

2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14
Psalm 17:1, 5-6, 8, 15
2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5
Luke 20:27-38

Today our attention is drawn to the mystery of the resurrection and life after death.

A popular subject today, many people wonder what will happen to them immediately after they die. Do we cease to exist or is there life after death? Are we reincarnated into another form, or do we simply sit on clouds and play golden harps? Unfortunately there is a lot of misinformation floating around concerning this topic.

As Catholic Christians, our basic assumptions regarding the resurrection and the life after death are rooted in a long-standing Jewish tradition. Sometimes we forget just how much the foundations of our western culture, and especially our legal system are influenced by ancient Jewish philosophy, religion, and theology.

So then it would be reasonable to ask what did the ancient Jewish sages believe about life after death? First of all it is important to remember that the earliest Jewish Fathers starting with Abraham did not have Moses, St. Paul, or the Nicene Creed to help clarify the uncertainties of this subject.

Concerning life after death, the unedited texts of the *1906 Jewish Encyclopedia* state that ancient Hebrews believed that after death all people went to the Netherworld where they remained until God chose to raise up a selected few to be with Him.¹

¹ (See <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12697-resurrection>).

A case supporting the evolution of Israel's theology concerning the afterlife involves the likes of Abraham who was born approximately 1800 years BC and lived some 450 years before Moses (1391 BC).

Again, Abraham, who is the father of our Judeo-Christian faith did not have foreknowledge concerning the afterlife or a recorded history concerning God, the fall of man, the resurrection, or life after death; he had no Torah, no Book of Genesis, no knowledge of Jesus, and certainly no New Testament.

Yet Joseph, who was the son of Jacob, who was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham, indeed Joseph besieged his relatives to be sure that after he died to bring his bones from Egypt back home to the land of Israel so that he could be buried with his forefathers.

Somehow, God had placed into the hearts of His people the notion that they would eventually live in the eschatological future forever in community with those whom they loved.

Thus we can safely say that history appears to support the notion that God's intention was to slowly reveal His Personhood, His purpose and His redemptive plan through the history of the nation of Israel – His People.

So with that thought in mind, let us comment on the first reading taken from the Book of 2 Maccabees, a historical inter-testament book that illustrates a much later Jewish mindset affirming a belief in a life after death.

But first, because many folks may not be familiar with 1 & 2 Maccabees, we will give a short overview of these two historically biblical books. I don't expect you to remember all the dates and facts, but I do want you to know that there is a very real historical connection between our first reading in 2 Maccabees and the Gospel reading from the 20th chapter of St Luke's account.

The connection between these two books is that they describe the story of certain members of the Hasmonean family of Jewish leaders and rulers, namely the sons of Mattathias and their descendants who reigned in Judea from around 167 to 37 b.c.. Judas Maccabaeus, and his brothers, defeated the Syrians under Antiochus IV in approximately 165 b.c.. Interestingly the name Maccabaeus means hammer. Freedom temporarily secured, they immediately rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem for worship.

Today's first reading describes the horrific torture the Jewish people suffered at the hands of their Syrian captors. In the story seven brothers along with their mother were arrested, scourged with whips, mutilated, and they were forced to eat pork in violation of God's law.

These men were tortured unmercifully; but just before the eldest brother died, and speaking as a spokesman for the family, he declared his Jewish theology saying, "You are depriving us of this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up to live again forever." So they killed him.

Another brother, when they were about to cut off his tongue, offered his hands to be cut off too, thereby insuring a sure death by suffocation and loss of blood, proceeded to say "It was from heaven I received these; for the sake of His laws I disdain them; from Him I hope to receive them again," and he died.

The fourth brother's testimony signifies an even more advanced resurrection theology. He, in the midst of torture declared, "It is my choice to die at the hands of men with the hope God gives of being raised up by Him; but for you, there will be no resurrection of life." All of the brothers and their mother eventually suffered the same horrible deaths.

Here at this point you may ask, what did this family of seven brothers and their mom do that was so horrible that the king would make them suffer so much? The answer, they refused to eat pork and dishonor God's Holy Covenant in the Law. Now think about it – would you die rather than eat barbequed pork ribs? Here some might suggest – now that is a rather ridiculous question – yet this honorable family was mutilated, scalped, fried alive, and dismembered slowly because they would not eat pork?

So let me ask the same question in a modern/post-modern context. If - you were told to either deny the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist or suffer a cruel and mutilating death, what would you do?

Most of us don't even want to think about the thought, but what would you do if forced into a similar faith-defining situation, as were they?

So then, in a nutshell, one of the reasons 2 Maccabees is important to us today is because in it we recognize that God's covenantal promises are not to be taken lightly nor are they extinguished by death. On the contrary, covenant theology rests on the premise that there must be two living parties for a covenant to remain in effect.

God is eternal, so that means that even when we die to this world, in the world to come His covenant is still applicable; therefore, we can be assured that we too shall continue to live even though we should die in this temporal world.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus faced a similar theological debate, this time with a group of Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or the life of the world to come. The Sadducees were a fairly short-lived Jewish fundamentalist quasi-political group of elitists that often aligned themselves with any political power so long as they opposed the Pharisees.

The Jewish born historian Flavius Josephus (37 -100 a.d.) recorded that the Sadducees did not believe in Fate or God's sovereignty. For the most part they maintained that the soul dies along with the body. Sadducees believed that after you died – that's it – poof you're gone its all over. While on the other hand, the Pharisees and early Christians believed in the bodily resurrection of the dead.

The historical and political connections between the Maccabean defeat of the Syrians and their politically motivated rise to the priesthood over the Zadokite family, who by the way were the originators of the Sadducee movement is long and detailed. However, they do link together the Book of Maccabees and today's Gospel account.

Now who said politics doesn't affect just about every area of life?

Sufficient to say, the Zadokite family and the later Sadducees retained political and religious power until the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 and subsequently remained a constant thorn in the side of the Pharisees.

So to make a long story shorter and to help provide a backdrop for Jesus' encounter with these resurrection scoffers, the Sadducees were still bitter about Jonathan Maccabees being appointed high priest in the year 152 BC.

Subsequently it is hypothesized that it was this long history of spite that prompted them to question Jesus and refer to a certain woman, who because of the death of each of her seven husbands, each leaving no heir, that they asked Jesus, whose wife would she then be in the resurrection? Remember here they did not even believe in the resurrection – so we can suppose that's why they were sad you see.

Seriously, think about it, it was because of spite and hatred that they purposefully schemed to create a blatant and sarcastic blemish on the legacy and testimony of the seven brothers who died for their faith in God's covenant in the Book of Maccabees.

In addition, their politically instituted argument was intended to be an attack on the life of Jesus, the Pharisees, and finally an intentional setback for the disciples. Josephus said of the Sadducees that they acted like barbarians in their ideological attitudes and treatment of people, even to their own kind.

The truth of the matter is that bitterness and resentment often leads to a sense of self-righteous bias, and bigotry. Unfortunately, history does repeat itself, and we can see it happening today right in our own government, and even worse in some of our major religious institutions. May the Lord help us all to be pure and blameless in our attitudes towards one another?

Nevertheless, Jesus quickly and skillfully addressed the deceit and trickery of the Sadducees, He appeared to have no patience with

their attitudes or with their theology – in fact He even called them vipers and snakes, whitewashed tombs –indeed, certainly not terms of endearment.

He told them that those worthy to attain the coming age were going to be like the angels – angels - another belief despised by the Sadducees. He also reminded them that the righteous cannot die, and that they will rise again; therefore, there will be no need for sacramental marriage in Heaven because the original design for marriage was for man not to be alone and for procreation. In the world to come man will not be alone. We will have an intimate relationship with Jesus, and the need to replenish the earth will be inconsequential.

Furthermore, knowing that the Sadducees accepted only the Torah as Sacred Canon, Jesus qualified another proof of the resurrection by referring to the burning bush encountered by Moses. Why, because Moses later wrote – “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to Him all are alive.”

When Jesus had finished His chastisement of the Sadducees, St. Luke records that, “some of the scribes (teachers of the Law and maybe even some of the Sadducees) answered and said, ‘Teacher, you have spoken well.’ But after that they dared not question Him anymore.”

So, there we have it, an interesting bit of history, a serious lesson in eschatology, a taste of covenantal theology and a glimpse into resurrection doctrine in its developmental process. So indeed, what are we to make of all of this information?

To even begin - we must first reiterate the fact that for those who are baptized into Christ - there is a joyous life after death. Those who are not baptized for whatever reason we must leave in the hands of our just and merciful Redeemer, because we are commanded not to judge. So if you, or someone you know is not baptized we can arrange for that to happen. In the mean time, St. Paul doesn't mince any words concerning the resurrection,

And if Christ is not raised [from the dead], then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not raised. And if Christ is not raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins (1Cor. 15:14-17)!

So here we can take comfort in the fact that we will be raised from the dead; however you will also notice that neither does St Paul address the issue of timing. The answer to exactly when we will be raised from the dead is not mentioned. The apostle alludes to that topic in his second letter to the Corinthians where he wrote,

Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight: We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-8).

If we carefully look at the aforementioned statement made by St Paul, we will notice that he does not give a definitive answer to the question of when. His point here is his willingness to be with the Lord rather than be here on earth.

For St. Paul the more pressing issue is not so much the future, but the present. God's method of keeping time may not be the same as ours making the future totally in God's capable hands. However what he does clarify is that no matter whatever state we may find ourselves in, we are to walk in faith worthy of the high calling of Christ. Thus he wrote,

Wherefore we labor, that whether present or absent, we may be accepted of Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad, (2 Cor. 5:9-10).

Subsequently today's readings offer us a sure hope in the life of the world to come. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting encouragement and good hope through His grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good deed and word" (2 Thess. 2:16-17).

So, in conclusion we can be confident in a theology that supports the resurrection as a true sign of Jesus' fidelity and love. You might say that the resurrection could be compared to a wedding engagement ring given to a soon to be bride. It is the surest of guarantees that Jesus loves the Church, and that He will return for His Bride.

Meanwhile and until He returns, may our eyes remain fixed on pleasing the Lord Jesus Christ and preferring one another.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.