Resurrection in the Mediterranean World

By John Granger Cook

The Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, following his crucifixion at the hands of the prefect of Judaea, Pontius Pilate, gradually made its way through the ancient Mediterranean world. But it fell on fertile ground. One of the primary contentions in my recent book on the topic *(Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis)* is that the Christians’ proclamation of a crucified Lord found fertile ground among Mediterranean people who had long been familiar with some form of the concept of the resurrection of a body.

“Physical resurrection” is a resurrection in which the body of a dead individual returns to life in some sense (i.e., a return to mortal or immortal life). Usually the risen individual appears near his or her tomb. A closely related concept in the ancient world is “translation,” in which an individual becomes immortal, whether or not their body remains in a tomb. The hero can disappear before or after death, is often transported to an otherworldly (or thisworldly) place, and can subsequently appear to those left behind.

Verbs that often occur in such translation narratives include variations of “seize,” “transfer,” and “snatch.” Descriptive adjectives such as “invisible” are also frequent. After Heracles’ death, he is transported to Olympus by Athena.
Red-figure pelike depicting Heracles brought to Olympus by Athena, ca. 410 BC, attributed to the Kadmos Painter. Credit: Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich (8958356382); Carole Raddato; CC BY-SA 2.0.

Roman emperors (and sometimes empresses) are often depicted in translation scenes in which they are taken to the gods and made gods in some sense.

The Apotheosis of Antoninus Pius and Faustina. Credit: Egisto Sani, Vatican Museums.
In the New Testament an example of translation would be the living believers who after the resurrection of the dead are “snatched up” (1 Thess 4:17) to meet the lord in the air.

Greek resurrection accounts are usually characterized by verbs that describe the vertical movement of a body (anistēmi, for example) or the awaking and rising of a dead individual (egeirō) – the two verbs used for rising from the dead in the New Testament. In other words: a fundamental marker for the concept “resurrection” in the New Testament and elsewhere, based on the meaning of anistēmi and egeirō, is the bodily motion upward of a formerly dead individual.

Verbs meaning “get up” or “rise” are used for resurrection in the Young Avestan texts of Zoroastrianism. Similarly, verbs with corresponding meanings are used for resurrection in the Hebrew, Syrian, and Ethiopic apocalypses of ancient Judaism. This corresponds to the etymological origin of “resurrection” in English, which is the Latin verb “resurgo” (“to rise from recumbent position, get up”) that was adopted by the early Latin translators of the New Testament as the basic expression for the resurrection of Jesus and others. In early Christianity the Greek verbs for resurrection were not used for the resurrection of a “soul” (psychē) or “spirit” (pneuma) until the Gnostic movements of the second century C.E.

The Zoroastrians are the first ancient people to believe in an apocalyptic resurrection of the dead (in texts whose origin is ca 1000–600 BCE), and some ancient Greek writers were aware of that belief. In the Zoroastrians’ resurrection, the dead will rise again, and they will be imperishable, not rotting, and not putrefying. The Egyptians, however, were fascinated by the afterlife and attributed some kind of resurrection to Osiris, even though he remained in the netherworld. A Ptolemaic Roman temple at Denderah, with rooms archaeologists call “The Chapel of Osiris,” depicts Isis’s resurrection of her brother Osiris.

Osiris is sexually aroused because he is going to become the father of Horus by Isis. Egyptologist Jan Assmann comments, “Osiris remained in the netherworld, but he was resurrected and alive.” In a Greek tradition the Titans plot against Horus and kill him. But Isis discovered a drug that makes one immortal, and using it she raised him from the dead and made him immortal.

Other gods in the ancient world experienced partings and returns analogous to resurrection in the NT. There were, for example, various Dionysus in Greek and Roman tradition. In one version, the philosopher Philodemus (first century BCE) writes, “torn apart by the Titans, Rhea put his members together, and he returned to life.” In another version, Athena saves his heart after Dionysus was ripped apart by the Titans, and another Dionysus grows again or emerges from his mother Semele. Adonis in one Greek tradition was killed by a boar and spends one third of a year with Persephone in Hades and two thirds of the year with Aphrodite. In other traditions he spends six months in the arms of each goddess. The Greek satirist Lucian writes about a ceremony he saw in Byblos: “After they have finished beating their breasts and lamenting, they first make offerings to Adonis as to the dead, and afterwards, on the next day, they claim [or “recite the myth”] that he lives and send him into the air.” Later Christian writers use the term “resurrection” to describe the return of Adonis from the land of the dead.

In the Greek and Latin traditions there are many temporary returns of the dead to life. An individual named Tylos, for example, was killed by a serpent, and in a version of the tale a Masnes kills the serpent and restores Tylos to life with a magic herb.
A Neo-Platonist philosopher named Proclus (fifth century CE) lists a number of instances, some of which he says occurred in “his time”: “Because in our time certain individuals who were thought to have been already dead and who had been buried in their tombs came to life again and appeared (were seen), some lying on their tombs and others standing up.” He gives an example: “And Naumachius of Epirus, who lived in the time of my grandparents, records that Polycritus ... died and came to life again in the ninth month after his death; and he came to the public assembly of the Aetolians and advised them on the best course of action to take concerning affairs that they were deliberating. Among the witnesses to these events were Hieron the Ephesian and other historians ...” In a famous story, a woman named Alcestis agrees to die in her husband’s place when his parents will not. Heracles goes into Hades and brings her back to her husband Admetus.
There are even narratives similar to the empty tomb stories of the Gospels. One of the most famous individuals who died and later appeared was named Aristeas of Proconnesus. Herodotus writes, “It is said that this Aristeas, who was as well-born as any of his townsmen, went into a fuller’s shop at Proconnesus and there died; the owner shut his shop and went away to tell the dead man’s relatives, and the report of Aristeas’ death being spread about in the city was disputed by a man of Cyzicus, who had come from the town of Artace, and said that he had met Aristeas going toward Cyzicus and spoken with him. While he argued vehemently, the relatives of the dead man came to the fuller’s shop with all that was necessary for burial; but when the place was opened, there was no Aristeas there, dead or alive.” There are other similar accounts of dead individuals who disappeared from their place of death and were later seen in some form.

There were diverse views in ancient Judaism concerning the afterlife including: the immortality of the soul (4 Maccabees 14:5–6, 18:23); a future exaltation of the spirit (4 Ezra 7:32, RSV: “And the earth shall give up those who are asleep in it …; and the chambers shall give up the souls which have been committed to them”; 1 Enoch 10:3–4); and resurrection of the body (Isa 26:19 [in some sense], Dan 12:2–3, 12:13, 2 Maccabees 7:9, 14). Nicholas J. Tromp has shown that in the Hebrew Bible the corpses the dead are present in the grave/netherworld (Sheol) along with their shades (Isa 14:11, Ezek 31:18, 32:26). One cannot separate the grave from Sheol. After mentioning texts from the Hebrew Bible such as Job 17:16, 20:11, 21:26, Ps 22:16 (= 22:15 NRSV), Tromp writes, “it is obvious that ‘dust’ also is a category transposed from the grave to the home of the dead. So, in a late text, the nether world can be described as ‘the country consisting of dust’ [Dan 12:2].” The metaphorical image in Ezekiel 37 of resurrection is interpreted as a literal resurrection of the dead in the frescoes (244–256 CE) of Dura Europos.

The Vision of Ezekiel. Credit: Yale University Art Gallery, Commissioned by the University. Gouaches on paper by Herbert J. Gute. 1936.127.2.
The Vision of Ezekiel. Credit: Yale University Art Gallery, Commissioned by the University. Gouaches on paper by Herbert J. Gute. 1936.127.11.

There is also an image of Elijah's (temporary) resurrection of the widow's dead son at Dura (1 Kings 17:21–22).

Elijah’s resurrection of the son of the widow of Zarephath. Credit: Yale University Art Gallery, Commissioned by the University. Gouaches on paper by Herbert J. Gute. 1936.127.4.
One consequence of this research for the interpretation of the New Testament is clear: Although Paul does not explicitly mention the empty tomb in 1 Cor 15:3–5, he could not have conceived of a resurrection of Christ without an empty tomb. This is because of the usage of the verb egeirō in resurrection narratives and because of the concept of bodily resurrection in ancient paganism and ancient Judaism. This in turn implies that there is no fundamental difference between Paul’s understanding of Jesus’s risen body and that of the Gospels. Although early critics of Christianity such as Celsus (second century) certainly rejected the empty tomb and resurrection, no Christian author of any variety denied the empty tomb of Christ until the French deists of the sixteenth century. Resurrection is a concept that remains central for many Jews and Christians.

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