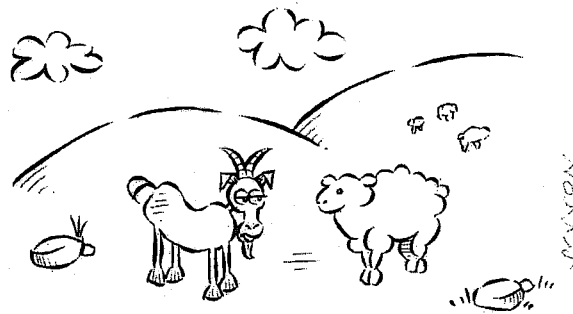




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FRANKLY, I FIND CERTAIN ELEMENTS OF
BIBLICAL IMAGERY SOMEWHAT DISTURBING.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE SON OF GOD



WALTER M. DUNNETT

THE RESURRECTION OF THE SON OF GOD

N. T. Wright

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In this present work from the prolific pen of N. T. Wright, we have volume 3 of the series *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, an attempt to answer the critical question: Did Jesus of Nazareth really rise bodily from the tomb? N. T. Wright, presently bishop of Durham (England), acknowledges the many and disparate responses over the years.

He points up two preliminary themes to be examined: (1) What historical task are we undertaking in talking about the resurrection at all? and (2) "How did people in Jesus' day, both Gentiles and Jews, speak about the dead and their future destiny?" Chapter 1 is a response to the former query; chapters 2-4 respond to the latter.

The necessary materials available to the reader are considered in a basic chronological order, beginning with the evidence from the pagan world and then continuing through the

Jewish and Christian data. Lest any reader feel overwhelmed at the prospect of reading through more than seven hundred pages of text, let me point up an initial aid to such trepidation. At the end of each major section, Wright adds a "conclusion" (usually just a few pages) to sum up the materials just expounded.

These summaries and their subject matter are as follows: ancient paganism (81–84); ancient Judaism (200–206); Paul's letters (271–76; 372–74); the Gospels (448–49); the rest of the New Testament (476–79); the second century AD (551–52); within the early Christian worldview (578–83); Easter from Mark's point of view (627–31); Matthew and the resurrection (645–46); Luke and the resurrection (660–61); and John and the resurrection (679–82). There is further help for the avid reader in an appended bibliography, first of primary sources (745–50) and then of secondary literature (751–79).

Wright begins with the world of ancient paganism. He distinguishes between the idea of "resurrection" and a "heavenly bliss"; that the former does not concern the "soul" but refers instead to some sort of "return to bodily and this-worldly life," and the latter is something not known or believed within the pagan world. Beginning with the writings of Homer, he traces through sundry Greek and Egyptian sources, in particular, and distinguishes between terminology that refers to an "after life" as opposed to the specific sense of bodily resurrection and existence.

In the Old Testament, says Wright, the hope of resurrection "makes rare appearances" (85). He cites, for example, W. Brueggemann, who writes of it as "only at the edge of the Old Testament." These rare appearances are found in the key examples in Daniel 12:2–3; also Isaiah 26:19; Hosea 6:1–2; 13:14; and Ezekiel 37:1–14. Resurrection, according to the Old Testament, is "what *will* happen to people who are at present dead, not what *has already* happened to them" (109).

Examining the world of post-biblical Judaism (chapter 4), Wright finds a variety of views, including those of the Pharisees and Sadducees and many intertestamental writings. He

cites some interesting passages from the Septuagint (LXX) that reverse the teachings of the Hebrew text. In contrast to Job 14:14, "If a man die, shall he live again?" the LXX reads, "If a man dies, he shall live"; again Job 19:26a, "after my skin has been thus destroyed," reads in the LXX, "God will resurrect my skin"; and in Job 42:17 the LXX adds, "It is written of him [Job] that he will rise again with those whom the Lord will raise." Following a discussion of the intertestamental writings, Wright concludes that there seem to be two basic meanings to "resurrection": (1) restoration of Israel (here in a metaphorical sense, denoting socio-political events); and (2) of human bodies (here in a literal sense, denoting actual re-embodiment). He describes the rabbinic explanations of the resurrection as describing it as not just about "life after death" but about a "new, embodied life *after* 'life after death.'"

If chapters 2–4 are made up of these contrasting and explanatory data, the shape of the remainder of Wright's investigations (chaps. 5–19) is determined by two questions: How do we account for both (1) the strong similarity between Christianity and Judaism and (2) the equally lucid contrasts? In chapters 5–12 two subordinate questions arise: (1) What were the early Christian affirmations about life and death? and (2) What metaphorical aspects did "resurrection" have (and how were they related) to current Judaism? Chapters 13–17 take up the canonical gospel records of the initial Easter. Wright likens them to the "trunk from which the branches themselves sprung"—not like the leaves on the branches of nascent Christianity.

About 190 pages are given to the theme as found in the Pauline correspondence, approximately one hundred of those to the crucial texts in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Wright sees as urgent the need to examine the (commonly asserted) idea that Paul believed and taught a "spiritual" view of the resurrection—making a body and an empty tomb irrelevant. Rather, Paul asserted that Jesus had been actually raised (by God), something "had actually happened." He was talking not about a spiritual experience or some kind of development; rather, he was affirming that God's love had been

expressed in a way never before apprehended. And the resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, is basic to all the teaching related to the resurrection of believers in Jesus.

After examining the Pauline teachings in detail, Wright concludes that the historical moment of the resurrection was divided into two parts: (1) the raising of the Messiah, then, at his *parousia* ("second coming"), (2) the raising of all his people. Further, the resurrection, more than being bodily, would also involve transformation—new bodies, fitted for the new age. Along with this understanding, Paul also employed resurrection terminology to picture specific, bodily events of the Christian life, e.g., especially baptism and holiness. (See especially 236–40 and 251–54 for his discussions of Colossians 1; Ephesians 1–3, and Romans 6, respectively.)

Wright goes on to analyze and discuss themes and texts in the gospels (outside of the Easter narratives), other New Testament writings, and in a wide variety of non-canonical Christian texts (chaps. 9–11). This is followed by a chapter on Jesus as Messiah and Lord (chap. 12), with a helpful discussion of the theme of "the Lord's Day."

Part IV is an incisive read on "the Story of Easter" (chapters 13–17). Along with general issues in the narratives of the Gospels, each of the four is examined in detail (616–82), indicating the particular items in each, yet drawing them together—not without attention to some of the (then) current and the present implications of these texts for the ongoing life of the church. The final chapters (18–19) include a historical and theological discussion of the theme of Easter and the meaning of the title "the Son of God." Wright indicates how the phrase "the resurrection of the Son of God" has three levels of meaning (725–36).

Any serious reader of this volume will be challenged to enlarge and deepen his/her understanding of its main theme, that Jesus Christ, once crucified and dead, was raised by the power of God his Father. But for you to appreciate more fully the thrust of this book, I want to remind any who may need a reminder, that this is the third volume in an elaborately-planned sequence. It would be very helpful to read *The New*

Testament and the People of God (Fortress Press, 1992) and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress Press, 1996), to discover how Wright has defined and developed the background and story of the life and ministry of the death of Jesus, now brought to a climax in the text of volume 3.

AUTHOR

The Rev. Dr. Walter Dunnett, retired professor of Bible and New Testament Greek, is currently assistant rector of St. Marks Episcopal Church, Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Among the books he has written are *The Book of Acts* (Baker, 1981); *The Interpretation of Holy Scripture* (Thomas Nelson, 1984); *New Testament Survey* (Revising Editor, Eerdmans, 1985), and *Exploring the New Testament* (Crossway, 2003), along with a number of articles in Bible and theological encyclopedias. He is a regular contributor to *ACT 3 Review*. Walter and his wife, Dolores, reside in Wheaton, Illinois.