 'a portion in eternal life' anyone daring to open his and his wife's grave (BS II, 129). Karteria and Zenobia, her daughter who arranged her funeral, long to 'enjoy again new indestructible riches' (BS II, 183). In these inscriptions the spiritual survival of Hellenistic Judaism is voiced without any hint at the doctrine characteristic of the Pharisees.

The very common wish at Beth Shearim that the deceased should 'possess a good portion' (*eumoirei, eumoros*), a Greek phrase reminiscent of the Hebrew Pharisaic-rabbinic 'portion' (*beleg*) in the world to come, may insinuate the idea of resurrection, but it could also refer only to the survival of the soul. Indeed, a clear confession of belief in bodily revivification is exceptional among the epitaphs. I have counted two or possibly three occurrences in the Corpus of Jewish Inscriptions, the Palestinian ossuaries and the Beth Shearim material. The uncertain case, already referred to, is 'Good luck with your resurrection' (BS II, 194). If it is taken at its face value with no undertone of cynicism, it has a positive religious significance. By the way, this is the only case where the term *anastasis* (rising, resurrection) is used. Of the other two, the first comes from Beth Shearim, and employs the verb 'to revive', while issuing a warning against interference with the contents of the grave. 'Anyone who changes this lady's place, He who promised to revive (*ζῳποιῆσε*) the dead will Himself judge [him]' (BS II, 162). The second, a direct proclamation of faith in the resurrection of the dead, is the versified Latin epitaph of the Roman Jewess, Regina. It was set up in the second century AD by her husband, with whom she lived twenty-one years, four months and eight days:

*Hic Regina sita est tali contexta sepulcro
Quod coniunx statuit respondens eius amori . . .
Rursum victura reditura ad lumina rursum
Nam sperare potest ideo quod surgat in aevum
Promissum quae vera fides dignisque piisque
Quae meruit sedem venerandi ruris habere
(CIJ 476).*

Here lies Regina, concealed in such a sepulcher
That her husband has set up responding to her love . . .
She will live again and will again return to the light
For she can hope to rise for eternity
As is promised by true faith to the worthy and the pious.
She has deserved to have a place in the venerable land.

The expression *surgere in aevum* (to rise for eternity) definitely refers to corporeal resurrection and if the phrase 'venerable land' denotes the Holy Land, the writer of the poem seems to allude to the rabbinic idea that the resurrection of the dead will take place, or at least will begin, in Jerusalem.

In conclusion, let us revert to the first question posed at the end of the previous chapter: How widely and deeply did the concept of resurrection affect first-century AD Jewish society? The long and the short of the answer is that the notion of bodily resurrection propagated by the Pharisees was alien to first-century Hellenistic Jews, and was on the whole unfamiliar in most layers of Palestinian Jewry. Our study of the New Testament will have to keep this remark firmly in mind.