



NT Wright – A bodily resurrection

Bishop Tom Wright's argument for a physical resurrection of Jesus as an historical event is based on three pillars.

First of all he asks us to consider the place of resurrection in the Judaism of the time. In Ezekiel 37 there is a vision of a valley of dry bones which the prophet presents as a metaphor for Israel's return from exile and captivity in Babylon. Yet it is clear that by the time of Jesus the exile had not yet ended – Israel was occupied by Rome and in AD 70 suffered the catastrophic event of the destruction of the great Temple building – the heart of the Jewish religion. The resurrection in first century Judaism was primarily, argues Tom Wright, about the renewal and rebirth of a people in the land of Israel.

We know from Josephus (War 2:163; Ant. 18:14) and the New Testament (Acts 23:7-8) that the Pharisees believed in resurrection because they believed in a good creator God who will put things right one day. But Tom Wright points out that

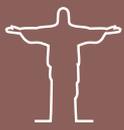
We must remember that in Jesus' day and Paul's day the majority of the Pharisees were on what we could call the revolutionary wing of Judaism, longing for the restoration of Israel. Resurrection functioned for the Pharisees, not as an abstract doctrine about what happens to God's people (or to anybody) after death, but as a statement about the great turn-around within Israel's fortunes that would shortly take place'

(Wright, 1998).

In other words, the resurrection is seen as a political event when the Jewish nation will rise again and re-occupy the land that is under foreign domination.

The second pillar of Wright's argument rests on what it means for Jesus to be Messiah. In his book *Jesus and the Victory of God* Wright argues that Jesus saw himself as messiah, and that this was not an invention of the early church. But his self-understanding was of a messiah of a different sort – a suffering messiah who would atone for the sins of the people and be crucified.

This was very different from the idea of messiah in Jewish thinking of the day. There were two elements to the expectation of contemporary Jews – that the pagans would be defeated and the Romans expelled from Jerusalem, and that the Temple would be restored or cleansed of pagan defilement (or after 70 AD rebuilt entirely).



It would be scandalous to see the messiah, however, as pinned to a cross of shame. The likeliest outcome would have been for this Jesus movement to evaporate in humiliation – yet exactly the opposite occurred.

The third pillar of the resurrection-as-fact argument is that Christianity began as a resurrection movement. The preaching of Jesus risen from the dead began straightaway. Jesus is proclaimed consistently as risen Lord. Wright argues that the resurrection idea that was proclaimed was crystal clear.

“Unlike the Jewish beliefs we glanced at earlier, from the very beginning Christian re-use of resurrection language is astonishingly free of vague and generalised speculation. It is crisp and clear: resurrection means going through death and out the other side into a new mode of existence”.

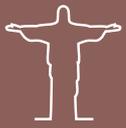
(Wright, 1998).

Although the Pharisees and others believed in a resurrection, it was a resurrection of the righteous after the event of the restoration of Israel. But at the time of Jesus’ death there was no restoration of Israel. Indeed, Israel was still firmly under Roman domination and the final humiliation of the revolt of AD 70 – the destruction of the Temple itself and the last stand at Masada under the rebel leader Eleazor, had yet to happen. Because it was so alien in its exact form, the proclamation of a humiliated messiah being brought back to life physically would itself have been laughed at – yet this resurrection, physical and in history, was exactly what formed the core of the message.

The early Christians busily set about redesigning their worldview around this new fixed point of Jesus’ resurrection. They behaved, in other words, as though the new age had already arrived. They did not behave as though they had had a new sort of religious experience or as if their former leader was alive and well in the presence of God, whether as an angel or a spirit or whatever. The only explanation for their behaviour, their stories, their symbols, and their theology is that they really believed Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead.

This conclusion is so well grounded that, today, even those who would like to insist that the body of Jesus in fact remained decomposing in the tomb agree that the early Christians believed him to have been bodily raised, leaving an empty tomb behind him.

“Jesus, whom you have crucified is both Lord and Saviour. God established this by raising him from the dead”. This according to the Acts of the Apostles, is the core of the message that spread rapidly from such unpromising beginnings. This is not myth – it is history.



Christianity

NT Wright and the Resurrection



NT Wright Christian Origins and the Resurrection of Jesus:

The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical Problem. (Sewanee Theological Review 41.2, 1998).

Available online at http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Historical_Problem.htm