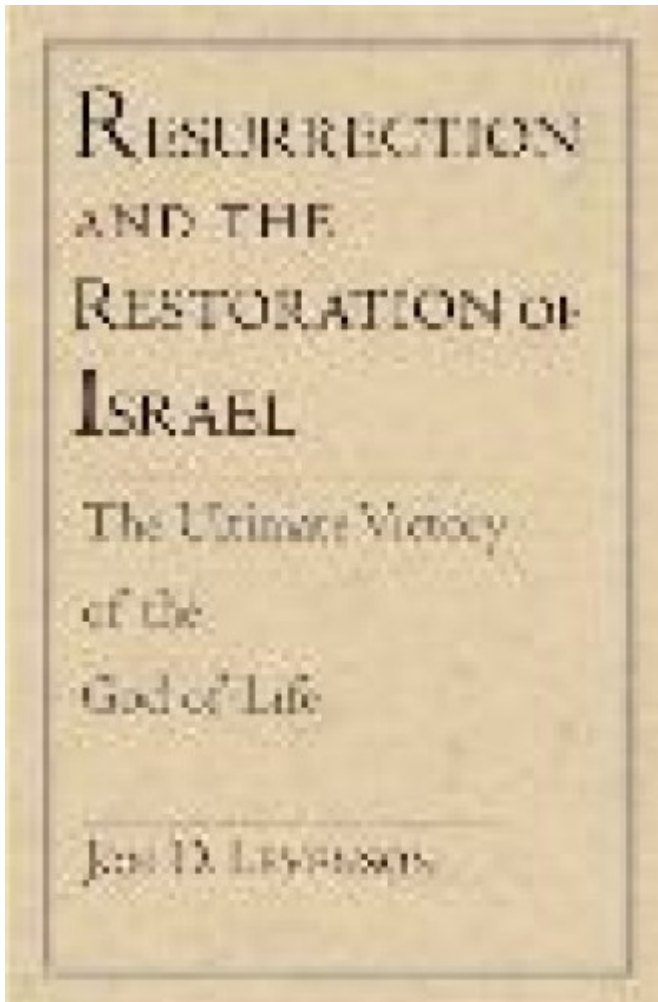


Ultimate victory

By [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [February 6, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life

Jon D. Levenson
Yale University Press

Jon Levenson has established himself as the foremost theological interpreter of the Hebrew Bible from a Jewish perspective in a way that contributes to the larger theological discussion. While he makes a sustained appeal to rabbinic tradition, he also invites and compels attention from Christian readers. This book serves as a companion piece to and an advance beyond his important 1993 book *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (Yale University Press). Whereas that book focused on the particular theme of “the death of the beloved son” with special reference to Genesis 22, this book considers more broadly belief in the resurrection of the dead as a characteristic and pervasive mark of Jewish faith.

The way Levenson frames the issue will be familiar to Christians nurtured on Oscar Cullman’s distinction between resurrection and immortality. Cullman persuaded many that the faith of the early church was in resurrection, not immortality. The latter concept, while popular in modern Christianity, is a betrayal and distortion of that faith, Cullman argued.

Levenson is quite capable of polemics against Christians, but in this book his critique is concerned not with Christians but with Jews who have, for reasons of Enlightenment rationality, rejected the scandal of the resurrection and embraced immortality, a stance he takes to be a pale distortion of Judaism. Thus the argument is framed in a way that will sound familiar chords with Christians, though that is of no concern here to Levenson:

Like creation, resurrection is a preeminently *supernatural* act, a miraculous reversal of the course of nature. Through it, God thus transforms death, nature’s last word, into a prelude to his own new act of creation, the re-creation of human beings in a form that is bodily yet immune to the vulnerabilities and ravages of biological life. So conceived, resurrection thus recapitulates but also transcends the creation of humanity. The miracle of the end-time restores the miracle of the beginning.

Levenson’s emphasis is on the supernatural intervention. He credits God with the gift of new life and challenges Jews who find such a claim to be an embarrassment rather than an essential of faith. Levenson’s presentation of resurrection faith touches characteristic interpretive accents concerning a) the mystery of God who

can intervene, b) the unitary character of persons as “body and soul,” c) the understanding of “life and death” as a spectrum of “strength and weakness,” and d) the social embedment of persons in community.

Levenson argues that according to rabbinic tradition resurrection faith permeates the Hebrew Bible. A primal insistence of that tradition is that resurrection is found in the Torah. To that point he cites rabbinic discussion of Exodus 15:1 and Genesis 3:19, and concludes: “This interpretation makes for exceedingly bad philology, to be sure, but also for rich and powerful theology.”

Given that broad claim, Levenson then considers in detail the nuances of “life after death” in the Bible. Central to that exposition is his judgment that not all the dead go to Sheol; only those without merit for the future are consigned to that wearisome, empty space. While Levenson takes up some details of religious phenomenology, his focus is unerringly on theological claims, as indicated in the book’s subtitle. He insists that the distinctiveness of the Hebrew Bible, crucial to a canonical sense and in contrast with Ugaritic texts, is a theological interest that needs to be honored and taken seriously:

We should respect the disinterest, viewing it as characteristic of the nature of Israelite religion as reflected in the Hebrew Bible and, to some degree, outside it as well. For the focus of that book is not on the world of the dead but on that of the living, specifically, on the people Israel and their complicated relationship with their God in history. . . . It is all the more significant that in the Hebrew Bible itself, the focus lies principally in two very different places. It lies in this life and the ever-present possibility of obedience to God’s known will established in public revelation. And it lies in the indefeasible promises that God made to the national and dynastic founders. If those individuals had ever been conceived as deified ancestors who are sources of rescue, blessing, or instruction, in the Hebrew Bible they have become recipients of promises from the true God, promises that even death ultimately could not defeat.

Whatever may be said about religious phenomenology, it is for Levenson said in the service of theological affirmation that in turn serves the specific and active hope of the community.

Having shown that the “dead with hope” are not consigned to Sheol along with the hopeless, Levenson then considers in three modes the alternative to Sheol offered in hope. First, it is the temple that is “the antipode to Sheol” where the faithful may find a future:

In the temple, instead of want, they found surfeit; instead of abandonment, care; instead of pollution, purity; instead of victimization, justice; instead of threat, security; instead of vulnerability, inviolability; instead of change, fixity; and instead of temporality, eternity. If this sounds like the World-to-Come or the Garden of Eden of rabbinic tradition, or the heaven of Christianity, that is surely no coincidence, for the Temple is the source of much of the imagery out of which those ideas grew.

Levenson would find support for his account of such hope in the study of the Psalms by Fredrick Lindstrom, who shows the centrality of the temple for the faith of Israel. By appealing to persons-in-community, the second antipode to Sheol is the family. By this Levenson means much more than that the family remembers the dead; rather, in the corporate body of the family, the dead continue to be present, alive and effective.

This account strikes me as a counterpoint to the church’s affirmation of the communion of saints of whom we sing, “We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.” Levenson offers wondrous exegetical study to support this claim, exposition that invites us to reread the text in fresh ways.

Third, a strong appeal to the imagery of Ezekiel 37:1-14 enables Levenson to make the case that—given family and the corporate body—resurrection concerns the revivification and restoration of Israel, which in the course of its history suffers weakness, abandonment and even death.

All of these antipodes in the end, even given all the attentiveness to context and historical location, amount to the conviction that God’s capacity for new life is a central affirmation of the Bible and of Judaism, and any interpretation that compromises this point is a diminishment and betrayal of faith. Levenson resists the often reiterated notion that such an affirmation first came to Judaism from Zoroastrianism in the Persian period, or later as a response to the oppression faced by the Maccabees:

The expectation of a resurrection in Second Temple Judaism, when it does appear, was thus not a total *novum*. Rather, it was the end product of a centuries-long process by which these old traditions (and others that we have explored but not listed here) coalesced. This fateful coalescence may well have received additional stimulus from the two sources to which scholars often attribute this expectation exhaustively, the indirect influence of Zoroastrianism, which affirmed a future resurrection of the dead, and the immediate trauma of persecution in the days of the Maccabees, when the faithful were put to death precisely for their faithfulness. But, as I have been at pains to argue, these two factors, whether alone or in tandem, cannot account for the shape the belief in resurrection assumes in Judaism. They may have served, in their different ways, as catalysts for that fateful reaction, but they were not themselves the reagents. To concentrate on them alone is to miss both the rich *praeparatio* of antecedent tradition and the complex trajectory that resulted in a belief in resurrection among many Jews of the Second Temple era.

Levenson's exposition is at times breathtaking and often instructive not only about the Bible and Judaism but about Christian faith as well. Three points strike me as particularly important.

First, faith in resurrection, when we have the courage to overcome the intrusiveness of Enlightenment rationality, is vigorous and central to both Jews and Christians. I would press our commonality much further than would Levenson, as that is not an issue he takes up. Surely Peter Ochs is correct in saying that the primary conversation partners for Jews are Christians, because secular Enlightenment voices are not adequate conversation partners. So it is, conversely, that Jews are Christians' proper companions in common faith that defies a world bent on death.

Second, Levenson suggests that Christians, while sharing much with Jews, must also marvel at the decisive interpretive move made by Paul toward the gentiles. In the end Levenson's focus is upon the gift of new life given by God to Israel, though Levenson is of course open to the larger rule of the God of life.

Third, though Christians depart from Judaism in the claim that the resurrection of Jesus is a remembered and present event in the life of the world, and Jews live in hope of a coming, promised resurrection, the distinction should not be overstated in

our shared, urgent attempt to bear witness to the God of life in a world mesmerized by death.

The book is an invitation to women and men of faith to recover some nerve about a core conviction that refuses to give in to the darkness of a closed world that ends in competition for the “goodies” of the world, which finally arrives at a limit. Beyond that limit, there is the promise of God:

The final victory, the one that allows for a life without incessant moral struggle, requires the intervention of the Creator to uproot the Evil Inclination that he implanted within us in the beginning.

The resurrection concerns the capacity of God. Immortality, on the other hand, is our weak claim to autonomous significance. Levenson’s specific program concerns the character of Judaism. The larger implication, which he recognizes very well, is the prospect of faith in the God of life and faith in God’s promised victory in a world that on its own is permeated with deathly defeat and despair. We must, as Levenson says, get the philology correct; but in the end, the challenge is “rich and powerful theology.”