A Resurrection for Tortured Jews (2 Maccabees)

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I have pointed out that the notion of "resurrection" first appears in Jewish writings in the book of Daniel, and I am arguing that this notion is intrinsically connected with the apocalyptic view of the world that developed at the time. In this view of the world, as I've laid it out on the blog before (e.g.: https://ehrmanblog.org/the-rise-of-apocalypticism/) the people of God suffer *not* necessarily because God is punishing them for their sins but because there are forces of evil in the world aligned against God and his people who are wreaking havoc among the faithful. But after this life, God will raise his faithful from the dead and reward them for their fidelity to his law.

This view can be found in the apocalypses that began to be written around the time of Daniel and then for the next several centuries first among Jews and then among Christians, such books as 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch and the New Testament book of Revelation (see further: https://ehrmanblog.org/a-new-genre-in-jewish-antiquity-the-apocalypse/)

But aspects of this view could be found in books that did not share the literary form of the apocalypse. People who held to apocalyptic views could write all kinds of books (letters, Gospels, historical narratives, and so on), just as Marxists can produce books other than economic treatises.

Among the books that came out of the Maccabean revolt, no historical works are as informative or interesting as 1 and 2 Maccabees (see https://ehrmanblog.org/the-books-of-1-and-2-maccabees/). For this post I am principally interested in 2 Maccabees, because like Daniel it presents a Jewish understanding of the resurrection of the dead, where the righteous who have been persecuted, tortured, and martyred will be rewarded with new bodies in the life to come.

Recall: in 167 BCE Antiochus Epiphanes ordered that Jews give up their Jewish ways and begin to live like Greeks. No more were they allowed to abstain from making pagan sacrifices; no more could they keep the Sabbath or the Jewish festivals, or circumcise their baby boys, or observe kosher food laws.

2 Maccabees records the trials, tortures, and horrific executions of an elderly man, Eleazar, of seven brothers, and their mother (all in chs. 6-7). The tortures are described in gruesome detail. Antiochus, for example, uses whips and thongs to force the brothers to eat pork. They refuse, and one of them bravely tells him they would rather die than "transgress the laws of our ancestors" (7:2). This enrages the king and he orders the executioner to take the young man, scalp him, cut out his tongue, and cut off his hands and feet while his brothers and mother look on. When he was then utterly helpless, but still breathing, the king orders him roasted on a giant metal pan placed atop a large fire. And thus he died.

Each of the brothers saw what would happen to them if they continued to refuse. But they remained stalwart, and one by one were tortured to death – while the surviving brothers, and their mother, encouraged them on to stay true to the law.

It is a powerful and moving narrative. For my purposes here, what is especially interesting are the words spoken by the brothers before their deaths. The second brother is tortured like the first, but while he

could still talk he tells the king, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws" (7:9). Note: a future resurrection will vindicate those who are faithful to death.

The third brother says, before his death, with respect to his tongue and hands that were about to be cut off, "I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again" (7:11). So the resurrection is not simply the revival of the soul in heaven at death. It is the reconstitution of the body, tongue, hands, and all.

When the fourth dies he exclaims to the king: "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life" (7:14). And so those faithful to God will be raised, but not those who deny God and oppose his people.

In the book of 2 Maccabees, the future resurrection is not the one and only explanation for why there can be such suffering. Among other things, some of the brothers inform the king that God will torture him in the same way he is torturing them. One might be tempted to think that this means he will go to hell after his death, but there is no discussion here of postmortem punishment or indication that the wicked will survive death. The brothers are tortured in this life, here on earth, and Antiochus can look forward to the same fate himself. But tor those who die for his laws there will be a resurrection. The book never says that others Jews (who are not martyred) will be raised as well. One might think so, but the book doesn't say.

Recall: the book of Daniel too was written in the context of persecution (the same one in fact), and it too embraced a doctrine of resurrection. My argument is that the idea that people would not simply die and go to Sheol, but that some of them at least would be given a joyful afterlife existence in a resurrected body, a real physical existence in a body with all its parts intact, came about within Judaism in the context of intense persecution, as Jews were being attacked not strictly for their political views or out of military necessity, but because they were practicing a religion that came to be proscribed. Since, in the views of these Jews, what was being outlawed by authorities was precisely the law that God himself had given, God would vindicate those who suffered and died. Thus, it appears that it was martyrdom for the sake of God that, in Jewish circles, led to the idea of a glorious afterlife in the hereafter. I'll expound on that further in the next post.

Physical Persecution and the Physical Resurrection of the Dead Interpolations and Textual Corruptions: The Blurry Lines