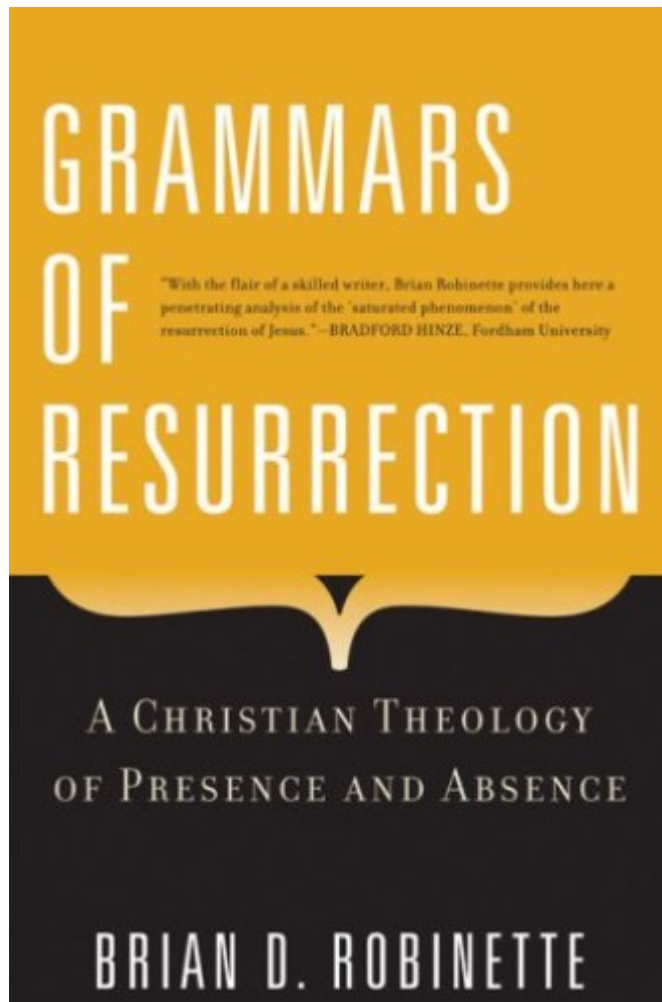


Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence

Sunday's Coming Premium

June 15, 2010

In Review



Grammars of Resurrection

Brian D. Robinette

Crossroad

I once had a fight with a more evangelical friend about the nature of resurrection. He would go to the mat for the bodily resurrection of Jesus. I agreed. And he was

equally adamant that we will not be bodily raised. “How could it possibly make sense?” he asked, amid references to *Night of the Living Dead* and Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*. The good news is that our souls go to heaven. Nothing more.

My friend might be one of several target audiences for Brian Robinette’s impressive first book, *Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence*. The young professor at Saint Louis University, who has a doctorate from Notre Dame, seeks to deliver us from what he calls, in a phrase borrowed from Jon Sobrino, “deism of the resurrection”: we may express belief that the resurrection is true, but this has no effect on the rest of our belief or action. This deism is barely our fault. Robinette insists that the resurrection has been a sort of awkward appendage in Western theology for more than a millennium and a half. In the New Testament the resurrection is a “saturating phenomenon,” as pervasive as the Exodus is in the Old Testament. Yet after Irenaeus it became “increasingly recessive,” until the cross or the incarnation came to dominate theology. Robinette ambitiously seeks to retrieve the resurrection as the central topic in theology it once was.

When we treat the resurrection these days, we usually do so in apologetic terms. Robinette wades through the literature on what “really happened,” siding with N. T. Wright and other traditionalists against more “spiritual” readings. He argues that we are uncomfortable with the doctrine because of its bodiliness, its insistence against any lingering Platonism that we are bodies, and its demanding call to a new life of discipleship.

For Robinette, apologetics is altogether the wrong grammar for the event. There are no grounds for the possibility of resurrection—it creates its own grounds, and the biblical texts make no mistake in their confused, chaotic and contradictory character. The resurrection is a sort of “absence” that is “womb-shaped,” Robinette says, following Graham Ward. The almost ad hoc nature of the stories is meant to draw readers into the event so we will follow the raised Jesus as he goes ahead of us to Galilee. The resurrection narratives are “already demythologized,” Robinette writes, borrowing now from James Alison. (It is no slur against this book to say that its best gift is Robinette’s ear for phrases from elsewhere. Much of this volume, as befits a former dissertation, is borrowed: the work on resurrection is from Gustaf Aulén’s *Christus Victor*, with a pinch of Wright, plus Alison and Rowan Williams on René Girard.) We understand the resurrection only as we become involved with it, being drawn into the discovery of the empty tomb and the raised Christ.

Robinette's other primary concern in this book is Girardian atonement theory, sifted through Alison. Robinette seeks to scrub our theology of any notion that God requires or brings about violence. Instead, quoting Irenaeus, he asserts that God chose persuasion to trick the devil and save his people, and he argues that substitutionary notions of the atonement that render Christ's death necessary to placate an angry deity get it entirely backward. What Christ did in the atonement was, rather, to enter into the mechanism of human scapegoating in order to undo our propensity for violence: through Christ, God entered the scapegoating ritual as the scapegoat. This is the "ultimate *apocalypsis*"—the unveiling of the reality that the one we killed is actually our Maker and our Judge. And here is how the resurrection makes all this go: when our victim returns to us, offering not the vengeance we deserve but instead forgiveness, we have a "double reversal." Not only is death undone in resurrection; vengeance is undone in the offer of reconciliation.

Some of Robinette's most creative moments come in his exploration of the nature of bodies. Christ must be bodily raised, he argues (leaning now on liberation theologians like Sobrino), because victimization happens to bodies. Christ's own body becomes, after his resurrection, "transphysical" (this borrowed from Wright). Not only does this body eat (it is *physical*), it also walks through walls (*trans-*) and withdraws in ascension to make space for our becoming part of it. The best way to get at scripture's resurrectional anthropology is a future-tense, corporate phrase that others will undoubtedly borrow from Robinette: "We will be our bodies."

There is much to admire in Girardian atonement theory. I read it like I read Wright and others on "the new Paul." Counterintuitive readings of traditional texts often throw fresh light. Yet in other places they can feel forced. Their advocates may insist that their readings explain everything, but we can grant only that they explain some things. The criticism offered by the late William Placher in the pages of the *Christian Century* seems borne out here: Girardian theories often seem to leave salvation at the level of the noetic. Girard writes that salvation takes place when we "acknowledge the guilt of [our] participation in the violent contagion that murdered [our] master." That's it? Acknowledgment? Don't we need more fundamental change than that—something only God can bring about on our behalf?

As a Wesleyan (and I take it others would agree), I'd like much more about how Christ's work applies in our own souls and changes us at a far more profound level than intellectual apprehension. With regard to the book's key theme, resurrection, it

seems strange both to say that no one speaks of it and then to quote luminaries from Karl Rahner, Wright and Wolfhart Pannenberg to Jürgen Moltmann, Hans Urs von Balthasar and David Hart on its importance. Several of these figures borrow heavily on theologians who were active between Irenaeus and now, including some who championed versions of substitutionary atonement. Perhaps resurrection is not always the appendage Robinette insists it is. Less substantively, the book suffers from the sort of repetitiveness that is common to former dissertations, and for some reason the publisher included no author bio. One assumes from his institutional history that Robinette is Catholic, but one can do no more than assume.

Nevertheless, this is an illuminating and bold work from a promising young author. Robinette's last word, borrowed from Balthasar, is an appropriate end to this review as well: if the resurrection is not bodily, the truth lies with Gnosticism and idealism, but "the resurrection of the flesh vindicates the poets in a definitive sense."