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## Easter in Durham?<sup>1</sup>

### N T Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God*<sup>2</sup>

**Steve Walton offers this extended review of N T Wright's important book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. The book has two main aims: to reassert that the authors of the New Testament believed that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead and to clarify the same authors' understanding of resurrection for those who believe in Jesus. Wright examines the writings of St Paul, especially in the letters to the Corinthians, and of the gospel writers. Although the length of the book might be daunting for most readers, lay or ordained, it is well written and will clarify thinking about resurrection in both academy and church.**

'What is it about Bishops of Durham and the resurrection?' would be one reaction you could have to this important, massive and scholarly book – but that would be to fail to realise that this project was gestating in Tom Wright's fertile mind long before he was approached to fill the See of Durham (and might also be a bit unfair on Wright's immediate predecessor, whose major contribution to the wider church seems to have been organisational – the creation of the Archbishops' Council – rather than theological). This book began life, as Wright explains, as a final chapter for *Jesus and the Victory of God* (hereafter *JVG*; the previous member of this series), which Wright had hoped to fit into 70 pages or so. However, he found that the arguments were so complex and important – and controversial – that they needed more space: hence this book.

This – I repeat – important book is a major contribution both to NT scholarship and to the church's understanding of the resurrection of Jesus and its implications for the believing community and deserves wide study. I rather fear it will not receive that because of its length (although 80 of the 817 pages are taken up with abbreviations, bibliography and indices) – and that would be a pity, for Wright writes accessibly, engagingly, wittily and beautifully, both in the book's overall organisation and in his choice and phrasing of excellent illustrations and metaphors.

1 The allusion is to Murray J. Harris, *Easter in Durham: Bishop Jenkins and the Resurrection of Jesus* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1985), a response to an earlier Bishop of Durham's writings on the resurrection of Jesus.

2 N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3, SPCK, London 2003, xxi + 817 pp; £50 (hb) £35 (pb); ISBN 0 281 05551 3 (hb) 0 281 05550 5 (pb).

So what is Tom Wright saying? His two main thrusts can be summarised briefly, after which we shall survey the book's overall shape before going through chapter by chapter, engaging with his arguments.

Wright has two important (and very different) major targets. First, he is endeavouring to turn the tide of NT scholarship, which has for several generations denied that the NT authors (and Paul in particular) believed that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead. Rather, most have argued that Jesus was raised 'spiritually', so that the stories of the resurrection of Jesus were the disciples' way of saying that they continued to experience Jesus after he died. In place of this he offers a robust argument both that the early Christians universally believed that Jesus rose bodily from the dead and was seen by his followers, and that the historicity of the bodily resurrection of Jesus is the best historical explanation of the evidence.

Second, Wright is seeking to clarify the NT authors' understanding of 'resurrection' for those who believe in Jesus. This part of the argument tackles the view, when expressed at a popular level, that 'John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching on' – in other words, the common belief that Christian hope consists of 'going to heaven when you die' (a view which Wright rejects vigorously). In place of this view which is akin to Greek philosophy which separates body and 'soul' (whatever that means), Wright places a Hebrew view of the unity of human beings and the covenant commitment of God to his good creation. These twin themes mean that God's purpose is to renew the universe and bring his people to live in new bodies on a renewed earth.

### The shape of the argument

Wright's overall argument has five parts. In the first (chs 1-4, pp 1-206), after a key methodological discussion, he sets the scene of how death and 'resurrection' were understood in the ancient world. Wright sets out his approach in ch. 1, notably in clarifying the view in NT scholarship which he aims to dismantle. This view has six main features (p 7): (i) in a Jewish setting 'resurrection' was a 'fuzzy' category which could mean different things; (ii) Paul believed in a 'spiritual' resurrection; (iii) the earliest Christians believed that Jesus had been exalted to heaven and they used 'resurrection' language to speak of this, only later using that language to speak of the empty tomb or Jesus' appearances; (iv) the Gospel resurrection stories are late, invented to support this later belief; (v) the appearances of Jesus were subjective religious experiences rather than objective events; (vi) the body of Jesus remained dead.

The first chapter includes his very important definition of 'resurrection' (31, italics his):

...there is no difference between pagans, Jews and Christians. They all understood the Greek word *anastasis* and its cognates, and the other related terms we shall meet, to mean...new life after a period of being dead. Pagans denied this possibility; some Jews affirmed it as a long-term future hope; virtually all Christians claimed that it had happened to Jesus and would happen to them in the future. All of them were speaking of a new life *after* 'life after death' in the popular sense, a fresh living embodiment *following* a period of

death-as-a-state (during which one might or might not be 'alive' in some other, non-bodily fashion. Nobody (except the Christians, in respect of Jesus) thought that this had already happened, even in isolated cases.

Following on are three key chapters in which Wright presents the evidence from the pagan, OT and post-biblical Jewish sources for this claim.

In part II (chs 5-8, pp 207-398) the focus turns to Paul, our earliest witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Wright first works carefully through the Pauline letters (excluding 1 and 2 Corinthians), in what he understands to be chronological order, discussing key passages. He then turns his focus onto the Corinthian letters and discusses the overall shape of the argument of the letters, while setting aside the most important passages (1 Cor. 15; 2 Cor. 4:7-5:10) for a separate chapter (ch. 7). He then (ch. 8) turns to Paul's Damascus Road experience as recounted in his letters and Acts, to consider what Paul says happened to him there. The shape of this section is wise, working from the less controversial texts to the most controversial, so that the overall shape of Paul's resurrection beliefs become clear before attempting to expound 1 Cor. 15 and 2 Cor. 4:7-5:10, which have been the texts to which many have turned first to argue for a 'spiritual' view of resurrection.

Part III (chs 9-12, pp 399-583) looks wider in the early Christian writings, although setting the Gospel resurrection narratives aside for later study, surveying the rest of the NT (chs 9-10), the Fathers through to the early third century, early Syriac Christianity and the Nag Hammadi writings (ch. 11). The argument of this part is drawn together in a splendid discussion of the status of Jesus as Messiah and Lord as a result of the resurrection (ch. 12).

Part IV (chs 13-17, pp 585-682) finally turns to the resurrection narratives in the Gospels. Wright has deliberately left these to the end, since they have special issues associated with them. After a good general survey of issues in the resurrection narratives (ch. 13), he studies each of the canonical Gospels in turn (chs 14-17), offering many helpful insights and clarifications, as well as advancing his overall argument that the early Christians believed Jesus to have been raised bodily from the dead.

Finally, part V (chs 18-19, pp 683-738) turns to the questions of what actually happened at Easter, having established what the early Christians believed to have happened. Here Wright presents a clear and cogent argument for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus as the only plausible *historical* explanation of the evidence (ch. 18). He then goes on to explore what this might mean for Jesus' status, as far as the early Christians were concerned, as 'Son of God' (ch. 19).

The book concludes with a list of abbreviations, a bibliography of works cited, and useful indices of ancient sources, modern authors and selected topics (which mean that I shall find it easy to refer to key discussions in this book in future).

### Edited highlights

The overall sweep of the book's argument means that it is impossible to engage with most of Wright's presentation – let alone everything! What follows is a guided

tour of the book, stopping to look more closely at some of the key sights along the way.

### Methods and contexts

Methodologically, Wright defines 'history' carefully, since it is frequently defined in scholarship to exclude the very possibility of resurrection, using a five-fold analysis of history as event, significant event, provable events, writing about past events, and what modern historians can say about the past (pp 12-14). He robustly critiques the views that we either cannot or should not study the resurrection historically, and goes on to consider how to study the topic. His approach is to map early Christian beliefs within the wider world of second-temple Judaism, after mapping this Judaism within the wider world of pagan beliefs in the Graeco-Roman world of the period. At this point he carefully defines 'resurrection' (see the quotation above), so that we are clear what we are discussing.

The discussion of the ancient pagan sources (ch. 3) is fascinating, tracking the questions people ask, the praxis they embrace, the symbols they use, and the stories they tell (readers of earlier books will recognise these as Wright's worldview questions). For many readers this material will be too detailed, and they may want to turn to the convenient summary (pp 81-4), which highlights that, while there was a variety of views, no-one in ancient paganism expected or believed in re-embodiment, since for most (under the influence of Plato), the body was an encumbrance from which to escape. This applied in particular to those who were divinised, such as emperors. Thus the early Christian claim of Jesus' resurrection would have been regarded as impossible, since the ancients knew that dead people do not rise (and this is hardly a modern 'scientific' discovery, as we might believe from some NT scholarship!).

It is the scholarly mainstream view that resurrection appears as a late belief in the OT, and Wright considers the texts carefully (ch. 3), showing the development from belief in Sheol to the explicit 'resurrection' belief of Dan. 12:2f. He argues that the Psalms, especially 16, 22, 49, 104 and 73, do more than hint at a future hope. He further sees the roots of the explicit Danielic hope in Isaiah Hosea and Ezekiel (noting that 'resurrection' is used in Ezek. 37 as a metaphor for national renewal and return from Babylonian exile). The root of the development of belief in resurrection, he argues, is the faithfulness of YHWH as creator and covenant-maker. The content of the later OT belief is the expectation that YHWH will renew the earth and raise his people bodily to new life – life *after* 'life after death'.

Wright then (ch. 4) carefully takes us through the post-biblical Jewish texts for the last two centuries BC and the first two AD, a rich and diverse set of sources, stretching from the Septuagint through Josephus to the Mishnah. Wright finds that 'resurrection' consistently means that those now dead will be alive again in a bodily form in the future; specifically, 'resurrection' was not a way of putting a positive 'spin' on death, to say that it wasn't so bad after all, but was rather the reversal of death. Thus the Sadducees rejected this belief, whereas the Pharisees (who seem to have reflected the mainstream Jewish view) held to it. The Jewish literature offers a view of an 'intermediate state' before resurrection, being held safe in the

hand of YHWH, but awaiting re-embodiment in the age to come. However, there was no expectation of an individual being raised from death prior to the general resurrection, not even the prophets or a Messiah figure.

### Paul

It is when Wright turns to Paul that many readers will feel on more familiar territory, and the quality and depth of his discussions here reflect his scholarly engagement with Paul over many years. He approaches Paul seeking to map where Paul stands in relation to the pagan and Jewish views he has outlined, and specifically what Paul believed about the resurrection of Jesus. Key passages for his argument that 'resurrection' means re-embodiment include 1 Thess. 4:13–5:11 and Phil. 3:21 – the latter especially demonstrating that believers will share future rule over a transformed world with their Messiah, having been re-embodied through the creative power of God. This belief has political implications, for it relativises the power of Caesar as subordinate to the rule of Jesus, who as Messiah is the world's true king, and frees Christians from the fear of death which might otherwise have held them in subjugation. When Wright turns to Romans (pp 241-67) he persuasively demonstrates that 'Romans is suffused with resurrection' (p 241), to an extent that I for one had not noticed previously. This section is one to which I shall certainly return for its fresh insights into the letter.

His summary of the Pauline material thus far (pp 271-6) shows that 'resurrection' is used in three ways: (i) for the bodily resurrection of Jesus; (ii) for the future bodily resurrection of believers; (iii) metaphorically for present Christian living. Paul's views, he emphasises, are thoroughly Jewish, with the important modification that the resurrection of Jesus has now split Jewish expectations of resurrection into two moments – one now past (Easter) and the other future (the resurrection of believers at the last day).

The central part of the discussion of Paul must be, of course, the Corinthian letters (chs 6-7) and here Wright excels. He offers an excellent overall reading of 1 Corinthians (pp 278-97) focusing on particular issues about resurrection as they appear in the text; this reading of the letter would benefit anyone wishing to understand 1 Corinthians enormously. (The ability to offer the 'big picture' overview of a letter or topic, preparing the way for handling the detail, is one of the great strengths of Wright's writing, both here and elsewhere.) Against Thiselton, Wright argues that the problem in Corinth was not an 'over-realised' eschatology, but rather (with Hays) that the Corinthian believers did not think eschatologically *enough*. Rather they had blended paganism and Christianity in a way that enabled them to see themselves as 'kings' in line with popularised Stoic beliefs which granted this status to those who truly understand the world and themselves. This approach makes good sense of numerous passages in the letter, not least Paul's regular urging of the Corinthians to live in the present in the light of the future events which are guaranteed by the past gospel events. The discussion of 2 Corinthians is similarly illuminating.

So we turn to the two key passages, 1 Cor. 15 and 2 Cor. 4:7–5:10. Wright outlines the argument of 1 Cor. 15 lucidly, seeing it as having a kind of chiasmic

structure, with the introduction (vv 1-11) balancing the conclusion (vv 50-8) and the key question being answered in two parts (vv 12-28, 35-49) with a practical interlude in the middle spelling out the implications of not believing this teaching (vv 29-34). He discusses vv 1-11 carefully, for this is our earliest explicit testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. He argues that the emptiness of the tomb is implicit in the statements that 'he was buried...he was raised', for (as he has argued in earlier discussions of Paul in this book) Paul is a Jew who holds thoroughly Jewish views of what is meant by claiming a person to be raised from the dead. Jesus, by his resurrection, has been declared to be Messiah and Lord (vv 20-28) and the world is now a different place – people can be transformed here and now because of the resurrection of Jesus (vv 12-19). The problem from which people need to be freed, according to Paul here, is not their bodies (*contra* the pagan world), but sin and death which are occupying powers which have taken over human bodies. Thus (v 44) the *soma psychikon* (which Wright prefers to translate 'ordinary human life' to avoid the misleading contrast between 'natural' and 'spiritual' body found in NRSV, for example) is to be superseded in believers by *soma pneumatikon*, that is, life animated by the Holy Spirit. Paul is located, thus, firmly in the Pharisaic camp in his understanding of resurrection, in looking forward to a future re-embodiment of believers at the end of history, based on the resurrection of one person, Jesus, in the middle of history.

Wright's discussion of 2 Cor. 4:7–5:10 adds a little more to this, showing that it is mistaken to read these verses as implying a purely 'spiritual' future resurrection. Part of Wright's reason for this is that it is inconsistent with what he has found in Paul elsewhere (and particularly with Romans, written not long after 2 Corinthians), but also because of the language of being 'further clothed' (5:4), which speaks of the renewed body given in the resurrection to believers. The fact that this body is 'in the heavens' (5:1) is simply speaking about the present 'storage' place while waiting for the age to come (Wright has a wonderful analogy involving drinking champagne here! p 368). Certainly there is a shift in *perspective* from 1 Corinthians to 2 Corinthians, Wright says, for Paul is now reckoning with the possibility that he will die before the new age arrives fully, but it involves no shift in *understanding*.

Thus Wright turns to Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, considering first the mentions in Paul's letters and then the three Acts accounts. Wright is concerned here to argue that Paul's experience is not simply subjective experience, but that the descriptions refer to events external to Paul (esp. 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8-11), notably that Paul believed the Jesus he met to have a renewed, but physical, body. He goes on to consider the implications of the Damascus Road experience for Paul's Christology, along the way engaging sympathetically with Seyoon Kim's influential arguments that Paul's theology can be traced to this experience, while disagreeing with Kim about the focus of the experience – Wright sees it as centred on understanding Jesus to be Messiah (and sees Rom. 1:3-4 as pointing that way), Kim as centred on seeing Jesus in the light of Adam-Christology and in terms of the Danielic 'son of man'. The implication for Paul of Jesus being vindicated as Messiah by his resurrection (says Wright) is that he is Israel's true representative, that the age to come has begun and that, in the light of Ps. 2; Dan. 7 and other passages, Jesus is now Lord of the world (cf. Phil. 2:6-11).

### Early Christianity apart from Paul

Wright next considers 'resurrection' in the other NT writings (apart from the Gospel resurrection narratives), plus a variety of other early Christian writings. His study of the Gospels (ch. 9) is illuminating, not least for his important observation that we lack evidence that the early Christians invented material now found in the Gospels about the resurrection – for there is so little such material. He organises this discussion around the 'two source' view of Gospel sources, focusing first on stories found in Mark and paralleled in Matthew and Luke (the so-called triple tradition), then on those found in Matthew and Luke alone (so-called double tradition or 'Q', although Wright is rather sceptical about whether a written source of this kind existed), material peculiar to Matthew, Luke and John.

Along the way, Wright reasserts his view of Jesus' answer to the high priest (Mark 14:62 and parallels, pp 411f), where Jesus identifies himself with the 'son of man' of Dan. 7:13-14, that this saying is about vindication rather than a 'second coming', since in Dan. 7 the 'son of man' goes to *God* (rather than coming from God to earth) on the clouds and is given authority. Developing this point from *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Wright notes that the resurrection is the primary vindication of Jesus. In my review of *JVG*,<sup>3</sup> I raised the issue that the vindication of Jesus seems to be his resurrection in the NT, rather than the fall of Jerusalem (as Wright then seemed to be asserting) – does this section mark a shift in Wright's understanding?

In discussion of the triple tradition material, Wright's consideration of Jesus' response to the Sadducees' question (Mark 12:18-27 and parallels, pp 415-29) is particularly important, for, read through the lens of a traditional 'going to heaven when you die' view, this story can be (and has been) read as reinforcing that grid of understanding and turning Christian hope into Platonism. Against this, Wright observes that 'heaven' does not mean 'the place where you go when you die' in the first century AD – rather, 'heaven' was God's dimension of reality (as we might say), and the debate between the Sadducees and the Pharisees was about whether there would be a final re-embodiment of believers, and what believers did after death until that happened. Thus, Jesus speaks about the children of the resurrection being '*like* angels', not actually *being* angels. Jesus' argument about God being God of the living because he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has regularly been understood to be asserting that, since Moses in the Pentateuch asserts that they are still alive, the life they have must be what is meant by 'resurrection' – a 'spiritual' life. No, Wright insists, this could not have been what a first-century Jew of any complexion meant by 'resurrection', referring back to his earlier discussion.

A fine summary (pp 476-9) pulls together what Wright has found in the NT, noting five key points: (i) resurrection is central to early Christianity in a way that was not true in Judaism; (ii) the early Christians were united in their view of death and resurrection, in spite of their having come to faith in Jesus from a wide variety of backgrounds of belief concerning death and the hereafter; (iii) the resurrection has been split into two: first the resurrection of Jesus and then that of his people, who will receive new bodies which will be incapable of death or decay; (iv) certain biblical texts are consistently used (and others, including Dan. 12:2-3, not used)

<sup>3</sup> *Anvil* 16.4 (1999), pp 281-91, esp. 290.

to express the meaning of what happened to Jesus; (v) the metaphorical use of 'resurrection' found in Ezek. 37 and the like, for the renewal and return of the nation from exile, has been replaced by a metaphorical use focused on baptism, holiness and Christian witness.

What, then of early Christianity outside the NT? Wright studies this in some detail (ch. 11), taking us through the Apostolic Fathers, early Christian apocryphal writings, the second-century apologists (Justin Martyr *et al.*), the great theologians of the late second and early third centuries (Tertullian, Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Origen); early Syriac Christianity (represented by the *Odes of Solomon*, Tatian and the *Acts of Thomas*), and into the Nag Hammadi texts. It is with the Syriac *Acts of Thomas* that the Rubicon is crossed into a 'spiritual' view of resurrection as disembodiment, a view which owes more to Platonism and Gnosticism than Judaism and the NT. The *Gospel of Thomas* and the Nag Hammadi texts move further in this direction by radically reinterpreting or flatly denying 'resurrection' in the sense consistently found in the NT witness. It is notable that in this chapter the footnoting changes character a little, with less secondary literature being referred to and fuller primary source references, illustrating both that Wright is here working outside his more usual area of expertise and that there is rather less secondary literature on many of these texts.

The key question which follows from this broad sweep of understanding found across the NT and earliest Christian witnesses is: what does his resurrection imply about Jesus himself? Wright's discussion argues that the resurrection demonstrates that Jesus is Messiah, but he is bursting the bounds of Jewish expectation of messiahship and thus redefining it radically – for no Jew expected a crucified Messiah. A bodily resurrection, however, would demonstrate that a crucified one could be Messiah, for his resurrection would be God's vindication of him. More than this, Wright goes on to argue that Jesus, as Messiah, is the world's true Lord – a belief rooted in the Psalms and Dan. 7:13f rather than being a hellenisation of the Jewish concept of Messiah (as is frequently claimed), and a belief which connected intimately with the teaching of Jesus on God's reign (or kingdom). But if Jesus is now the world's true Lord, it follows that others are not, including Caesar, and thus belief in the resurrection of Jesus is politically subversive. Further, Jesus is being understood in early Christianity as 'Lord' in the same that YHWH is Lord (notably in Phil. 2:10; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15-20; Rom. 10:13; John 20; 1 Pet. 2:3; 3:15) – a key link with recent work by (among others) Hurtado and Bauckham arguing that the earliest Christians rapidly began to speak of and worship Jesus alongside Yahweh as 'God'.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 12 closes with a splendid summary of the place of resurrection in the early Christian worldview, answering Wright's worldview questions. In praxis, the early Christians lived as those who were in important senses already living in the new age, celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus (and, we might add, the

4 Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2003; Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*, Didsbury Lectures 1996, Paternoster Press, Carlisle 1998.

gift of the Spirit consequent on the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus – a point curiously absent here) as the events which inaugurated this new age through baptism and eucharist, and worship together on Sundays – a change from the Jewish sabbath-worship. The early Christians' symbolic world focus on Jesus himself as Messiah and Lord who was to be worshipped. The ICHTHUS (fish) so beloved of some Christians today was a potent symbol of the centrality of Jesus. The stories told by early believers were centred on Jesus and his death and resurrection, themselves a re-telling of the Jewish stories of exodus and return from exile (yes, that does get in here, having been one of Wright's central categories in *JVG*). In terms of the key questions, the early Christians saw themselves as resurrection people, formed by the events of Easter and the gift of the Spirit (which does get mentioned here); as those living in God's good creation which looks forward to restoration and renewal; as those in a world in pain, for the final defeat of sin and death is yet to come; as those experiencing God's solution to the world's pain and looking forward to its final fulfilment at the reappearance of Jesus (yes, Wright *does* believe in the 'second coming') to renew the earth. And the time we now live in? It is the overlap of this age and the age to come. Throughout, the future hope is sustained by the past events of Good Friday and Easter – the confidence early believers had in God's future action is based on his power exercised in raising Jesus from the dead. This chapter presents a vision of the implications of the resurrection which would transform any who grasp it, and on its own would justify the purchase of the book.

### So what about the Gospels?

Finally, we come to the Gospel resurrection narratives. In a sensible discussion of where the evangelists found the stories, Wright argues that it is hard to establish any dependence between those found in the four canonical Gospels. He further (rightly) criticises Crossan's view that an earlier edition of the Gospel of Peter was the source of much of the canonical material (offering eight cogent points of critique to Crossan, pp 594f). He is also pessimistic about form or redaction criticism offering much help, on the ground that there is no sign of the issues and situation of the churches of the 40s to 60s in the origins of these stories. There are, Wright observes interestingly, some rather surprising features of the resurrection narratives: they lack much reference to (OT) Scripture, by contrast with the remainder of the Gospels; they lack the implication that the resurrection of Jesus guarantees future personal hope of 'life after death' for believers – rather, they commission believers to this-worldly activity in mission; they present a rather unusual (to say the least) body of Jesus, which can enter locked rooms, hide its identity at times, and yet also eat with the disciples; and they focus on women as primary witnesses, whose testimony would not stand up in a first-century court. These features lead Wright to conclude that no-one inventing these stories would have invented them like this, so strange and lacking in smoothing and consistency. Thus Wright regards the Gospel narratives as early, originating well before Paul, and argues that they tell a basically consistent story amidst 'multiple surface inconsistencies' (p 614).

Mark's account provides a text-critical conundrum: where did the original Gospel end? Wright follows the consensus in seeing the end as being 16:8a and

regarding both the 'short' and 'long' endings (respectively 16:8b and 16:9-20) as secondary. However, he believes that Mark intended to write further, but stops short of speculation as to why he did not (or why his original ending was removed). He argues against the view, popular in some quarters, that Mark ends deliberately at 16:8a in order to leave things 'open', by highlighting the way the story of 16:1-8a works as a story (using Greimas' actantial analysis, introduced in *The NT and the People of God*).

Matthew has his own strange features, of course, not least the resurrection of the saints (27:52-3), which Wright sees as 'a strange semi-anticipation' of the general resurrection which is yet to come (p 635) and appears to hedge his bets on whether Matthew is describing an actual event. The story of the bribery of the guards to say that the disciples stole the body (28:11-15) makes sense, Wright notes, in a situation where the empty tomb is taken for granted and requires explanation – thus critiquing Bultmann's view that the early Christians used 'resurrection' language to speak of Jesus' exaltation to heaven and then later other Christians (who did not understand how this language was being used) made up stories to undergird the discovery of an empty tomb (supported by women as witnesses!).

Luke's presentation in Luke 24 and Acts 1 is handled well. In particular, Wright notices a (rare) biblical allusion to Gen. 3:7 – 'and their eyes were opened' is echoed in Luke 24:31, where Cleopas and friend recognise Jesus. The task of the church, in the light of the resurrection, is to go out and proclaim Jesus as the world's rightful Lord (Acts 1:8).

On John, Wright offers fresh and thoughtful insights (at least, fresh to me), notably in identifying that John's story sequence of 'signs' highlights Easter as the first day of a new week, as the first day of the new creation (pp 440, 668-9). While John certainly offers a theological reading of the stories, it matters for John that Jesus rose bodily from the dead, for John thinks incarnationally – the living God is present in the physical flesh of Jesus. Wright expounds seven themes linking John 20 to the rest of the Gospel: the signs, faith, the Spirit, the restored temple, the understanding of Jesus himself, the motif of Jesus being 'glorified' or 'lifted up', and love (pp 668-74). John 21 Wright sees rather differently, judging that it appears to be an 'appendix' to the Gospel, which is essentially complete at 20:31 (although he is not sure whether the appendix was added by John or by another person). He rightly dismisses the idea that the story in John 21 is told to assert the primacy of Peter over John among the apostles, for there were much clearer ways to do that than this story – Jesus' conversation with Peter is about 'penitence, not primacy' (p 678).

Looking back on Wright's discussion of the Gospel resurrection stories, it is easy to see why he places them where he does, for to read them in the light of the picture of resurrection which emerges from Paul and other NT authors shows that it makes most sense to read them as understanding resurrection as a *bodily* event. It also allows him to undermine the view that these stories were invented at a later date when Christians had begun to misunderstand 'resurrection' language (which originally meant 'spiritually') to mean bodily resurrection. It would be hard to read Wright's study at this point as anything but helpful in (for example)

preaching on the resurrection stories at Easter. (*En passant*, I note that the implication of the preponderance of all-age services on Easter Day is that few adults hear a sermon about Easter which engages with them as adults – and thus their 'resurrection faith' is likely to remain under-developed, to put it no stronger.)

### So what?

Finally, Wright addresses the question of history: did the resurrection of Jesus *happen* in any sense which historians can discuss? He provides a careful analysis of necessary and sufficient conditions for a conclusion here in preparation for arguing that it was the combination of the empty tomb and the appearances which generated resurrection belief, and that neither alone could have done that. He then turns to critique alternative explanations, focusing on two.

First, he responds to Festinger's influential 'cognitive dissonance' theory, which was applied to propose that Jesus' followers were trying to hold together their knowledge that Jesus was dead with their belief (derived from their experience of Jesus' ministry) that God was acting to save the world in and through Jesus – and that the resurrection faith was the product of this, sustained by a community who shared this combination of knowledge. Wright responds that, whatever the early Christians were expecting, it was not what they described as happening at Easter. Wright points to other second temple messianic groups, who responded to the death of their founder by either disbanding or by finding another Messiah, rather than by responding in the way which Festinger's theory suggests the early Christians did.

Second, he engages with Schillebeeckx's view that the early Christians had a new experience of God's grace and forgiveness, an experience which had nothing to do with an empty tomb or appearances of Jesus. This growing sense of divine presence eventually generated stories to describe it which no-one in the early churches understood to be describing events which actually took place in history. Wright criticises this view on the basis of his analysis of Judaism (chs 3-4), for Schillebeeckx has failed to see the uniformity of belief there concerning the nature of 'resurrection' – no first-century Jew would have used the term to mean what Schillebeeckx says they meant. Equally, Schillebeeckx claims that it was only those who already believed who experienced the 'risen' Jesus, and this is manifestly false – James the brother of Jesus is the obvious counterexample (1 Cor. 15:7). Further, Schillebeeckx has no real explanation of *how* the disciples came to this new experience of grace and forgiveness – he has simply moved the problem back one stage in an attempt to by-pass the early Christians' own explanation.

A final, important, section to ch. 18 draws out the implication that the resurrection, if true, is not merely historical data, but 'self-involving' – it has results and challenges for those who live now (as, indeed, does the opposite view, as Wright notes). For if Jesus was raised from the dead, then we cannot live now without taking cognisance of that, and (as Wright unpacks) this includes its implications for our intellectual lives as well as our love for and moral obedience to the risen Jesus.

The last chapter explores what it might mean for a first-century person to come to believe that Jesus, raised from the dead, was 'the Son of God'. In a tightly-packed

argument, Wright identifies three levels of meaning of 'the Son of God': (i) the resurrection demonstrated in a Jewish setting that Jesus was Messiah through whom God was accomplishing his covenant purpose to deal with the infection of sin and death; (ii) to call Jesus 'the Son of God' challenged Caesar's claim to world rulership using that title and identified Jesus as the world's true ruler; (iii) the resurrection placed Jesus alongside Yahweh as the one sent by the one true God as 'the very embodiment of his love' and that Jesus had been so before the resurrection too. In the course of the latter point Wright astutely observes that the resurrection focuses a definition of what the early Christians meant by 'god' – for to ask the question 'Was Jesus God' presupposes that we know what is meant by 'God'.

### Assessment

Let me say again: this is a very important book. I have greatly enjoyed reading it – all 700+ pages – which is itself a tribute to Wright's fine writing style as well as the compelling quality of the overall argument. The contribution of this book should now be clear, in responding to the two issues of the scholarly 'demythologisation' of the resurrection of Jesus and the popular Christian 'remythologisation' of the resurrection of believers. In their place Wright offers a solid, well-argued historical case for a robust belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and a clear presentation of early Christian belief that 'resurrection' for believers means 'life after "life after death"', to use Wright's own memorable phrase, on a renewed earth. Along the way the political implications of resurrection belief come clearly into focus, both in the first century and today, as Wright rightly rejects the Enlightenment-inspired split of 'religion' and 'politics' which is pervasive in the modern western world – not least among British politicians of all parties.

That said, this book is *long*: in places its argument feels a little repetitive, and I found myself thinking that it could have achieved most of the same purposes by being about 75% of the length. What we need Wright to do, amidst all the other things he does, is to provide us with the 150-page paperback which people in the churches will read and absorb, for most (including, alas, most clergy) will not even consider attempting this tome, to their loss. For *Anvil* readers who want to get the guts of the argument, this could be done by reading the conclusions of the chapters surveying Graeco-Roman and Jewish sources (chs 2–4), and then reading the material on Paul (chs 5–7), the superb ch. 12, which sums up NT belief about Jesus and his resurrection, ch. 13 on issues in the Gospel resurrection stories, and chs 18–19 on the implications. Then read the chapters on the Gospel resurrection narratives (chs 14–17) during Lent as wonderful preparation for Easter preaching.

One technical point which frustrated me frequently is Wright's transliteration system for Greek. For folk like me, who handle Greek texts most days, it isn't a problem that he fails to differentiate omicron and omega (using 'o' for both), and epsilon and eta (using 'e' for both), but for most who have a smattering of Greek, this will be at best confusing and at worst misleading. A specific example is p501n111, where the 'o' of *hagion* has to be an omega (indicating genitive plural) to make sense of the argument, but *hagion* with an omicron also exists in Greek (indicating accusative singular, as Wright will know). Is it really so hard to typeset

a bar (macron) above the letters when they denote the longer letter? This would certainly help my students – even those with some Greek – in reading Wright's books.

But overall, our reaction must be gratefulness to Wright for his endeavours in producing this book. It would be easy to dismiss it as 'apologetic' – as I am sure will happen in the academic world – but that would be to fail to engage with the cogent and persuasive discussions. I can think of few people who would not benefit from reading this book, at least in part; it deserves a very wide readership – and if it can turn the tide of loose thinking about 'resurrection' in the academy and the church, both for Jesus and his followers, Wright's labour will not have been in vain.

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