olam he-zeh v’olam ha-ba
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Published by Purdue University Press

Greenspoon, Leonard J.
olam he-zeh v’olam ha-ba: This World and the World to Come in Jewish Belief and Practice.
Purdue University Press, 2017.
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The vast assembly of late Second Temple period religious texts written under the pressures of imperial domination and Hasmonean self-rule offer the modern scholar a window open toward the tumultuous world of Judea of the Second Temple period, testifying to various responses to the political and cultural challenges of the times. To be sure, the real and perceived hostilities of the Hellenistic world could not help but provoke real concerns for the inhabitants of Judea, raising existential questions about what it might mean ultimately to be a Jew.

Most of these writings witness to courses of thought and action arising within a range of accommodation in the faces of structures of power, suspended between extremes of resistance on the one hand and complete assimilation on the other. Taken together, the literature witnesses to the complete absence of any dogmatic orthodoxy among Jews living in the four centuries following Alexander the Great (333 B.C.E.) and culminating in the destruction of the Temple (70 C.E.). Their scenarios often testify to distressing, even precarious social contexts, which is why one finds among these writings a variety of perspectives regarding the world at hand [olam ha-zeh] and the world to come [olam ha-ba], sometimes vying together within a single book. These perspectives challenge biblical scholars to bring these ancient texts into dialogue with their troubled worlds, while offering theologians an opportunity to explore the processes involved in the production and development of theodicies. Speculation about the relationship between this world and the world to come is more than a passing fancy for these authors. It arises out of dire concerns for making sense of the world in light of threatening challenges to it.

The present study will focus on identifying a few among several distinct present world/coming world scenarios contained within the deuterocanonical corpus, highlighting points of contrast that demonstrate the wide range of speculation entertained by their respective authors. Although the deuterocanonicals are Jewish texts that were officially abandoned by the rabbis shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple, they remain authoritative for the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox biblical and
Having circulated with the Septuagint (LXX) they are regarded as canonical by the Western Church, however only secondarily so (hence, deutero-). Their canonicity has never been in question among the churches of the East. It is often necessary to remind Christians that, like the Older Testament itself, these texts are inherited from Judaism—that is, written by Jews for Jews living throughout the Greco-Roman world. Eventually marginalized by both rabbinic and Protestant traditions, they have been of modest significance for biblical scholars until recent times.

Given the number of texts at hand, only a representative sampling of models of Jewish speculation about present and future worlds can be presented here—models ranging from a traditional biblical worldview maintained by the privileged conservative elite (most notably the ruling Sadducee party), to the radically apocalyptic scenarios of the resistance, as well as other groups perceiving themselves to be under siege. Christians, who frequently hear excerpts of these texts read aloud in liturgical contexts, might gain a deeper understanding of the beginnings of their own tradition, rooted as it is in the seedbed of Second Temple period Judaism. Although no longer part of the Jewish canon, their value derives from the insight they provide into the diversity of Jewish speculation about the world in which they lived, as well as any world to come. Because many of these texts contain theological elements that were attractive to Christians, they also serve to reacquaint Christianity with its own (Jewish) roots.

CORPORATE (NATIONAL) PRESENT WORLD RESOLUTION

The first category includes present world scenarios that posit divine deliverance through the agency of righteous human warriors, whose personal bravery and zeal for Israel and for the Torah overcome the nation’s enemies. Standing in the tradition of Ezekiel 37’s vision of the dry bones, which speaks to a future revitalization of the nation and the rebuilding of Solomon’s temple, and Isaiah’s famous “swords to plowshares/spears to pruning hooks” oracle (Isa 2:1–5), some deuterocanonical texts affirm the restoration of justice in this world in a collective, nonindividualized way. As in the prophetic books [Nevi’im], divine justice is meted out in the fearsome age of empires, looking forward toward full resolution in the near future of a present world characterized by peace and well-being [shalom].

In the deuterocanonical texts in this category, powerful earthly forces threaten Israel’s security and national well-being, bringing about the need for an agent of divine deliverance to arise and set the world aright. Resolution
(salvation) is corporate and national, not personal. For example, in 1 Maccabees, the deaths of Judah, Jonathan, and Simon are presented in a matter-of-fact way as necessary sacrifices for the greater cause, rather than as martyrdoms or personal tragedies. For this reason, the theodicy of this worldview remains traditionally biblical. There are no references to an afterlife, including any sort of individualized resurrection, bodily or otherwise, which despite its centrality to the Christian tradition is a notion that appeared relatively late in the Second Temple period.3

1 MACCABEES

The book of 1 Maccabees is a late second century text that recounts the events from the death of Alexander the Great to the installation of John Hyrcanus, self-proclaimed king and high priest of Judea, almost exactly two centuries later. Its author interprets current events in a way that supports the legitimacy of the early Hasmonean high priestly dynasty, whose founders, the heroic Maccabees, brought Antiochene persecutions to an eventual end, established national independence, and re instituted the rule of the Torah. In contrast to the many texts that arose out of the crucible of suffering and persecution, here the righteous celebrate victory through the Maccabean triumph, most notably on the part of Judah, warrior par excellence, whose brave deeds are heralded as too numerous to record (9:22).

It is noteworthy that the author of this celebratory text does not record the violence and self-serving corruption that would ensue under the leadership of the Hasmoneans. Although the text witnesses to what was for many a troubled time, it appears the author was not adversely affected by these events and was likely a supporter of the ruling family.4 In any event, the theodicy remains earthbound and rooted in the present, consonant with the worldview of the Hebrew Bible, in which human action plays out on the face of the earth, with God and his heavenly hosts in the heavens and the shadowy realm of the dead below (Sheol).5

JUDITH

The book of Judith tells the story of a pious and beautiful widow who delivers her village from an Assyrian siege. Although the characters, time, and plot lines are radically different and influenced by Hellenistic gender-specific roles and language, some scholars suggest that Judith’s character may have been inspired
by the warrior exploits of Judah the Maccabee; thus one might expect similar themes and outlooks. Still others have suggested that the book of Judith was composed by a member of the Pharisee party and that the book, full of rich irony, is cryptically anti-Hasmonean. If these scholars are correct, then—as I have suggested elsewhere—the whole point of this ironic tale almost certainly rests upon its implication that Judah and his brothers should have emulated Judith by returning to private life following the liberation of their people, instead of wresting power for themselves and eventually becoming corrupt. Thus, the book of Judith projects an alternative history in which the cruel tyranny of Hasmonean rule would never have come about.

Judith’s story of seduction, deception, and assassination unfolds in a cleverly reconfigured, conflated historical past, one in which the Assyrian conquest is led by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar who conquered Judah in the early sixth century B.C.E. Such seeming historical inaccuracies are not mistakes, for they signal the reader to pay attention to the details, which hearken to a present world situation in which things are set aright by a mortal agent of divine deliverance. Although there is no indication that the residents of Bethulia are particularly righteous folk, they are nevertheless delivered by the God-fearing Judith’s formidable beauty and warrior fierceness: she actively embodies God’s justice on the earth. Thus again, deliverance comes at the hands of a warrior-type human agent who brings corporate deliverance to the nation.

PERSONAL PRESENT WORLD RESOLUTION

Like the previous texts, these narratives reflect a worldview consonant with that of the Tanach generally, namely, one in which human activity from birth to death takes place in an arena sandwiched between the heavens [ha-shamaim] and the grave (Sheol). Whatever plays out on the face of the earth, the Most High watches and resolves upon the earth before the eyes of everyone involved—especially the righteous—but also for their sake, sometimes also the punishment-deserving wicked. This perspective is rooted in the traditional deuteronomistic worldview, explicitly laid out in Deuteronomy 28, which asserts that God’s justice in relation to covenantal fidelity is meted out in the present life.

Although this worldview is rooted in a corporate view of deliverance, one cannot help but notice the implications for personal life as well. Living one’s life according to the Torah brings personal health, wealth, and abundant life, while forsaking the Torah results in disease, misfortune, and death. Thus for
some deuterocanonical texts, the righteous enjoy divine favor in the present world even though they experience great distress. Such favor includes being able to behold the ruin of their oppressors, who in turn see the reestablishment of justice in the vindication of the righteous. These texts rest on the underlying conviction that the divine will for human existence is the default mode for ultimate reality, seen only by the wise righteous ones. Given that biblical wisdom is defined as “fear of the LORD,” such stories are rightly called wisdom tales.9

SUSANNAH

The story of Susannah came to circulate with the book of Daniel. Read during the fifth week of Lent in the Latin tradition, it concerns a pious woman who is sexually compromised by two elders of her own community. The elders spy on the God-fearing Susannah as she bathes and then threaten to publicly accuse her of adultery with a stranger—an action punishable by death—should she refuse to acquiesce to their salacious advances. The righteous Susannah has no choice but to call upon God for deliverance, who immediately stirs up the spirit of the young prophet Daniel. In what some have called the world’s first courtroom drama, Daniel interrogates the elders; but this is not the usual cross-examination, for Daniel as prophet (and master of wordplay, one should add) is able to convict first one elder and then the other on the basis of their individual testimonies alone.

The story of Susannah’s persecution and vindication calls to mind stories about Daniel standing before the Babylonian king in chapters 3 and 6, but here Susannah is simply an ordinary God-fearing person. Furthermore, her enemy is not some wicked emperor, but putatively respected leaders of her own community. Unlike other deuteroncanonical tales, the narrative is set in a village that does not appear to be troubled by outsiders; however, one could argue that the actions of these devious elders, antithetical to the life of the Torah, pose a threat to the interior life of the community equal to or greater than that of any foreign despot. In any event, swift to deliver the righteous, the Most High rescues Susannah from certain death and vindicates her in the present world.

TOBIT

The book of Tobit, from which large portions are read in the church’s lectionary, offers another present world, present life resolution, only here the agent
of divine justice is not a human agent like the prophet Daniel, but an angelic being named Raphael. Set in the Assyrian exile in the late eighth century B.C.E., the book of Tobit is a wisdom novella focusing on the struggles of the righteous in the face of powerful human and supernatural forces. Full of rich irony and humor, the story resolves all its righteous characters’ struggles in a happy ending in the present world.

Tobit, the eponymous protagonist, is persecuted by the Assyrian king Sennacherib for burying the exposed corpses of fellow Israelites—a death mitzvah [met mitzvah] that brings him into repeated contact with what rabbinic sources call the “mother of all impurities,” raising the need for repeated repurification rituals. At one point, Tobit’s sufferings are compounded when he sleeps outside the house during the repurification process. While he is asleep, sparrows defecate upon his eyes and render him blind. Meanwhile, in faraway Ecbatana, a distant cousin named Sarah is suffering at the hands of the demon Asmodeus, whose jealous desire for her leads him to kill seven husbands in succession before any of her marriages could be consummated.

Both Tobit and Sarah are righteous Israelites who suffer hardship at the hands of malevolent powers, human and superhuman; both suffer reproach from the people around them, and both resort to prayer in the midst of their despair. Their parallel plights are brought together and resolved in a third cycle, in which God sends the angel Raphael—disguised as a distant kinsman—to accompany Tobias, Tobit’s son, on a journey to reclaim some money held in trust. During the journey they stop at the Tigris River to refresh themselves, when suddenly a large fish jumps out. The angel instructs Tobias to take hold of the fish and secure its gall, heart, and liver, organs that will later become the means by which the demon is driven off and Tobit’s eyes healed (6:1–8), bringing about a happy ending.

The narrative world of the book of Tobit is full of hardships, and the righteous seem to suffer by dint of their righteousness. However, the righteous are never out of sight of the Most High, who bestows upon them the rewards of their faithful perseverance in the present life. Tobit becomes highly respected in his community. He dies peacefully at the age of 112 and is buried in Nineveh with great honor (14:2). Tobit’s son Tobias enjoys even greater wealth and honor and lives to the ripe old age of 117, three years short of the divinely appointed limit for mortals (Gen 6:3). Shortly before his death, Tobias receives news of Nineveh’s destruction, for which he rejoices. Praising God for the restoration of justice for which his father had prayed, Tobias now goes to his grave in peace, a blessed ending to righteous life.
Moving now from wisdom tale to wisdom discourse, “The Instruction of [Joshua] ben Sira” (known to Christians as Ecclesiasticus or the Book of Jesus, son of Sirach) affirms that a life devoted to wisdom is a reward in itself. Such a life is characterized by prudent speech, unwavering uprightness, and an honorable reputation. At the end of life, both sage and sinner inescapably meet up with maggots, worms, and decay (10:11, 38:21); however, the former, whose life is lived in the fear of God (i.e., awesome reverence), enjoys a happy and prosperous end (1:13, 2:3), while his or her virtue and acts of righteousness live on. In contrast to the books of Susannah and Tobit, ben Sira asserts that even a happy, prosperous end is not necessarily without pain and suffering; but even in the midst of persecution leading to death, the life of wisdom brings reward and satisfaction to dimming eyes: “The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and will not rest until it reaches the goal; it will not desist until the Most High responds and does justice for the righteous, and executes judgment. Indeed, the Lord will not delay” (35:21–22).

PERSONAL OTHER WORLD RESOLUTIONS

Some deuterocanonical texts imagine a world that is irredeemably broken and wholly unsalvageable, necessitating some kind of cosmic reset. For some writers, Trito-Isaiah’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth (Isa 65:17) inspired an apocalyptic hope among groups that perceived the world in this way. Likely influenced by Orphic pessimism, this view inspires the hope for a new creation—a new heaven and earth—set apart from a world no longer worth saving. Augmented by Daniel 12:2, the persecuted righteous ones find hope for transformed existence delivering them from the time and place of present anguish:

Your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever (Dan 12: 1–3).10

Other raw materials for the belief in a resurrection from the dead [tēḥîyat hamētîm]11 were drawn from Ezekiel 37:1–14 and Isaiah 26:19. Thus, one sees that apocalyptic beliefs emerge from a radical intensification of convictions
voiced in prophetic literature. What is new is that the belief in a resurrection of the dead, once a hope for the rebirth of the nation, now becomes personal.

2 MACCABEES 7

The deuterocanonical texts offer a variety of present and future world theodicies; however, 2 Maccabees manages to offer several aspects of divine deliverance within a single text. The narrative is set in a world dominated by the wicked Seleucid king Antiochus IV, who in chapter 7 presides over the gruesome torture of a family of Torah-abiding Jews. The story calls to mind the story of Taxo and his seven sons in Testament of Moses 9, both of which stand in the tradition of persecution and vindication in Daniel 3 and 6. But for the mother and her sons—quite unlike the stories of Susannah and Tobit—deliverance follows an agonizing, torturous death. In one sense, the imagery calls to mind Isaiah 65:17–25, in which the righteous are promised a long life in a new heaven and earth, while God judges and kills the wicked, leaving their corpses exposed (66:15–17); however, here it is the corpses of the suffering righteous that remain exposed. Nevertheless, vindication occurs in the form of resurrection to new life.

This martyrology of the pious woman and her seven sons presents a situation in which imminent and inescapable death arises from living a life according to the Torah, for it is the family’s faithfulness to the Torah that incurs the anger of the king and fuels his primary motivation for ordering their torture and death. Their choice is clear, but antithetical to any previous understanding of how the world is supposed to operate. Despite their horrendous agony, several hopeful convictions are voiced:

- God sees their plight and has compassion upon them. (v. 6)
- God will raise up the righteous to an everlasting life. (v. 9)
- Severed body parts will be restored. (v. 11; see also Razis, 14:30 ff)
- There will be no resurrection for the wicked king. (v. 14)
- God will torture the wicked king and his descendants. (vv. 16–17)
- The calamity ultimately is not in the king’s power to carry out, but is the result of Israel’s sins against God. (v. 18)

Their situation sets up a kind of cognitive dissonance in which the inherent conviction that fidelity to the Torah brings life comes to be challenged by the reality that clinging to the Torah now brings certain torture and death. Underscored by the conviction that the Most High is omnipotent,
omniscient, compassionate, and just, suddenly all evidence has shifted to the contrary. Something has to give. The displacement activity forced by the cognitive dissonance in this clash of realities reaffirms that God’s justice is certain; therefore, if justice is not being realized in the present world, then it must be taking place somewhere else. Thus traditional notions concerning the finality of death are rewritten to accommodate the conviction that the end is not the end.

WISDOM OF SOLOMON

A somewhat similar situation obtains in the Wisdom of Solomon, namely, that fidelity to the Torah leads to persecution and death; only here the classic distinction between immortality and bodily resurrection seems confused. In words that clearly affirm the preexistence of souls, the author writes, “As a child I was naturally gifted, and a good soul fell to my lot; or rather, being good, I entered an undefiled body” (8:20); however, vindication of the righteous protagonist clearly involves resurrection [anastasis] from the dead.

Like ben Sira, the author of Wisdom of Solomon acknowledges the reality of death and asserts that righteousness is immortal. He insists that God did not make death (1:13), but that death is brought into being through the actions of the wicked (v. 16). The speech attributed to the wicked reflects an Epicurean worldview that denies the existence of any personal afterlife. The wicked lie in wait to murder the righteous ones, but when they do, the righteous ones only appear to have died. Their souls are in the hand of God, he asserts, where torments of the present world will never touch them (3:1–2).

In contrast to the deuteronomistic notion that righteousness brings long life and prosperity, the author of the Wisdom of Solomon accounts for the untimely deaths of the righteous by asserting that their perfected souls were pleasing to God, thus he snatched them from the midst of earthly wickedness (4:14). By contrast, the wicked may enjoy a long and profitable life, which is contrary to the deuteronomic view, but after death they will be raised just long enough to see the error of their ways and be judged by the righteous ones they had condemned. Ironically, the distorted worldview they held in the present world becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, for the paradoxical reversal of fortunes on the Day of Judgment forces them to behold the righteous ones whom they killed standing at the right hand of God to convict them. As a result, the wicked endure acute pangs of fear and anguish before fading into oblivion, unremembered as though they were never born.13
CONCLUSION

Despite a wide range of outlooks and outcomes, the deuterocanonical texts all share one fundamental conviction: that the Most High is unique (Deut 6:4), omnipotent, omniscient, and providentially just—a unique and powerful God of steadfast lovingkindness [hesed] willing and able to act in establishing and maintaining justice and righteousness [mishpat ve-azedekah] in ruling the universe. Even a cursory reading of these texts shows a broad spectrum of speculation concerning how the Deity might act in vindicating righteous ones and righting earthly wrongs. Particular convictions about the world to come are predicated on the situation of the present world, as the oppressed look desperately to the divine for help.14 They arise out of particular social contexts and at no point do they presume to be dogmatic or universal in scope. As such, one cannot expect these texts to have the clarity and resolution of systematic theology, so they often remain ambiguously raw and undeveloped and distinct from the corpus as a whole. Nevertheless a thorough comparison of these texts brings great appreciation for the colorfully rich spectrum of light refracted through the prism of a shared conviction about divine steadfast lovingkindness [hesed] manifested through the cosmic administration of justice and righteousness [mishpat vezedekah].

NOTES

1. The expanded canon of inspired books in the western half of the Roman Empire was promulgated by Pope Damasus at the Synod of Rome (382) and reaffirmed by subsequent regional councils at Hippo (393) and Carthage (397, 419). The Council of Trent (1545–1563) affirmed the infallibility of these books as Scripture. The canonicity of these texts was never officially in question among churches of the East.


5. The worldview stands in marked contrast to that of 2 Maccabees, where Judas and his companions pray on behalf of the souls of their fallen comrades, that they may be absolved of their sins (2 Macc 12:43–46). It does agree with the view of the Saduccee party, who disparaged any belief in resurrection (see Matt 22:23; Mk 12:18; Lk 20:27; Acts 23:6–10; also, Josephus, J.W. 2.165 and Ant. 18.16).
6. Judith can be seen as having been modeled on a number of Jewish female heroes, especially Deborah and Jael, but also Miriam and the woman of Abel-beth-maacha (2 Sam 20:14–22); see Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 100.


8. For more information, see Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 97–102.

9. It is almost certain that the Deuteronomist did not actually hold such a naïve view of the world; however, the idea that sin brings ruin (and its converse, that ruin is the result of sin) offered itself as a plausible explanation for what had gone so terribly wrong in that God had permitted Jerusalem and its temple to be destroyed.

10. The belief in bodily transformation, in this case shining like stars, may refer to some sort of angelic state of being. Compare 1 Enoch 39:7, 58:1–4; Psalms of Solomon 3:15; 2 Esdras 7.55; and 2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch 50:10; see also Matthew 13:43.


13. Note that the fate of the wicked stands in contrast to the classical conception of eternal hellfire rooted in the book of Enoch and implied in the Gospels.

14. Such desperate situations could not help but bring several psalms to mind, e.g., Psalms 18, 22, and 28, in which the Lord is said to be a personal rock, strength, shepherd, shield, salvation, and so on.