

## BOOK REVIEW

N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). xxi + 817 pp. Pbk. US\$49.00.

*The Resurrection of the Son of God* is the third volume in the series *Christian Origins and the Question of God* by prolific biblical scholar N.T. Wright. As Wright explains in his preface, this book began as the final chapter of the series' second volume, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996). It is amazing to consider that this 800-plus page book was originally intended as a 70 page chapter. Fortunately for scholars and students, this very important topic eventually received the space it deserves.

Wright begins with a fascinating chapter that wrestles with the entire issue of historical investigation into a cornerstone of faith. While acknowledging the limitations of historical investigation, Wright does conclude that the resurrection of Jesus is not just a matter of faith, but an event to be examined and explored.

Wright then begins his survey of ancient religious and philosophical texts with a look at the pagan view of life after death. In this, Wright focuses on the Hellenistic traditions and concludes that most Greeks believed in some sort of post-death existence but explicitly denied the idea of a physical resurrection.

Moving from paganism to Judaism, Wright looks at the concept of death and resurrection, both in the Old Testament and post-biblical Jewish texts. The near silence of the Old Testament on life after death is acknowledged, although it is shown that the seeds of the doctrine are found in the theme of ongoing fellowship between God and his people. These seeds are seen in their growth in later texts such as Isaiah 26, Ezekiel 37 and Daniel 12, which, although they have a national restoration tendency, also include (especially Daniel 12) movement towards individual resurrection. The development of this doctrine in Judaism is taken beyond the canonical limits with examinations of post-biblical literature such as the Pseudepigrapha, Apocrypha, Dead Sea Scrolls,

Josephus, rabbinic material and more. A wide range of beliefs is shown, including pessimism or agnosticism towards life after death, a ‘Greek’ view of the immortal soul, and a developed doctrine of a bodily resurrection. Within this spectrum, Wright demonstrates a strong strand of thought in which the present state of those who had died would eventually be replaced with a future state in which they would live once more after a physical resurrection.

Having presented the pagan and Jewish context of resurrection beliefs, Wright moves into the heart of his study: resurrection in the New Testament. This examination is taken in a logical manner, beginning with Paul’s letters as the earliest texts and attempting to look at them in chronological sequence to gain a sense of any development. At the same time, Wright holds off his treatment of the Corinthian correspondence because of its great importance to the subject, and even separates the key passages of 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Cor. 4.7–5.10. Wright concludes that Paul, in accordance with his Pharisaic origins, continued in the Jewish idea of the resurrection developed in the inter-testamental period, with the exception that Paul saw the resurrection as beginning with Jesus’ resurrection.

Wright then begins a study of resurrection themes in non-Pauline texts including the Gospels (apart from the Easter narratives) and the rest of the New Testament. Wright sees the view of the resurrection in these texts as consistent with the Jewish position over against the pagan view. Although the resurrection is sometimes expressed in different ways, the rest of the New Testament follows the same basic trajectory as Paul, envisioning a Jewish-type resurrection but inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus.

Before tackling the Gospel Easter narratives, Wright presents the early Christian views of the resurrection to confirm that the present study’s interpretation of the resurrection texts is consistent with the early Church’s understanding. Wright casts his net widely, using such a variety of sources as the Apostolic Fathers, early Christian Apocrypha, the Apologists, the Great Early Theologians, early Syriac Christianity and Nag Hammadi texts. While there is some diversity, especially within the Gnostic texts, the basic direction is the Jewish position of believing in some current state with a bodily resurrection in the future.

The focus of this study, as the title of the book suggests, is on the resurrection of Jesus. Before examining the Easter narratives, Wright takes a look at two titles for Jesus, Messiah and Lord, showing that the

images related to these roles help prepare the way for the Easter story. Wright then goes on to examine in turn each of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection, demonstrating the similarities and reflecting on the differences. Wright argues that what is presented in these Gospel accounts is not just testimonies of faith, but descriptions of actual events that can be described in historical terms. Wright concludes that the central message of the New Testament is a bodily resurrection in continuity with the expectations of Pharisaic Judaism, but offering the innovation of Jesus' resurrection as the beginning and ultimate demonstration of the general resurrection to take place in the eschatological future.

There is much that is very useful in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. First of all, as one part of the successful multi-volume work, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, this book goes a long way towards developing a balanced, scholarly and contextual study of New Testament Christianity.

Secondly, this is a very thorough study of the concept of resurrection. Wright looks at resurrection from multiple angles and from a variety of texts and theological traditions. He also interacts with a number of scholars, giving the reader a great introduction to the issues and controversies surrounding many of these texts. The footnotes and bibliography are a tremendous resource for anyone doing research in the areas of Jesus' or the general resurrection.

Finally, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* is an impressive tour of a wide range of texts from mythology to philosophy to the Bible to Gnosticism. Wright must be credited for interacting with such diverse authors as Homer, Paul, Josephus and Irenaeus. Beyond the contribution to resurrection scholarship, Wright offers a valuable introduction to the pagan, Jewish and early Christian context in which the New Testament is found. By tracing one concept, such as resurrection, Wright has been able to show how a variety of groups from different times, cultures and theological positions developed their worldviews.

While not denying the great value of *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, I find some significant weaknesses in this book as well. Although the exhaustive survey of texts is in one way a strength, it is in another way a weakness. One cannot interact with such a wide variety of texts and still give them the treatment they deserve. Sacrifices have to be made and the reader is left wondering how representative the current study really is. It might have been more useful to have a more thorough

examination of fewer texts. Although the survey of early post-biblical Christian texts is interesting, it could have been left out with little damage to the overall argument.

Even Wright's treatment of biblical texts causes some concern. At times Wright's argument seems based on breadth of material rather than depth. He seems to attempt to be as complete as possible, at times requiring a stretch to make the information relevant. Wright spends some time in Galatians, as it is a very important Pauline text, while admitting that it does not actually discuss the resurrection. Wright's reason is that the resurrection is the background to what Paul says in Galatians even when it is not mentioned. While this is technically true, it is just as valid to say that the cross or the Holy Spirit are in the background to all of Paul's thought. This is also seen in Wright's treatment of the Prodigal Son story. While the story does use death and life imagery, it really has nothing to do with either Jesus' or the general resurrection. At times it seems as if Wright is attempting to do what Gordon Fee did with the Holy Spirit in *The Empowering Presence of God*. Perhaps because Fee had a more limited selection of texts and less variety in imagery for the Spirit, his argument ended up tighter and clearer than Wright's. This is not necessarily a criticism of Wright as a scholar, but a difference in the nature of the texts and the subject.

The other weakness of this book concerns the actual purpose of the study. Wright presents this work as a comprehensive study of resurrection beliefs to help clarify what the early Christians meant when they said that Jesus rose from the dead. In a way, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* does achieve this with its wide-ranging treatment, giving readers enough information to come to their own conclusions. But a closer examination demonstrates that Wright has his own agenda for this book. Wright continually reminds the reader that each piece of the puzzle confirms that Jesus' resurrection was consistent with Jewish, especially Pharisaic, views of resurrection and completely contrary to the pagan views. This information is used to help build the historical credibility for the resurrection of Jesus. Although explicitly critical of popular apologists such as Josh McDowell, Wright's work is in essence an apologetic for the resurrection of Jesus. The sense after reading *The Resurrection of the Son of God* is that Wright's study ends up being a more scholarly and academic version of Lee Strobel's popular *Case for Christ*.

The apologetic nature of *The Resurrection of the Son of God* is not necessarily a bad thing, especially for those of the Christian faith. The problem is that the apologetic focus at times is not a perfect fit with the evidence presented. There are two, at times conflicting, forces in this book. While Wright desires to provide a comprehensive and somewhat overwhelming quantity of evidence, he also wants to prove the narrow thesis of a historical resurrection of Jesus.

This problem is most acute in the section on pagan influence. Wright assumes that in order to prove the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection he must show the doctrine of resurrection as being a strictly Jewish and non-pagan belief. Wright has fallen into the common presumption among biblical scholars that Jewish equals truth and pagan or Greek equals false. As a result, Wright strongly opposes scholars, such as Stanley Porter (Stanley E. Porter, 'Resurrection, the Greeks and the New Testament', in Stanley E. Porter, Michael A. Hayes and David Tombs [eds.], *Resurrection* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999], pp. 52-81), who suggest Greek influence in the Jewish development of the idea of the resurrection. This becomes a problem because of Wright's generous offering of Greek and Jewish texts. Wright demonstrates that some Greeks believed in a transformation into gods or stars after death. In a separate chapter, Wright also shows that some Jewish apocalyptic texts at times describe the resurrection as a transformation into angels or stars. This would suggest a relationship of influence, but because of his apologetic motivations, Wright denies this connection. Wright's assumption is not necessary for a Christian scholar, as there are examples in Plato that fit more with the Gospel message than some Jewish apocalyptic texts. Greek influence on the Jewish development of the resurrection doctrine in no way takes away from the historicity of Jesus' resurrection.

Despite these weaknesses, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* is an important offering to biblical scholarship. Wright presents many of the debates, issues and texts that are a part of any discussion on the resurrection. Wright's work helps to move along the conversation concerning both the general resurrection and the resurrection of Jesus. The material presented is valuable to scholars and students, whether or not one agrees with all of his conclusions.

Stephen J. Bedard  
Meaford, ON