

4-1-2005

Book review: Christian Origins And The Question Of God

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Recommended Citation

Craig, William Lane (2005) "Book review: Christian Origins And The Question Of God," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol22/iss2/8>

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Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 3: *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, by N. T. Wright. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. Pp. 817. \$49.00 (Cloth).

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The present work is Wright's third in his series of books on Christian origins, the sequel to *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992) and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996). It is cause for reflection that whereas John Meier, that other producer of prodigious tomes on the historical Jesus, refuses even to touch the topic of Jesus' resurrection, Wright has devoted over 800 pages to this subject alone. The result is one of the most impressive studies of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection published to date.

One of the most remarkable features of this large book is that it is almost exclusively dedicated to discussion of the primary sources alone. One would have expected so lengthy a study to be choking with references to the vast secondary literature on the resurrection and to involve itself in discussion with that literature. But, while he obviously knows that literature (the book includes a 29-page bibliography of such sources), Wright concentrates on discussing the primary source documents of ancient pagan, Jewish, Christian, and biblical literature that mention the subject of resurrection from the dead. By page 681 Wright can boast, "We have now surveyed the entire corpus of writing about Jesus and his resurrection in the first two centuries, setting it within the framework of beliefs about life after death in the ancient worlds of paganism and Judaism." The reader has realized long before then that were Wright to engage the secondary literature in the customary fashion, five more volumes of equal length would have been spawned. This preoccupation with primary sources leaves it largely to the reader to work out for himself what Wright would say to this or that contemporary scholar who does not share his views. But the advantage won for Wright is that this procedure makes Wright's book timeless, rather than tied to current fashion or scholarship. His study will remain a valuable sourcebook for future generations of students of the resurrection. After all, barring what Wright calls "a happy accident of archaeology" which yields new sources (such as discovery of what Wright regards as a lost ending to the Gospel of Mark), these will remain all the sources we have, so that if one's handling of them has been thorough and careful, one can ride out the shifting currents of scholarship.

One of the curiosities of the book is that Wright is constantly taking aim throughout it at those who construe the Christian hope of life after death in terms of the immortality of the soul rather than resurrection of the body. This is the reason for his strange locution that resurrection is "life after 'life after death'" (p. 30). I take this to mean that the Christian hope is that following a period of unembodied existence after death we shall experience re-embodiment in the resurrection. One would have thought that no such correction of popular misunderstanding would have been necessary subsequent to Oscar Cullman's *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead* (1958). But Wright is a churchman as well as a NT scholar, and I suspect that in his role as a clergyman he must constantly encounter persons who

deny the resurrection of the body in favor of the immortality of the soul. Hence, his tilting at this windmill.

The book is divided into five parts. Part I "Setting the Scene" surveys the subject of resurrection from the dead in pre-Christian paganism and Judaism. I consider Wright's wide-ranging discussion of life after death in ancient paganism to be among the most valuable sections of his book. He concludes that the overwhelming view among pagans was that death was a one-way street and that resurrection of the dead did not and could not happen. Supposed parallels to Jesus' resurrection "are figments of the (modern) imagination" (p. 36). One of the most intriguing of the pagan sources discussed by Wright is Chariton's novel *Callirhoe*, which contains an account of the discovery of Callirhoe's empty tomb (due, however, to merely apparent death) that is strikingly similar to Mark's account (pp. 68-72), leading Wright to suspect Christian influence. This question deserves further exploration.

Part I finishes out with an equally thorough discussion of Old Testament and second Temple Jewish beliefs about resurrection of the dead. Tracing the emergence of the belief in resurrection of the dead, Wright concludes that by Jesus' day "resurrection" could be used either metaphorically to refer to the socio-political restoration of Israel or literally to denote the re-embodiment of human persons. The overall conclusion of Part I is that "resurrection" never refers to non-physical forms of immortality.

Part II treats "Resurrection in Paul." Here we have a thorough review of all Pauline references to resurrection, especially in the crucial Corinthian correspondence (chapters 6, 7). Wright argues that Paul retains the typical Jewish understanding of "resurrection" with two important modifications. First, he sees it as occurring in two chronological stages, first of Messiah Jesus, second of all his people. Secondly, the resurrection involved not merely the restoration of the physical body, but its transformation to an immortal and incorruptible body. Wright rejects any suggestion that by a *soma pneumatikon* Paul meant anything less than a physical body: "when the early Christians said 'resurrection' they meant it in the sense it bore both in paganism (which denied it) and in Judaism (. . . which affirmed it)" (p. 209). Still, Wright's discussion of the intermediate state between death and resurrection is not as clear as it should be. He suggests that Paul perhaps believed that Jesus' resurrection body "had been all along waiting 'in the heavens,'" so that on Holy Saturday Jesus had not become "naked," that is, an unembodied soul (p. 371). But an inanimate *soma pneumatikon* waiting in the closets of heaven to be put on is a contradiction in terms; moreover, the idea that Jesus received his resurrection body immediately upon death contradicts Wright's insistence on the continuity of Jesus' earthly body with his transformed resurrection body. Wright softens the contradiction by later construing "stored up in heaven" to mean "safe in the mind, plan and intention of the creator God" (p. 373). This seems quite correct and leaves only to be said that Jesus' resurrection body was "put on" via a transformation of his corpse after a brief period of unembodied "nakedness."

Part III is a lengthy survey of "Resurrection in Early Christianity" apart from Paul and the Easter narratives. This takes Wright all the way to

Origin and the Gnostic gospels. This portion of the book is less interesting and much of it less relevant to the topic at hand. But Wright's intention is to show the overwhelming unity of early Christian sources concerning the fact and nature of Jesus' resurrection, both in their continuity with and mutations of typical Jewish beliefs about the resurrection of the dead. As we shall see, the springboard for Wright's argument for the resurrection is the existence of this belief system, so he is eager to show its pervasiveness.

Finally, we come to Part IV "The Story of Easter," in which Wright discusses the resurrection narratives in the Gospels. Here the reader who has patiently worked through nearly 600 pages of text waiting to arrive at last at a discussion of the heart of the New Testament witness to the resurrection of Jesus is apt to be somewhat surprised and disappointed: Rather than a detailed exegesis or a discussion of the historicity of the narratives, Wright provides a merely general discussion of each major pericope. There is virtually no discussion of what sources the evangelists employed or of their specific redaction of them. But that is not Wright's style; in his previous books he explained his scepticism regarding such an approach. Rather than speculate about sources, he tends to look for an account of the narratives that makes the most historical sense, broadly speaking. Moreover, Wright's purpose in this part of the book is very modest: merely to show that the evangelists' view of Jesus' resurrection is the same as that which he has detailed outside the Gospel narratives. That should hardly need proving. What this means is that Wright's book, despite its size, is not a definitive or complete discussion of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Much more remains to be said and has been said about these narratives.

The key section of this Part actually comes in the introductory chapter on "General Issues in the Easter Stories" (chapter 13), where Wright argues that the Gospel narratives are in four respects so surprising that they cannot be explained as the offshoot of the belief in Jesus' resurrection such as we find articulated by Paul. Rather Paul's theology presupposes them. Wright concludes Part IV with the observation that "early Christian resurrection belief has a remarkable consistency," which includes that belief's location on the spectrum of Jewish belief (that is, bodily resurrection) along with four important modifications: "(1) resurrection has moved from the circumference of belief to the centre; (2) 'the resurrection' is no longer a single event, but has split chronologically into two, the first part of which has already happened; (3) resurrection involves transformation, not mere resuscitation; and (4) when 'resurrection' language is used metaphorically, it no longer refers to the national restoration of Israel, but to baptism and holiness" (p. 681). This intermediate conclusion leads to the final question to which Wright has been driving all along: "what historical reasons can be given for the rise of this belief?" (p. 682).

It is worth pausing for a moment before moving to Part V to note that modification (2) above stands in an unresolved tension with a position Wright defends in his earlier books, namely, the view that Jesus' prophecies of the coming of the Son of Man in judgement were fulfilled in AD70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. Wright repeatedly asserts that Jews did not anticipate "the end of the space-time universe" at the coming of the

Kingdom of God, but a shift within history. I wondered in reading those earlier works how Wright would interpret Paul's teaching that the general resurrection of the dead would take place at Christ's return (I Thess. 4.13-17; I Cor. 15.20-23, 51-54), teaching which was given prior to AD 70. Surely Wright did not believe that the predicted resurrection took place in AD 70? Certainly not; Wright maintains that the second stage of the resurrection remains future. But if that is the case, in what principled way can we discriminate prophecies concerning Christ's return in AD 70 from those concerning his final return? Are we really to think that Paul, writing in the AD 50s, took the return of Christ and the attendant resurrection to be something different than the return predicted by Jesus and anticipated by the early church (Mk. 13)?

Part V "Belief, Event and Meaning" lays out Wright's argument for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Wright's case is very interestingly constructed. Typically, evidences of Jesus' historical resurrection would include the discovery of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the very origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection. In Wright's case, this third element assumes pride of place and actually is used as evidence for the factuality of the other two elements. Having documented the centrality and essentiality of belief in Jesus' resurrection to the early movement named for him, Wright presses the question: "what caused this belief in the resurrection of Jesus?" (p. 685). Wright presents his answer as the conclusion to an argument based on necessary and sufficient conditions (p. 687). He argues that the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb conjoined with physical post-mortem encounters with Jesus would, in the context of Jesus' own Messianic claims, be a sufficient condition for the disciples' coming to believe in his resurrection. On the other hand, Wright insists, in the absence of those two facts there is nothing in the historical antecedents of the Christian movement which would plausibly explain the origin of the disciples' belief that God had raised Jesus from the dead. Wright's argument, then, amounts to the claim that the hypothesis of the empty tomb and appearances has far greater explanatory power than any known rival hypothesis. Notice that this hypothesis is not equivalent to the resurrection hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead and thus far forth involves only non-miraculous facts.

I think that Wright's claim that the discovery of the empty tomb and the post-mortem appearances are jointly sufficient to explain the rise of resurrection belief is relatively uncontroversial, given that we are talking about physical appearances, not mere visions. The more controversial claim will be that they are individually necessary conditions. In support of this claim, Wright presents two arguments: (1) the very meaning of "resurrection" rules out most of the alternatives and (2) the principal alternative hypotheses turn out to be insufficient (p. 694). The first consideration is not very carefully formulated. What Wright argues is that "resurrection" entailed the rising of the dead man to new life, so that an empty grave must be left behind, and that appearances of the dead man are necessary to generate belief in his resurrection, since an empty grave alone is ambiguous. We may grant these points; but it does not follow that "if the body of Jesus of Nazareth had remained in the tomb there would have been no early

Christian belief" in Jesus' resurrection (p. 695). Rather what follows is that if the disciples had *thought* Jesus' body remained in the tomb, they would not have come to believe in his resurrection. In other words, the necessary condition of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection, given the meaning of that word, is their *belief* that his body no longer lay in the grave. Kirsopp Lake's wrong tomb hypothesis was consistent with that condition. So is Crossan's hypothesis that Jesus' body was thrown into a common graveyard for criminals and its location forgotten. Here Wright's failure to discuss the historicity of the burial narrative constitutes a shortcoming in his argument. Wright is correct when he characterizes attempts to deny Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathea as "desperate" (p. 708), but there is a lacuna in his argument here that needs to be filled. Wright could try to do so by appealing to his arguments earlier in the book that it is highly unlikely that belief in Jesus' resurrection, as attested in Paul's letters, could itself have generated stories of the empty tomb such as we find in the Gospels (chap. 13, §3). But he insisted there that he was not arguing for the historicity of the narratives, merely their logical and chronological priority to the theology we find in Paul (p. 612). I think his case would be stronger if he were to present independent evidence for the historicity of the burial and empty tomb rather than rely solely on the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection as evidence of these facts.

As for the necessity of the appearances, clearly from the meaning of "resurrection" one cannot deduce the fact of appearances. Wright's point is rather that appearances of Jesus are a necessary condition of the disciples' coming to believe in Jesus' resurrection (p. 695). His argument here could be stronger, however. He discounts the hypothesis that dreams could have produced belief in Jesus' resurrection because dreams would not lead to belief in a person's resurrection. Quite so, but that only proves that dreams *alone* are not a sufficient condition of the disciples' belief. The question here is whether dreams conjoined with the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb might not have led to belief in his resurrection. Or, more plausibly, visions of Jesus conjoined with his empty tomb? Why are real appearances necessary? On this score, Wright needs to explain more thoroughly the distinction between "resurrection" and "assumption into heaven" in Jewish thinking and show how the latter would be an explanation more consonant with Jewish beliefs than the former. This would not be to say anything that Wright has not already somewhere said, but he needs to marshal his evidence at this point.

Wright's first argument for the necessity of the empty tomb and resurrection appearances might, then, be more carefully cast as the claim that the original disciples would not have proclaimed Jesus' resurrection from the dead had they not experienced appearances of Jesus after his death and found his tomb empty.

Wright's second argument for the necessity of the empty tomb and post-mortem appearances, it will be recalled, is the insufficiency of alternative hypotheses to explain the disciples' belief. Here he provides an excellent discussion of the hypotheses of cognitive dissonance (pp. 697-801) and a fresh experience of grace (pp. 701-706). But his critique of the former hypothesis is again not as strong as it could be. For the most important

point to be made here is that, given the arguments of chap. 13, §3, the disciples, if they were to have persisted in believing in Jesus due to cognitive dissonance, would not have produced the sort of narratives we find in the Gospels.

Wright concludes this section:

Nobody was expecting this kind of thing; no kind of conversion-experience would have generated such ideas; nobody would have invented it, no matter how guilty (or how forgiven) they [*sic*] felt, no matter how many hours they [*sic*] pored over the scriptures. To suggest otherwise is to stop doing history and to enter into a fantasy world of our own, a new cognitive dissonance in which the relentless modernist, desperately worried that the post-Enlightenment worldview seems in imminent danger of collapse, devises strategies for shoring it up nevertheless (p. 707).¹

On the basis of his argument, Wright judges the historical probability of the twin facts of the empty tomb and post-mortem appearances of Jesus to be "so high as to be virtually certain, as the death of Augustus in AD 14 or the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70" (p. 710).

Now comes the final step in the argument: what is the best explanation of the facts of the empty tomb and appearances? Wright casts his argument here as an inference to the best explanation (p. 716), but he again focuses on explanatory power. The resurrection hypothesis explains the empty tomb and appearances; its rivals do not (p. 717). Wright recognizes that we here come face to face with worldview considerations; there is, he says, no neutral ground. It is not entirely clear to me what Wright's answer to Enlightenment naturalism is (pp. 710-716). He seems to say that the spirit of the Enlightenment is not to close *a priori* any door to understanding and then to invite the naturalist to shift grounds and see if the facts do not make better sense within a theistic worldview than within a naturalistic view. Wright concludes with a summary of reasons for rejecting the principal alternative explanations of the empty tomb and appearances (p. 718). But here again there is confusion. The four rivals he considers are in fact denials of the empty tomb and appearances, not explanations of them. These hypotheses should have been considered and rejected in his earlier discussion about the necessity of the empty tomb and appearances in explaining the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection. The rivals that should be considered here are those few hypotheses that concede these two facts and then try to explain them naturally. Wright's reference here to Habermas' survey of rival hypotheses is all that he provides by way of refutation.

There is much, much more in this wide-ranging book. I think it is best seen as the most extensively developed version of the argument for the resurrection from the fact of the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection, an argument which may be supplemented by comparably strong or even stronger independent arguments for the empty tomb and post-mortem appearances of Jesus and, then, for his resurrection. It is an invaluable reference work and a benchmark of resurrection scholarship.

NOTE

1. It soon becomes obvious that Wright's un-grammatical use of plural pronouns with singular antecedents stems from a politically correct desire to be inclusive. Such infelicities are of negligible importance when he writes in his own hand. But in an exegetical work the distortion this practice brings to the Greek text of the New Testament is inexcusable. In his biblical citations, Wright repeatedly substitutes "they" and "their" for "he" and "his," "family" for "brethren," "Judeans" for "Jews," etc. which are simply mistranslations of the text.

God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought, by Jeremy Waldron. Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp., 263, \$60.00 (cloth); \$22.00 (paper).

Hobbes, Locke, and Confusion's Masterpiece: An Examination of Seventeenth-Century Political Philosophy, by Ross Harrison. Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. 281, \$65.00 (cloth); \$23.00 (paper).

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In these two texts we find discussions of 17th century political philosophy that acknowledge both that Locke's *Two Treatises* and Hobbes' works on natural law are period pieces, distinctively shaped by their times, but also classics, in Harrison's phrase "transportable" to our time. Both Waldron and Harrison take the location of these classic texts in what Harrison calls a "religiously saturated" age to be an obstacle to their transport to our secular or, as Harrison styles it, our agnostic age. Their respective responses to this putative obstacle lead them in opposite directions. Harrison takes Locke to be largely confined to his own age because of the religious preoccupations that he shares with his contemporaries. He takes Hobbes to be the greatest political philosopher of the age because, for Hobbes, religion bears no weight in political philosophy. Waldron argues that the religious cannot be bracketed from Locke's argument for and, therefore, his conception of equality. According to Waldron religious claims are necessarily weight bearing in Locke's account of equality. Waldron further warns that we bracket the religious argument for equality at our peril or, perhaps, at the cost of incoherence or false consciousness. The warning is consistent with his frequently expressed disagreement with the Cambridge School's reading of Locke as simply a period piece. While Waldron warns that agnosticism imperils commitment to equality, Harrison opts for an agnostic account for agnostic times.

Waldron sets out to show, contrary he tells us to his own earlier view, that "Locke's equality claims are not separable from the theological claim that shapes and organizes them" (p. 82). The argument for this central assertion is systematically set out in chapter 3, "Species and the Shape of Equality," and defended and articulated in subsequent chapters. After asserting the centrality of equality in Locke's political thinking, Waldron