

# ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION OF DANIEL 12:2

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## INTRODUCTION

Chapter 12 of Daniel reports the final vision of Daniel, where the future redemption is described. Daniel 12:2 states, *Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence.* This passage is brought by Ravina in TB *Sanhedrin* 92a as the proof-text for the idea of the future resurrection of the dead. Maimonides, in his *Treatise on the Resurrection of the Dead*, cites Daniel 12:2 as a verse that “admits of no other interpretation,” and cannot be explained allegorically.<sup>1</sup>

Saadia Gaon, in the seventh section of his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, notes that “some few of the Jewish nation interpret every verse in which they find mention made of the resurrection of the dead at the time of redemption as referring to revival of a Jewish government and the restoration of the nation.”<sup>2</sup> Saadia Gaon goes on to refute this idea, but throughout history there have been others who interpreted Dan. 12:2 metaphorically.

## NON-JEWISH ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Jerome, referring to the interpretation of his opponent, the pagan philosopher Porphyry (c. 234-305 CE), states that he explained the verse as referring to “the Maccabees, in which it is said (I Mac. 2) that many Jews under the leadership of Mattathias and Judas Maccabaeus fled to the desert and hid in caves and holes in the rocks, and came forth again after the victory. These things, then, were foretold in metaphorical language as if it concerned a resurrection of the dead.”<sup>3</sup> The allegorical approach was followed by “several prominent Syriac Christian interpreters, including the ninth century Syriac Christian exegete Ishodad of Merv,” bishop of Hadatha.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of Daniel 12:2 as “using the imagery of resurrection to convey hope in the revival of the Jewish people after a history of suffering and death” is found in modern non-Jewish Bible scholarship as well.<sup>5</sup> However,

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we do not have a record of any named Jewish individual interpreting Dan. 12:2 allegorically in the Middle Ages, with one exception.

#### YESHUA BEN YEHUDA'S INTERPRETATION

Ibn Ezra, in his commentary to Daniel 12:2 first brings the approach of Saadia Gaon, that the verse is referring to a physical resurrection of the dead. Afterwards, he brings the approach of R. Yeshua, that "*those that sleep in the dust of the earth* is a metaphor for Israel, who in exile are like dead." This is Yeshua ben Yehuda (Abu al-Faraj Furqan ibn Asad), a major 11<sup>th</sup> century Karaite commentator.<sup>6</sup> Parts of his Bible commentary have survived, but there seems to be no record of his commentary on Daniel beyond what is quoted by Ibn Ezra.<sup>7</sup>

Although he was an opponent of Karaism, Ibn Ezra often quotes Karaite commentators and, if they are not influenced by a Karaite agenda, relates to their comments based on whether or not they make sense as such.<sup>8</sup> Yeshua is quoted by Ibn Ezra numerous times in his commentary, and remarkably, and as distinct from other Karaites that he refers to, Yeshua is usually given the honorific 'Rav.'<sup>9</sup>

Ibn Ezra concludes his comments on Dan. 12:2 by noting that the statements of the Sages support the view of Saadia Gaon, but also writes that "the intelligent will understand the correct approach among the two explanations." Ibn Ezra's cryptic phrasing here, and his lack of contradicting Yeshua outright, as he tends to do with Karaites that he disagrees with, has led some scholars to speculate that Ibn Ezra secretly agreed that the verses regarding the future bodily resurrection of the dead are indeed metaphorical, and he quoted Yeshua as a kind of proxy to safely hint at his own approach.<sup>10</sup>

Yeshua's own interpretation seems not to be based on standard Karaite theology. Although there are reports of a Karaite splinter group that rejected resurrection,<sup>11</sup> this does not represent mainstream Karaite philosophy. "Every list of Karaite articles of faith included belief in the resurrection of the dead," particularly in light of their literal approach to the Bible.<sup>12</sup> It would seem that Yeshua himself did not subscribe to the belief in resurrection based on his personal philosophy, which led him to stray from the simple meaning of the text and interpret Dan. 12:2 metaphorically.<sup>13</sup>

## RESURRECTION AS A METAPHOR

The metaphoric approach is referred to by R. Yosef Albo (c. 1380-1444) in his *Sefer Ikkarim* 4:35. He brings the opinion of “the *pashtanim*” who understand the verse the way Ibn Ezra reported Yeshua did. They explain that “the passage in Daniel does not refer to resurrection, but must be understood in the way in which some *pashtanim* interpret it, as referring to the exaltation of the lowly nation in the days of the Hasmoneans or in the days of the Messiah. At that time, they say, the lowly nation, or many of the survivors, who are like those who sleep in the dust, will awake and rise to a degree which will be permanent and from which the nation will not again descend, but which it will occupy forever.” Albo of course subscribes to the belief in bodily resurrection and states that even according to this interpretation one must believe in the resurrection, but that “the belief in resurrection is therefore merely traditional” and not based on explicit verses.

Although generally the term *pashtanim* means those who interpret verses according to the simple meaning of the text, here it seems that it refers to rationalists in particular, as the simple meaning of the text in fact supports physical resurrection.

There are other passages in the Bible which describe a large scale resurrection of the dead. Some modern scholars consider these to be allegorical, describing “a matter of national restoration”,<sup>14</sup> an idea found among early Jewish thinkers as well.

Most famously, TB *Sanhedrin* 92b records a dispute as to whether Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones in chapter 37 took place in a prophetic vision or in physical reality. Albo refers to this in his discussion of the verses (*Ikkarim* 4:35), and states that the view that the dry bones was a vision “is also the final opinion of the Talmud: “R. Judah says: It is really (*b’emet*) an allegory.” It is true that there is a dispute concerning the matter in the Talmud where someone says: “I am a descendant of those people and these are the phylacteries which my great-grandfather left me,” but this is merely a hyperbole, for it is an accepted rule that the expression ‘really’ (*b’emet*) indicates that the statement for which it vouches is authoritative.”

The other classic verse is Isaiah 26:19, *Oh, let your dead revive! Let corpses rise! Awake and shout for joy, you who dwell in the dust!* This is the verse that Rabban Gamliel brought as a proof-text for the idea of resurrection of the

dead in TB *Sanhedrin* 90b. Ibn Ezra there explains that “According to everyone this is a hint to the resurrection of the dead,” but then adds “and some say...we who are considered as dead will be alive.” This is a reference to the approach of the 11<sup>th</sup> century scholar R. Moshe ibn Gikatilla, who Ibn Ezra refers to as R. Moshe haKohen. He famously interpreted this part of Isaiah as referring not to the future redemption but to the salvation at the time of Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem. Ibn Ezra brings this interpretation throughout his commentary on Isaiah.<sup>15</sup> Ibn Gikatilla was an arch rationalist and “already in his time Ibn Gikatilla’s views were criticized as harmful.”<sup>16</sup>

In *Ikkarim* 4:42 Albo refers to the 14<sup>th</sup> century Spanish sage R. Hayim Galipapa, and reports that in his *Epistle of Redemption*, a work now lost, he states “that all the prophecies of Daniel refer to the Second Temple only.” It may be that because of this he also interprets Dan. 12:2 metaphorically,<sup>17</sup> but as his work is no longer extant, this cannot be determined with certainty.<sup>18</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Dan. 12:2 was always regarded as a very explicit reference to the future physical resurrection of the dead. Medieval Jewish philosophers noted that there were some Jewish exegetes who interpreted the verse metaphorically, but the only record we have of a named figure who held this view is the Karaite, Yeshua b. Yehuda, whose interpretation was preserved only by being quoted by Ibn Ezra. It would appear that Yeshua interpreted the verse that way, and against the standard Karaite literal exegetical approach, based on his philosophical conviction that passages discussing widespread future resurrection must be understood metaphorically, a view others applied to different verses as well.<sup>19</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Mordechai Rabinovitz, *Iggerot haRambam* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1987), Argument 4, p. 363. See however Robert Kirshner, “Maimonides’ Fiction of Resurrection”, *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. 52 (1981), pp. 184-185 for a very different understanding of Maimonides’ choice of citing this verse, as part of his understanding in that this work Maimonides actually “eviscerates the doctrine he claims to profess...signaling his true belief to the enlightened” (p. 163). Also see the comprehensive discussion of the opinion of Maimonides in Marc Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), pp. 150-152.

2. Samuel Rosenblatt, trans., *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), p. 265
3. Gleason Archer, *St. Jerome, Commentary on Daniel* (1958), Dan. 12:1-3.
4. Carol Ann Newsom with Brenan Breed, *Daniel: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), p. 369.
5. C.L. Seow, *Daniel* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 187. See also
6. For a biography of Yeshua b. Yehuda, see Chagai Ben Shmmai, "Lidmuto Shel Chacham Karai Yerushalmi ben Hameah Achad Esrei", *Peamim* 32 (1987), pp. 3-20.
7. Leon Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 123-124.
8. On Ibn Ezra's relation with Karaite exegetes, see Refael Zer, "Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra u'Parshanut haMikra haKaraite", *Meggadim* 32 (2000), pp. 97-106.
9. Why Ibn Ezra calls him by this title is subject to debate among scholars. Either Ibn Ezra considered him to be particularly significant or it is a gloss added by later copyists who did not realize that Yeshua was a Karaite. See Nafali Ben-Menachem, "Iyunim b'Mishnat Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra", *Tarbiz* 27:4 (1958), p. 516; Yair Haas, "Negation of the Belief in the Resurrection of the Dead in the Thought of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra", *JSIJ* 13 (2015), p. 15, note 35.
10. Yair Haas, "Negation of the Belief in the Resurrection of the Dead in the Thought of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra", *JSIJ* 13 (2015), pp. 1-39. On Ibn Ezra's philosophy regarding what is termed *techiat ha-metim* see M. Friedländer, *Essays on the Writings of Abraham ibn Ezra*, vol. 4 (London: Society of Hebrew Literature, 1877), p. 100.
11. Zvi Ankori, *Karaites in Byzantium: The Formative Years, 970-1100* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 369.
12. Daniel Lasker, *From Judah Hadassi to Elijah Bashyatchi: Studies in Late Medieval Karaite Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 256.
13. Yair Haas, "Negation of the Belief in the Resurrection of the Dead in the Thought of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra", *JSIJ* 13 (2015), p. 38.
14. Louis Hartman and Alexander Di Lella, *The Anchor Bible – The Book of Daniel* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1978), p. 308. See also Meyer Waxman, *Galut v'Geula b'Safrut Yisrael* (New York: Ogen, 1952), p. 84.
15. See Ibn Ezra on Isaiah 24:4 and 26:20.
16. Adele Berlin, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 292.
17. Carol Ann Newsom with Brenan Breed, *Daniel: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), p. 369.
18. See Ovadia Yosef, *Sheelot u'Teshuvot Yabia Omer*, vol. 5, Yoreh Deah 11:2 and 11:6 on the lenient halachic opinions of Hayim Galipapa.
19. See Yehuda Kiel, *Daat Mikra – Daniel* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994), p. 296, n. 188c, where it is understood that Yeshua was following the approach that the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 was a vision.