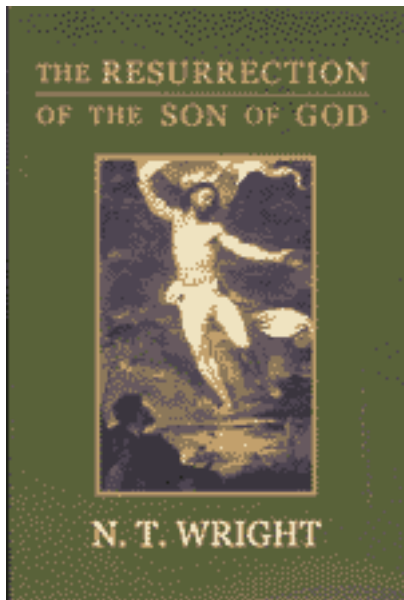


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Wright, N. T.

The Resurrection of the Son of God

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In his third and latest volume, N. T. Wright addresses the question: What happened on Easter morning? Wright addresses two major subquestions: (1) What did early Christians believe had happened to Jesus subsequent to his death? (2) What can be said about the plausibility of those beliefs? Before diving into the subject, Wright discusses historical conclusions. After surveying objections, he concludes there is no reason, epistemological or otherwise, why historians cannot draw historical conclusions regarding Jesus' resurrection.

He begins his major discussion by addressing concepts of an afterlife in both pagan cultures and Second Temple Judaism. The works of Homer, Plato, and Philo present an afterlife involving a disembodied existence. With only a few rare exceptions, postmortem embodied existence was disavowed by the pagan culture, since death was liberation from the prison of the body. Within Second Temple Judaism, there were a number of views regarding an afterlife. While some, such as the Sadducees, denied an afterlife, the majority of Jews affirmed it, with a strong strand holding to resurrection. These Jews almost always thought of resurrection as a bodily event. Wright's conclusion to these results is that the Christian view of resurrection is in line with the Second Temple Jewish view of resurrection, although a few modifications appear.

Discussing the early Christian meaning of resurrection, Wright begins with Paul. Several passages point strongly toward bodily resurrection (e.g., Phil 3:21; Rom 8:11), with nothing in his letters arguing against it. After extensive exegesis on 1 Cor 15:1–58 and 2 Cor 4:7–5:10, Wright concludes that the former is often misunderstood by critics who employ it to support an ethereal view of the risen Jesus by Paul, and the latter says nothing substantive concerning the nature of a resurrection body. Furthermore, the 1 Corinthians passage actually reveals Paul’s belief in bodily resurrection, and there is reason to hold that 2 Cor 5:4 militates against Paul’s belief in an ethereal resurrection body. Thus, when we read Paul on Paul, no compelling reasons exist for holding that he thought of resurrection bodies as ethereal. Rather, precisely the opposite is true.

But what about Acts on Paul? Wright contends that, since Paul’s writings are primary, anywhere Acts may appear to disagree with Paul must take a backseat to what he himself writes on the subject. He postulates that Acts may have a few possible parallels in mind when telling the story of Paul’s conversion experience (2 Macc 3:24–28; *Jos. Azen.* 14:2–8; Ezek 1:28–2:1; Dan 10:5–11) and may have aimed at telling it in such a way as to align him with the prophets and/or possibly penitent pagans. Since Paul is clear in a number of passages that resurrection is bodily and nowhere in his letters or outside is there clear data to the contrary, claiming that Paul believed in anything other than bodily resurrection by appealing to other passages in Paul or Acts “carry no conviction” (398).

Having examined Paul’s thoughts on the nature of resurrection, Wright then looks carefully at resurrection traditions in three categories: (1) Gospel traditions outside the Easter narratives; (2) other New Testament writings; and (3) noncanonical early Christian texts. References by the Evangelists to resurrection provide enough data to suggest that a later theology is not present. For example, Jesus’ use of the violent metaphors of amputation in Mark 9:43–48 suggests there is a bodily continuity between this life and the next. Thus, the implications for bodily resurrection are in place before we arrive at the resurrection narratives. Wright demonstrates that whether we look in the Synoptics, Mark, or Q, we find bodily resurrection. If Jesus’ resurrection is not mentioned, such as in Q, the bodily resurrection of believers is.

While several other New Testament writings mention resurrection, its nature is not always clear. Wright attempts to examine most of the biblical passages relating to the subject and provides exegesis for several of the more difficult ones, such as 1 Pet 3:18. He either links the passages to bodily resurrection or neutralizes an interpretation that suggests the author viewed resurrection as an ethereal existence.

He then discusses the noncanonical early Christian texts through the third century. Several of the earliest texts, such as *2 Clement* and Ignatius, clearly hold to a bodily

resurrection, while later texts such as the *Epistle to Diognetus* have a Platonic flavor. Wright acknowledges the possibility that the earlier texts may have used their writings as a polemic against Gnostics and Docetics. Notwithstanding, the line of tradition holding to bodily resurrection continues with little exception from Paul to Origen. This is not to say contrary views were absent. From Paul's exposition on the resurrection in 1 Cor 15 and Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* to the Thomas literature and Nag Hammadi texts, we see clearly that the bodily resurrection view faced opposition. Nevertheless, the point is that the concept of bodily resurrection within the church was early, primary, and not the result of theological invention that occurred over time.

Having concluded that the early Christian (apostolic) view of resurrection was a thoroughly Jewish strand, Wright proceeds to the resurrection narratives. Before arriving there, he pauses for a moment to note the early Christian view of Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Since by the time of Paul's writings, the terms "Christ" and "Lord" applied to Jesus had almost become proper names, these titles must have been assigned to him quite early. Even the explicit connection of Jesus as YHWH by Paul is noted. This is very surprising, given he had been crucified so recently in what would have appeared to everyone as a decisive defeat. What would account for this high view of Jesus as Messiah and Lord of the universe found so early after his apparent defeat? The answer of the early Christians was: because Jesus was bodily raised from the dead, a sign of his vindication. To this Wright comments that the historian must acknowledge that this belief would produce the result. But what caused this belief? Wright tackles this in his final section. But before he gets there he returns to the resurrection narratives.

He concludes that we cannot say much regarding the sources behind the resurrection narratives. Certainly oral tradition existed, since even Paul claimed this in 1 Cor 15:3. Several striking anomalies appear when the tradition is regarded as late. For example, the absence of future hope stated in relation to Jesus' resurrection is odd, since severe persecution occurred in the last quarter of the first century. He concludes that the stories behind the narratives must be regarded as early, "certainly well before Paul" (614). Concerning puzzling accounts in the narratives, Wright is prepared to take an agnostic position on some rather than settle for "probable historicity or a cheap and cheerful rationalistic dismissal of the possibility" (636). However, a core of early tradition exists, retold by each Evangelist to facilitate the ending of his Gospel. While certain details are up for debate, the core tradition remained untouched. Accordingly, we may conclude that the Evangelists, using primitive tradition behind the resurrection narratives, "believed that they were writing about events that actually took place" (680).

Having answered the question regarding what early Christians believed had happened to Jesus subsequent to his death, Wright now inquires into the plausibility of those beliefs in

the book's final section. Two data that he regards as historically certain are the empty tomb and the "meetings." Taken together, they are logically *sufficient* for explaining the early Christian belief that Jesus rose. In other words, this belief will certainly result given the empty tomb and appearances. But Wright believes we can go further and conclude that these two data are also logically *necessary* in order to bring about belief in Jesus' resurrection in the early Christians. In other words, the empty tomb and appearances are the only things that could bring about this belief in these people. He adds that this conclusion is strengthened by the fact that, given two thousand years of efforts, no single naturalistic theory or combination of them is logically *sufficient* for accounting for them. But what caused the empty tomb and appearances? Is the early Christian explanation that Jesus had risen the best explanation? Wright concludes that Jesus' resurrection is likewise both *sufficient* and *necessary* in order to bring about the combination of these data.

The volume finishes with a chapter on what the event of Jesus' resurrection meant to early believers. From their writings, especially Paul's, we find that Jesus' resurrection meant he was Messiah, the offspring of divinity who is the absolute sovereign, and the personal revelation of the one true God. "The resurrection, in the full Jewish and early Christian sense, is the ultimate affirmation that creation matters, that embodied human beings matter" (730).

A few criticisms of the book are in order. On a positive side, this volume is an enjoyable read, peppered with Wright's wit. The breadth and depth of his research is impressive. He is well-acquainted with scholarship on the subject, and his exegesis of Paul is especially strong and compelling. Carefully written and painfully thorough, this book is, and will continue to be for some time, one of the premier treatments on the topic of Jesus' resurrection.

On a negative side, Wright seems to make a few conclusions that, although merited, may not be as strong as he thinks. For example, he claims that when *resurrection* is used metaphorically outside the New Testament in the first century and before, it always refers to a concrete referent. Based on this observation, he seems to conclude that it cannot be otherwise in the New Testament. What he fails to address is that paradigm shifts occur, and we see such shifts occurring in the first-century Christian community. For example, Paul's messianic expectation at the point of his conversion experience did not include a dying Messiah, although it later became the center of his teaching. Moreover, Paul's Jewish ideas about the coming kingdom of God now include a present manifestation inaugurated by Jesus. If such radical changes can occur in his understanding of the Messiah and God's kingdom, is his concept of postmortem existence exempt?

Wright also notes a few exceptions to the strong patterns he discovers. He finds a few rare examples in antiquity where some believed a person rose bodily from the dead. However, the risen was to die again and correlates more with Lazarus than Jesus. Thus, it is resuscitation, not resurrection. Moreover, one or two exceptions do not nullify the general trend. True enough on both accounts. But he then goes on to conclude that bodily resurrection *never* was thought to occur. He avoids technically overstating this conclusion with the caveat that the early Christian definition of bodily resurrection included the concept of being “transphysical,” meaning the same body but significantly different. Granting the certain difference between resuscitation and resurrection, are the concepts so different that the conceptual chasm could not be crossed with just a little imagination? If one believes the chasm is crossable without much effort, the exceptions carry more weight even though Wright is correct to note that a couple of rare exceptions do not make a tradition.

Although some of his arguments are more robust than others, this should not dissuade one from the ultimate conclusions Wright draws. He presents a number of strong arguments that may very well seal the matter in favor of his conclusions. What happened on Easter morning? According to Wright, Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead is required in order to account for the historically certain facts we possess pertaining to the alleged event.