

N. T. Wright. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 3. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003. xxi + 817 pp. \$49.00 hardcover; \$39.00 paper.

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N. T. Wright was recently consecrated as the Bishop of Durham, the fourth highest post in the Anglican church, and the office formerly held by both J. B. Lightfoot and B. F. Westcott. Volume 3 of the series, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, is titled *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. This book is breathtaking in scope and evocative power. So many book reviews glibly comment that a particular volume should find its place on every pastor's or scholar's shelf, and yet so few of those volumes exercise the intellectual depth, worldwide influence, academic prowess, and sheer poetic elegance that one finds on the pages of *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. This book has been awarded the Theologos Award for 2003, as well as being named both Book of the Year and Best Academic Book by the Association of Theological Booksellers. What's more, this acclaimed volume was named the Best Biblical Studies book for 2004 by *Christianity Today*.

From start to finish Wright is stimulating, interesting, informative—no easy task for a book that commands the attention of any serious NT scholar, defends the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, and is over seven hundred pages long! As an example of the kind of description that gives the book its swift, rhythmic feel, consider Wright's description of reading 1 Corinthians. He writes, "A glance through 1 Corinthians is like a stroll down a busy street. All of human life is there: squabbles and lawsuits, sex and shopping, rich and poor, worship and work, wisdom and folly, politics and religion" (p. 278).

The book is organized into five parts. Part 1 opens by calling into question the view that from a historical perspective we have no access to what really happened because there are no analogies for such an event and all the evidence is biased. From there, Wright moves into a discussion of life after death as conceived by ancient paganism, the OT, and post-biblical Judaism. In parts 2 through 4, Wright surveys the evidence from early Christian literature. He proceeds chronologically, beginning with Paul in part 2, then treating other texts in part 3—everything from the rest of the NT to Origen, saving the resurrection narratives of the gospels for part 4. Part 5 then concludes with a nuanced discussion of what has and has not been proven, followed by frank, piercing reflections on the significance of the resurrection.

Observing that historical evidence is rarely sufficient to establish a conclusion absolutely and certainly on historical grounds, Wright helpfully describes a "scale from . . . 'extremely unlikely,' through 'possible,' 'plausible,' and 'probable,' to 'highly probable'" (p. 687 n. 3). Every orthodox Christian will be heartened by his conclusion that "the historian, of whatever persuasion, has no option but to affirm both the empty tomb and the 'meetings' with Jesus as 'historical events'" (p. 709). The bishop in the troubled Anglican church then states with the boldness that strengthens faith, "I regard this conclusion as coming in the same sort of category, of historical probability 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). Coming from one of the most prolific and influential NT scholars of our day—at a time when scholarship cares not for faithfulness but for novelty—a forthright affirmation of the resurrection is like the blast of a shofar on the battlefield.

So much more could be said regarding the contents of this volume, but Wright has said it with such acumen and charm that all would do well to read him directly! Those who ignore this series do so to their own detriment. A project of this magnitude and coherence, from an evangelical perspective, does not appear in every generation. Scholars from disciplines other than biblical studies who wish to browse the terrain of the NT will be hard pressed to find a better guide than Wright. Since much of what is addressed in these volumes is occasioned by the current state of NT scholarship, the tour is not only of the NT but of the ivory tower. Pastors, charged with the role of holding the academy accountable to the church, will find Wright informative for their understanding of the NT, of the first century, and of the state of biblical studies. And any student thinking of Ph.D. studies would do well to begin to process this material.

For all the clarity of the shofar's blast, there are certain features which remain, to use some of Wright's favorite terms, puzzling, tantalizing, vexing. First, Wright repeatedly affirms that "the meaning of 'resurrection,' both in the Jewish and the non-Jewish world of late antiquity, was never that the person concerned had simply 'gone to heaven' or been 'exalted' in some way which did not involve a new bodily life" (p. 694). The problem is not with this conclusion, for the evidence here is compelling, and Wright weaves the theme all through the book's tapestry: "Resurrection means bodily life *after* 'life after death,' or, if you prefer, bodily life after the *state* of 'death'" (pp. 108-9, emphasis his). Substantiation of this conclusion and assertions of its truth recur throughout, as this is a central prong in the argument (cf., e.g., pp. 196, 200-201, 204-5, 209, etc.). This being the case, and the evidence being so strong, the reader is all the more startled upon coming to Wright's discussion of resurrection in Revelation 20. Having unequivocally affirmed over and over again that "there is no evidence that the *anastasis* [resurrection] root meant anything other than bodily resurrection, either in the paganism that denied it or the Pharisaic Judaism that affirmed it" (p. 215), Wright eventually arrives at Revelation 20, where he reiterates the conclusion that "the meaning of 'resurrection' throughout the literature . . . pagan, Jewish and Christian" always refers to bodily life after life after death. Wright then concedes that to argue that the word refers to something other than this is "to strain usage well beyond breaking point" (p. 474). Nevertheless, because premillennialism is an unacceptable

position for Wright, he concludes, "It seems likely that we are faced here with a radical innovation: a use of the word 'resurrection' to mean a coming-to-life in a sense other than, and prior to, that of the final bodily raising" (pp. 474-75). Wright knows that he is contradicting the otherwise universal evidence that he has presented, and writes, "Since this corresponds to nothing else in either Jewish or early Christian literature, except for writings dependent on the present passage, it is difficult to get any clearer about what is in mind" (p. 475). The lack of clarity does not seem to arise from the evidence, but from the interpreter's obstinacy. Wright chooses to understand the use of the word "resurrection" here as a "radical innovation" to avoid being "projected into premillennial literalism" (p. 474). Whether or not the use of the term "literalism" is pejorative, since Wright defends such "fundamentals" of the faith as the resurrection, the deity of Christ (pp. 731-34), and the Trinity (pp. 735-36), it is "puzzling" that Wright does not conceptualize a pre-millennialism that avoids popular literalistic, perhaps even "fundamentalistic," excesses. The evidence Wright presents only strengthens the premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20, but his systematic rejection of that interpretive possibility clouds his vision.

The second issue that I find "vexing" is the groundless, and yet standard, confession that the authorship of the Fourth Gospel is a knot that cannot be untied. Wright says that he will refer to the author as John without prejudice regarding which John (p. 662), and claims that we are unable to "decode" the note on the author's reliability in John 21:24 (p. 663). Given the fact that Wright is extremely well-read, and given the unrefuted argument mounted by Wright's predecessor as the Bishop of Durham, B. F. Westcott, that John the son of Zebedee is the Fourth Gospel's author, it is mystifying that Wright claims no "prejudice as to which of the possible 'Johns,' if any, he actually was; likewise, without reaching any conclusion either on the identity of the beloved disciple or on his relation to the actual author of the book" (p. 662). Westcott's argument from the internal evidence that the son of Zebedee is the author of John can be briefly summarized: it is clear enough that the author was a Jew, that he was from Palestine, that he was an eyewitness of what he records, that he was one of the twelve, that he was closely associated with Peter and seems to have been one of the three apostles closest to Jesus, therefore, the author was most likely St. John. This argument has been re-articulated in recent literature by scholars such as F. F. Bruce, Leon Morris, D. A. Carson, and Craig Blomberg (see particularly the latter's book, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*). Blomberg has called the external evidence "overwhelming" in favor of John, the son of Zebedee, as the author of this gospel. In view of these considerations, Wright's avowal that he has no prejudice is curious. Andreas J. Köstenberger of Southeastern Seminary has written a compelling argument that the early doubts concerning Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel were not due to evidence but ideology ("Early Doubts of the Apostolic Authorship of the Fourth Gospel in the History of Modern Biblical Criticism," in Köstenberger, *Studies on John and Gender* [Studies in Biblical Literature 38; New York: Peter Lang, 2001], 17-47). Wright himself routinely points out the flaws in the modernist and post-Enlightenment approach to biblical studies (e.g., pp. 7 10, 714). Nevertheless, the ghost of the Enlightenment seems to haunt his own work on the issue of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel.

I hasten to add at this point that Paul did not say that if there were no millennium the Corinthians' faith would be vain, nor does the Fourth Gospel explicitly state that the son of Zebedee was its author. In comparison with the resurrection, these are but quibbles, and Christianity does not stand or fall on either of these points. Nevertheless, on these points the evidence is compelling, and since Wright customarily follows the evidence where it leads, his failure to do so on the millennium and the authorship of the Fourth Gospel is disappointing.

On the whole, however, the book is a success. One might wonder why seven hundred plus pages are necessary to say what Christians have been saying for nearly two thousand years—that the resurrection is the only adequate explanation for the rise of Christianity. But while it cannot be said of every book that no parts seem unnecessary or boring, the statement is true of this volume. Wright's explanation of how Paul can say that the resurrection is "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:4) when the OT does not precisely describe a dying and rising Messiah, and his discussion of the development of the understanding in the OT that death would be reversed, are particularly luminous. We are brought nearer to understanding the NT, especially its use of the OT, through this book. And in the process, the boundaries of our historical knowledge and of what can even be considered "knowable" are pushed back. *The Resurrection of the Son of God* whets the appetite for the projected volumes of the series, the next of which takes up Justification by Faith.

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