In his popular study of the afterlife in Jewish thought, Neill Gillman describes how resurrection of the dead and immortality of the soul within Second Temple Judaism would later merge and complement one another in the rabbis’ classic conception of “revivification of the dead” (חיה אחר המוות):

From their predecessors, then, the talmudic rabbis inherited two doctrines about the afterlife: The first taught that at some point after death, God would raise the body from the grave. The second taught that, at death, the body disintegrates and returns to dust, but the soul leaves the body and lives eternally. The first, of uncertain provenance, is articulated in three biblical texts. The second, which originated in Greek thought, is not in the Bible. Both appear in the literature of the intertestamental period.¹

Harry Wolfson described a parallel, if independent, development among the church fathers, who arrived at their own synthesis of resurrection and immortality:

... to the Fathers of the Church these two beliefs were inseparably connected with each other. To them, the belief that Jesus rose on the third day after the Crucifixion meant that his soul survived the death of the body and was reinvested with his risen body. Similarly the belief that in the end of days there will be a general resurrection of the dead meant the reinvestment of surviving souls with risen bodies.²

These developments reveal the crucial context of the second-fourth centuries of the Common Era as a great age of synthesis for Judaism and Christianity, in which earlier afterlife traditions were reinterpreted into classic affirmations of faith.


Prior to this age, however, the literature of Hellenistic Judaism often displays a more complex relationship between resurrection and immortality. While the two could potentially coexist, a significant number of earlier traditions noticeably gravitate toward one conception or the other. Indeed, as Jon Levenson perceptively comments, the two ideas “can be different in critical ways, and it can be profoundly misleading to subsume them under some simplistic master category, such as ‘afterlife’.”

The expectation of an eschatological resurrection coexists easily with immortality so long as the latter is defined as the state of those who have died and await their restoration into embodiment, that is, into full human existence. ... But if immortality is defined in connection with an indestructible core of the self that death cannot threaten (and may even liberate), then resurrection and immortality are at odds. ... Whereas history in the classical Jewish vision of resurrection will culminate in God’s supernatural triumph over death, this second idea of immortality assumes a very different scenario: individuals at various times and without relationship to each other quietly shed their perishable casings to continue in an unbroken communion with their benevolent creator.

Where they exist in their radicalized forms, apocalyptic resurrection of the dead and philosophical immortality of the soul assume very different conceptualizations of anthropology, creation, and history. While this distinction casts greater appreciation on how later sources synthesized these two beliefs, it equally demands sensitivity to precisely where earlier sources stand along this important conceptual divide.

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