

Interview

N. T. Wright is the recently consecrated Bishop of Durham in England and widely acclaimed New Testament scholar. Among his many influential works is the newly published *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, the third volume in his much-noted series, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Fortress Press, 2003). Below is an interview between Wright and K.C. Hanson, Biblical Studies editor for Fortress Press.

KCH: What do you hope the effect of *The Resurrection of the Son of God* will be on those who read it?

NTW: I hope that this book will confirm the faith of those who believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus! Challenging them to think it through in what for most will be quite new ways (not least the political implications of saying that Jesus is Lord), I hope that, for those who don't believe in Jesus' bodily resurrection, this book will bring them up short and make them face the quite massive historical arguments. Instead of assuming either that 'modern science has disproved that sort of thing,' which of course it hasn't. Science studies the normal, repeatable events, whereas the whole point of the Christian claim is that Easter was abnormal and only to be repeated at the very end. Or that 'modern biblical and historical scholarship has shown that the earliest Christians believed in a non-bodily resurrection,' which is ultimately wishful thinking on the part of some scholars and some in the churches.

KCH: How relevant is the category of history/historical to the resurrection?

NTW: Very! The early Christians believed firmly that something had *happened* in real history, in the space-time-matter reality of their world. If someone had convinced them that it was simply an experience inside their own heads or hearts, they would have said 'then we've been mistaken'—and their reasons for living as followers of Jesus the Messiah and Lord would have been taken away. This is of course very counter-intuitive to many mainline churches in America, in particular, who have been fed various kinds of ahistorical existentialism for so long they don't realize it's not the real thing.

Of course the word 'history' is sometimes used to mean 'what a post-enlightenment philosopher can put onto his/her Procrustean bed.' I regard that as a downgrading of

‘history.’ The God the early Christians believed in is the God who made, and has remained active within, the real world. Beware of Platonism here in particular.

KCH: How do the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection fit into the larger picture vis-à-vis Judaism?

NTW: First, those first-century Jews who were expecting a resurrection thought of it as a last-minute, large-scale event; the early Christians said it had happened to *one* person in the *middle* of history, something nobody had seriously proposed before.

Second, first-century Judaism could use the word ‘resurrection’ both literally, to refer to that future large-scale reawakening, and metaphorically, to refer (as in Ezekiel 37) to the restoration of Israel. The Christians maintained the literal use but changed the metaphorical one; instead of the restoration of Israel, they used resurrection-language to speak of baptism and holiness.

Third, first-century Judaism, though believing firmly in *bodily* resurrection, never developed much of a theory about what sort of a body this would be. The early Christians quickly developed the theory that it would mean a *transformed* physicality—still a body but with new properties.

The main thing underlying this, though, is that the early Christians firmly agreed with their Jewish contemporaries in seeing ‘resurrection’ as involving bodies, i.e., physical reality. This is after all what the word meant at the time, as also in the writings of those pagans who denied that such a thing was possible.

KCH: After doing this research and writing this volume, has your view of Jesus’ resurrection changed?

NTW: No and yes.

No: I think the book has simply enabled me to see, and to spell out in much more detail, what I have said in lectures, etc., for many years now but never had a chance to work through in such depth.

Yes: I see much more clearly than I did before the way in which, for the early Christians, Jesus’ resurrection really was the start of God’s new creation, the new

world in which Jesus reigns as Lord, the world in which they decided to live conterminously with the present evil age. And in particular I have seen, again and again, how this played out politically in ways that much scholarship has simply screened out.

KCH: You originally planned your series, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, to be five volumes. What prompted you to change the original plan and do this volume?

NTW: Originally it was a matter of space. SPCK, the British publisher who commissioned *Jesus and the Victory of God* told me there wasn't enough room in the book for a chapter on the resurrection as well. At the same time I had to do the Shaffer Lectures at Yale Divinity School in 1996 (the year of JVG's publication) and they had to be about Jesus. I didn't want to do a potted version of JVG. So I decided to do the Shaffers on the resurrection and turn it into an extra volume. Of course by the time I worked up the Shaffer lectures there was plenty of material for three lectures, and when I then tried to write it up as a book it grew and grew and grew. Further, I found that most of the writing about the resurrection in the scholarship of the last fifty years or so has made enormous and remarkable errors which needed careful explication and correction. I hope that readers of the new volume will see the point!