

Body, Soul, and Immortality in Hellenistic Judaism

For a summary of early Greek views of death and the afterlife, see handout from January 24, 2005

1. Hellenistic Judaism and Greek ideas about death, the cosmos, and the soul

The Hellenistic World: After the conquests of Alexander the Great (i.e., 4th century BCE and following = late Second Temple period), ancient Greek philosophy, culture, and science defined the dominant cultural context of the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East, including the Jews.

“Hellenization”: From the fourth to mid-second centuries BCE, the Land of Israel was itself a part of Hellenistic empires, first of Hellenistic Egyptians (Ptolemies), then of Hellenistic Syrians (Seleucids). Even after the Maccabean Revolt brought this era of imperial rule to a close, however, the Land of Israel remained very much part of the Hellenistic world. Jews (like other conquered peoples) sought to define and understand their unique place in that world, negotiating in different ways between [1] the dominant Hellenistic culture and [2] their own ancient traditions and religious, social, and cultural identity. In one sense, then, all Jews of the time can be termed “Hellenistic” inasmuch as they – in a range of different ways – defined themselves both in reaction to and in relationship to the dominant culture. Rather than thinking of “influence” in any simple sense, the process is better imagined as a conversation. This process of negotiation resulted in a number of new articulations and developments of traditional ideals and beliefs, which came to be influential in Judaism and later in Christianity, as well as shaping Western culture more broadly.

Hellenistic Judaism: Nevertheless, the term “Hellenistic Judaism” is typically reserved for those forms of Judaism that most actively absorbed, reworked, and integrated ancient Greek traditions and the Hellenistic culture of the time. It typically covers Jews who wrote, not in Hebrew or Aramaic, but rather in the Greek language, and who lived in the Diaspora (= outside of the Land of Israel).

Diaspora: After the Babylonian Exile, there were many vibrant Diaspora communities throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Near East. The community in Alexandria, Egypt, had a long and rich history, and has left us the most writings. Prior to the rise of Roman power (which we’ll discuss later), many of the Ptolemaic leaders treated the Jews of Egypt very favorably. Egyptian Jews often rose to positions of political and even military power. Alexandria, in fact, even had a Jewish quarter. Jews there seem to have been quite well-off economically, well educated in Greek as well as Jewish learning, and well integrated into the cultural and civic life of Alexandria. This situation posed challenges to the maintenance of Jewish identity that differ markedly from the challenges posed by religious persecution but similarly prompted reinterpretation of biblical traditions for the concerns of a new time – including reinterpretation and expansion of ideas about death and the afterlife; the structure of the cosmos; the body, the soul, and the human condition.

Septuagint (LXX): Early Jewish translations of biblical books, beginning with the Torah (ca. third century BCE) into Greek. The likely motivation was to provide Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora with a version of biblical literature in the language with which they felt most comfortable. This is the version of the Hebrew Bible which is most often quoted in the NT and which would later be used by most Early Christians. Whereas the earliest portions of the Hebrew Bible contain little reference to the afterlife, the Septuagint translates/interprets/expands certain biblical verses related to death so as to make explicit reference to the continuance of life after death.

2. 2 Enoch and Hellenistic cosmology

Date, language, authorship: 2 Enoch is an “ascent apocalypse” written in the name of Enoch (and dependant on earlier Enochic apocalypses, esp. the Book of the Watchers). Most scholars believe that this text was authored by a first-century CE Egyptian Jew and that was originally written in Greek.

Cosmology: As with the Book of the Watchers, 2 Enoch describes the otherworldly journeys of Enoch. Here, however, the model of the cosmos is not an Ancient Near Eastern model but rather a Greek one, involving multiple heavens (seven in one version; ten in another; cf. Pythagoras’ model of the universe as nested spheres, as later developed by the [non-Jewish] Alexandrian astronomer Ptolemy – precisely in the first century CE!).

Collective eschatology: In 2 Enoch, we see no Sheol or Hades or Hell below nor any places for punishment at the edges of the earth; rather, the places for punishment located in some of these multiple heavens! The second and fifth heavens house wicked angels until the Day of Judgment. The third heaven (see 2 Enoch 8-10) contains both [1] a joyous and peaceful “Paradise,” which contains the “Tree of Life” and which is reserved for the righteous as an “eternal inheritance,” and [2] a gloomy realm in which angels inflict torture and punishment on the wicked and impious.

3. Wisdom of Solomon and the immortality of the soul

Date, place, language: The Wisdom of Solomon was written in Greek in Alexandria between 250 BCE and 50 CE, probably in the early first century (i.e., around the time of Jesus' life and before the destruction of the Second Temple by Romans in 70 CE). In style and genre, it forms part of the Wisdom literature.

Pseudonymity and authorship: The text is pseudonymously written in the name of King Solomon (long associated with wisdom); its Second Temple Jewish author clearly sees himself as standing in the tradition of Solomon in the sense of developing a distinctly Jewish tradition of wisdom. He does not only exhort his readers to righteousness in a general sense, but he is concerned with defending Jewish monotheism and proper worship against Egyptian polytheism and idolatry. In contrast to earlier Jewish Wisdom texts, he has an interest in history, retelling the story of the Exodus as a story of the Jews' salvation from false worship. Even as the author is sharply concerned with (and knowledgeable about) Jewish tradition and identity, he is also well educated in Greek philosophy and literature.

Personal eschatology: Whereas earlier books of the Jewish Wisdom tradition (e.g., Job, Qohelet, Wisdom of ben Sira) embraced the inevitability of death as a final end and stressed the need for wisdom and righteousness in life, the Wisdom of Solomon advances the idea of the soul as a preexistent and eternal component of the human being, which is distinct from the body (contrast the view of self as inextricable combination of non-physical attributes [mind/personality] and physical form [body] assumed in the concept of post-mortem survival through resurrection of the body).

Anthropology: In earlier Jewish literature, we find hints that an idea of a soul as separable from the human body and/or an idea of the soul's potential for post-mortem survival may be assumed. This book, however, contains the earliest explicit attestation of the concept of the immortality of the soul in Jewish literature. In this text, we find a concept of the soul as:

1. distinct from the body
2. able to survive the death of the body
3. pre-existent, existing even prior to one's birth in a body (e.g., 8:19-20 "...a good soul fell to my lot; or rather, being good, I entered an undefiled body")
4. superior to the body (e.g. 9:15: "for a perishable body weighs down the soul, and this earthy tent burdens the thoughtful mind")

Interaction with Hellenistic ideas: We here see a Jewish adaptation of Greek ideas about the soul as distinct from the body, and as spirit superior to matter. These ideas are here interpreted in terms of the same concerns for [a] righteousness adherence to God's will even in everyday life and [b] the assertion of God's justice that we have seen throughout in the Jewish Wisdom literature. Moreover, human wisdom of Nature as well as Scripture is not due to human wisdom or skill or effort: it is wholly given by the One God who created the cosmos, the same God who chose Israel to have a special status in worshipping Him. According to this text, God's Wisdom enters souls and guides them towards Him. By contrast, the idols of Egyptians and others are "traps for the souls of men." The choice between monotheism and polytheism is, quite literally in the view of this text, a choice between immortality and death.

Other reflections on death: Another interesting perspective on death in this text is its assertion that idolatry began when a parent, sorrowful at the death of a child, created an image of the child for remembrance that only later denigrated into worship.

4. Philo of Alexandria and Platonic philosophy

Date, place, language: Like ben Sira, Philo wrote in his own name, rather than anonymously and pseudonymously (this kind of named authorship was, as we have seen, unusual in ancient Near Eastern and ancient Israelite/early Jewish culture; it was, however, quite common among Greeks and those influenced by them). He wrote in Greek, and his works include interpretations of the Pentateuch (including allegorical interpretations) and philosophical treatises on key themes. In literary genre and style, his works are closer to Hellenistic literature than biblical literature. His work is marked by an effort to harmonize Greek philosophy and Jewish belief and worship. For instance, he proposes that the Greek philosopher Plato was dependant on the writings of Moses – although this is not historically true, it results in his reading of Plato and other Jewish philosophers through the lens of the Hebrew Bible in a manner that proves very influential.

Anthropology: Philo assumes the existence and immortality of the soul as distinct from the body. The human being is a combination of mere flesh and divine spirit; the latter is the soul, which is identified with the mind.

Personal and collective eschatology: Consistent with the split between soul and body (and, typically, denigration of the body) in Plato and most Hellenistic philosophy, Philo avoids any reference to the resurrection of the body. He does, however, develop Greek concepts of the immortality of the soul to fit

earlier Jewish traditions about death and the afterlife. For instance, whereas Plato and others assert immortality as an attribute of the soul, Philo asserts that the soul's continued survival after death is dependant on one's deeds during life. The human soul may be immortal in nature, but it can still be corrupted by impiety and destroyed in punishment for wickedness. The wicked have no afterlife. An eternal afterlife is a reward for righteousness (which, interestingly, includes pious martyrdom).

SELECTIONS FROM PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA (See <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com>)

Legum Allegoriarum 105-108 - (105) Accordingly God says, "In the day in which ye eat of it ye shall die the death." And yet, though they have eaten of it, they not only do not die, but they even beget children, and are the causes of life to other beings besides themselves. What, then, are we to say? Surely that death is of two kinds; the one being the death of the man, the other the peculiar death of the soul--now the death of the man is the separation of his soul from his body, but the death of the soul is the destruction of virtue and the admission of vice; (106) and consequently God calls that not merely "to die," but "to die the death;" showing that he is speaking not of common death, but of that peculiar and especial death which is the death of the soul, buried in its passions and in all kinds of evil. And we may almost say that one kind of death is opposed to the other kind. For the one is the separation of what was previously existing in combination, namely, of body and soul. But this other death, on the contrary, is a combination of them both, the inferior one, the body, having the predominance, and the superior one, the soul, being made subject to it. (107) When, therefore, God says, "to die the death," you must remark that he is speaking of that death which is inflicted as punishment, and not of that which exists by the original ordinance of nature. The natural death is that one by which the soul is separated from the body. But the one which is inflicted as a punishment, is when the soul dies according to the life of virtue, and lives only according to the life of vice. (108) Well, therefore, did Heraclitus say this, following the doctrine of Moses; for he says, "We are living according to the death of those men; and we have died according to their life." As if he had said, Now, when we are alive, we are so though our soul is dead and buried in our body, as if in a tomb. But if it were to die, then our soul would live according to its proper life, being released from the evil and dead body to which it is bound.

Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres Sit 237-240 - XLIX. (237) Therefore, after Moses has mentioned the facts of birds not being cut in two pieces or divided, he proceeds to say, "And the birds came down and descended upon the bodies which were Divided;"^{{74}{#ge 15:11.}} using indeed expressions which are synonymous, but still representing the variance which exists in the facts in a most visible manner to those who are able to see. For it is contrary to nature that birds should come down, when they have been given wings for the purpose of soaring on high. (238) For, as the earth is the most appropriate place for land animals, and above all for reptiles, which do not endure even to crawl upon it, but seek caves and lurking places, avoiding the regions which are above, on account of their kinship with the things which are below; so, in the same manner, the air is the appropriate abode for the winged race, the element which is by nature light is the proper home for those creatures which are light by reason of their being feathered. When, therefore, those creatures, whose nature it is to traverse the air and who ought to roam through the aether, descend and come down upon the land, they are unable to live a life according to their nature. (239) On the other hand, Moses approves, in no ordinary degree, of whatever reptiles are able to take a leap in an upward direction. At all events he says, "Ye shall eat of these winged reptiles which go upon four feet, and which have legs above their feet so as to be able by them to leap up from the Ground."^{{75}{#le 11:21.}} But these reptiles are the emblems of souls, which like reptiles being rooted in the earthly body, when they are raised up, get strength to soar on high, taking the heaven in exchange for the earth, and immortality in exchange for destruction. (240) We must, therefore, think that they are full of every description of misery, which, having been brought up in the air, and in the aether which is the purest of all things, have changed their abode (not being able to bear the satiety of divine things), and have descended to that mortal and evil district, the earth. And there are innumerable imaginations concerning an innumerable variety of things which roam about upon it also; some voluntary, and some out of ignorance, which are in no respect different from winged creatures, and which Moses compares to the birds that come down.

Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres Sit 275-283 - LVI. (275) Having said this much on these subjects, the historian proceeds: "And thou shalt depart to thy fathers, having lived in peace, in a good old Age."^{{91}{#ge 15:15.}} Therefore we, who are imperfect, are made war upon, and we become slaves, and only with difficulty do we find any relief from the dangers which impend over us. But the perfect race, exempt from slavery and free from the perils of war, is bred up in peace and the firmest freedom. (276) And there is a particular lesson to be learnt from his representing the good man not as dying but departing, in order to show that the race of the soul, which is completely purified, cannot be extinguished and cannot die, but only departs in the way of migration from this earth to heaven, not undergoing that dissolution and destruction which death appears to bring with it. (277) And after the words, "Thou shalt depart," he adds, "to thy fathers." It is here worth while to consider what kind of fathers is meant; for God can never mean those who had passed their lives in the country of the Chaldeans, among whom alone he had lived as being his relations, because he had been commanded by a sacred oracle to depart from those who were his kinsmen by blood. For, says the historian, "The Lord said unto Abraham, Depart from out of thy land, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, to a land which I will show thee; and I will make thee into a great Nation."^{{92}{#ge 12:1.}}

(278) For how can it be reasonable for him who was once been removed from his abode by the interference of Divine Providence, to return and dwell again in the same place? And how could it be reasonable for one who was about to be the leader of a new nation and or another race to be again assigned to his ancient one? For God would never have given to him a new character, and a new nation and family, if he had not wholly and entirely separated himself from his ancient one. (279) For that man is truly a chief of a nation and ruler of a family, from whom, as from a root, sprang that branch so fond of investigating and contemplating the affairs of our nature, by name Israel, since an express command has been given "to remove the old things from before the face of those which are New." (Leviticus 26:10.) For where is any longer the use of investigations into antiquity, and ancient, and long-established customs, to those in whom on a sudden, when they have no such expectation, God rains all kinds of new blessings in a mass?

LVII. (280) Therefore, when he says "fathers," he means not those whose souls have departed from them, and who are buried in the tombs of the land of Chaldea; but, as some say, the sun, and the moon, and the other stars; for some affirm that it is owing to these bodies that the nature of all the things in the world has its existence. But as some other persons think he means the archetypal ideas, those models of these things which are perceptible by the outward senses and visible; which models, however, are only perceptible by the intellect and invisible; and that it is to these that the mind of the wise man emigrates. (281) Some, again, have fancied that by "fathers," are here meant the four principles and powers of which the world is composed--the earth, the water, the air, and the fire; for they say, that all created things are very properly dissolved into these elements. (282) For as nouns, and verbs, and all the other parts of speech, consist of the elements of grammar, and again are resolvable into these ultimate principles, so, in the same manner, each individual among us, being compounded of the four elements, and borrowing small portions from each essence, does, at certain fixed periods, repay what he has borrowed, giving what he has dry to the earth, what moisture he has to the water, what heat he has to the fire, and what cold he has to the air. (283) These then are the things of the body; but the intellectual and heavenly race of the soul will ascend to the purest aether as to its father. For the fifth essence, as the account of the ancients tells us, may be a certain one, which brings things round in a cycle, differing from the other four as being superior to them, from which the stars and the whole heavens appear to be generated, and of which, as a natural consequence, one must lay it down that the human soul is a fragment.

De Cherubim 113-14 - (113) Thus, therefore, putting all these things together, God appropriated the dominion over them all to himself, but the use and enjoyment of themselves and of each other he allowed to those who are subject to him; for we have the complete use of our own faculties and of everything which affects us: I therefore, consisting of soul and body, and appearing to have a mind, and reason, and outward sense, find that not one of all these things is my own property. (114) For where was my body before my birth? and where will it go when I am departed? And what becomes of the differences of age of that being which at present appears to exist? Where is now the infant?--where the child?--where the boy?--where the youth just arriving at the age of puberty?--where the young man?--where is he now whose beard is just budding, the vigorous and perfect man? Whence came the soul, and whither will it go? and how long will it remain with us? and what is its essence, or what may we speak of as such? Moreover, when did we acquire it? Was it before our birth?--But then we ourselves did not exist. Shall we have it after our death?--But then we shall not exist, we who are now a combination of distinctive qualities in combination with our bodies; but rather we shall then be hastening to a regeneration, becoming in combination with incorporeal beings: (115) and now, when we are alive we are governed rather than governing, and we are understood ourselves rather than understanding anything else; for our soul understands us without being understood by us, and it imposes commands upon us which we are necessitated to obey, as servants are compelled to obey a mistress; and whenever it chooses to abandon us and to depart to the Ruler of all things, it will depart, leaving our house destitute of life. And even if we attempt to compel it to remain, it will disappear; for its nature is composed of unsubstantial parts, such as afford no handle to the body.