

Resurrection faith: N. T. Wright talks about history and belief

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*New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, who has taught at Cambridge, Oxford and Montreal, recently became the canon theologian at Westminster Abbey in London. He is both a vigorous investigator of the historical Jesus and an effective communicator of the gospel. His scholarly works include a two-volume project on the origins of Christianity: The New Testament and the People of God (1992) and Jesus and the Victory of God (1996). More popular works include The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary (1996) and Luke for Everyone (2000), which is part of a series of "New Testament Guides for Everyone" distributed in the U.S. by Pilgrim Press. Tom Wright is also well known for carrying on a lively public debate on Jesus with the American scholar Marcus Borg, which led to their joint book The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions (2000). We recently spoke with Wright about his life as a historian and believer.*

**You once wrote: "Authentic Christianity has nothing to fear from history." Why is that?**

Well, it's a slightly polemical remark, directed at those Christians who think Christianity is simply a matter of the community of faith telling its own story, and who don't even want to discuss issues of the historical Jesus because they think the Bible and the tradition have told us all we need to know. That seems to me profoundly wrong. The Gospel writers think they're talking about things that actually happened. If they didn't happen, then I've got other things to do with my life. If, for example, Jesus died of influenza at the age of 25 and everything about the crucifixion was made up, then something pretty significant about Christianity is lost. Of course, the primary issue here is the resurrection. I am not going to stay up nights sweating about such matters as whether Jesus walked on water.

**One of the underlying issues here is that of miracles. Does the postmodern context, with its suspicions of rationalism, open up the issue of miracles in a way that it hasn't been open since the 18th century?**

I think that's true. When Marcus Borg and I debate each other on these topics, we don't use the word "miracle" because we both agree that the term is too infected by post-Enlightenment debates. It is accompanied, especially in America, with the idea that God exists outside natural processes and sometimes reaches in and does something and then pushes off again. That is how a lot of people think of miracle, though that view is more part of the superman myth of God than part of Christian theology and history.

In any case, I think God can do whatever God wants. I don't think we know what the limits are. And our discussion of the limits is too much shaped by the terms of modern philosophy.

**Can't we talk about empirical limits, however? We know certain things, such as the laws of gravity—and that human beings cannot walk on water.**

I've been told that in some Muslim fundamentalist circles people are taught to walk on water as a spiritual exercise. I'm prepared to believe it. I do think there are all sorts of odd things that happen in the world. And there are several stories in the Gospels—the resurrection is the main one—which have the flavor of people saying: Look here, you're not going to believe this, but this is what happened.

**How do you, as a historian, approach the resurrection?**

Well, we know quite a lot about first-century Jewish movements, many of which ended with the leader's death. I've tried to imagine myself in the world of someone like Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian. He hears about the demise of a messianic leader or prophetic leader, and is told that this leader has been raised from the dead. He is going to ask: What do you mean he's been raised from the dead? And he will not be satisfied if the answer is: Well, I had this vision, or I felt my heart warmed, or I felt that God had forgiven me for letting the leader down. He would say, "Well, fine, I'm glad you had that experience. But why did you say he's been raised from the dead?" My point is that resurrection is something that had a quite clear meaning at that time. It was something that every pagan knew doesn't happen. And a lot of Jews (the Sadducees and some others) believed it doesn't happen. Those who did affirm the resurrection did not think it was just a way of saying, "He is Lord."

The historian has to offer a plausible hypothesis of why the disciples used the language of resurrection. My hypothesis is that there were two things: an empty

tomb and sightings of Jesus. An empty tomb by itself doesn't mean that much, nor do visions—many people have had visions, particularly after somebody they love has just died. Given the accounts of the empty tomb and of the sightings, however, I think the historian is faced with two parts of an arch with the piece in the middle—the resurrection—missing. The question is: Are these just two isolated phenomena?

The historian cannot prove the resurrection in the same way that one can prove that Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 a.d. But I think the historian can say: Here are the plausible explanations. And there is an extreme implausibility of virtually all the rival suggestions, such as the one that James, the brother of the Lord, was walking around in the garden at the same time, and because he looked rather like Jesus, the women saw him in the half light. That story is not going to last more than an hour or two.

**What is at stake for you in the issue of resurrection? Or to put it another way, what's at stake in the argument between you and Marcus Borg, who would not be that concerned over whether the resurrection happened, who would be content to say "Jesus is alive today regardless of whether the tomb was empty."**

Resurrection is hugely important as the beginning of the new world God has already started—which is how Paul talks about it. Resurrection is also the foundation of Christian ecological action and political action, for God has actually launched the new mode of being into the world. On this point Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan make what I think is a very modernist complaint. They say that the resurrection of Jesus would not be fair—If God raised Jesus, why only Jesus? Why didn't God do it for everybody? I understand that view, but it completely misses the point that the resurrection is a beginning. It is a seed being sown, a tune being composed which everyone now gets to sing.

And the resurrection is the sign that death is defeated. That's the point of 1 Corinthians 15. Many Christians talk about death in a way that suggests it isn't actually so bad after all. But if Christians allow death to rule in the realm of physicality, then ultimately the doctrine of creation is in jeopardy—the doctrine that God remains the good creator who loves the world that God has made and who is not going to abandon it.

**You're saying that the resurrection of Jesus introduces something really new in the history of the cosmos and that this new thing is connected to a historical event. By contrast, Borg and others would say that something can be truly new, but it can arise from a story or myth. not from a historical event.**

Yes. The myth of a new beginning was around for centuries. The Jews weren't expecting it to take the form of a young, would-be Messiah executed by the pagans followed three days later by news of a resurrection. They were thinking in terms of something happening to all God's people at the very end of time. Resurrection was as much a shock for them as anyone.

**The resurrection, seen as a "new beginning," has always raised a question: Why is the new beginning so slow to take shape? Why is the reign of God delayed?**

The problem of the delay of the parousia is a modern myth. The problem is caused by liberal Christianity's no longer believing in the resurrection, which means that the weight of God's activity is pushed forward in time. There's not much evidence that the early church was anxious about this. First-century Christianity didn't see itself so much as living in the last days, waiting for the parousia, as living in the first days of God's new world.

We are still awaiting the final outworking of what God accomplished in Jesus, but there are all kinds of signs to show that, though the situation is often bleak, we are in fact on the right road.

**You have engaged in dialogue with Dominic Crossan and others in the Jesus Seminar, which has famously issued statements on the unreliability of the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. Though you have generally reached different conclusions from major figures in the seminar, do you think its work has been fruitful?**

It has alerted a large number of people to the fact that there really is historical investigation into the first century, and that the world of the first century is not the same as ours. But the way it has done that—with the rhetoric of “We, the scholars, will tell you, the ordinary people, the truth”—has been singularly unhelpful.

I would add that any work that makes available major new editions of relevant noncanonical texts, like the Gospels of Thomas and Philip, is very valuable.

**Can you say something about your own life of faith?**

I was raised in the Church of England and at various times questioned it, but saw no reason to jump ship. My parents are devout middle Anglicans. The evangelical emphasis, which is still very important to me, came through attending camp. When I started doing my doctorate on Paul, one of the small but quite stunning things that happened was my realizing that Paul by no means legitimates the evangelical worldview. That is, the big question about justification for Paul was not How do I find gracious God? but How do Jews and gentiles who believe in Christ share table fellowship?

**You have made your own scholarship accessible to the church and the wider public, as in the television series you've worked on for the BBC on Jesus and the Middle East and your new series of "New Testament Guides for Everyone." Is this work part of how you understand your vocation?**

C. S. Lewis once said that if you can't translate stuff into the vernacular, you either don't understand it or you don't believe it. Another Lewis-ism is this: we must never underestimate people's intelligence even as we mustn't overestimate their information. In other words, if you lead them step by step, most people can catch on. Just don't assume that they know who Josephus was or that they know what happened in A.D. 70.

Fortunately, being in a church position, not an academic one, I've been able to write what I want to write. And I've always wanted to write both popular and scholarly articles. Also, I come from a family that isn't particularly academic, and I'm married to a woman who certainly isn't an academic, and I have four children whose regular comment is, "Dad, you're going to have to say it clearer than that in order to get hold of me."

Finally, by temperament I'm a big-picture person as opposed to a details person. Most biblical scholars are detail people. The problem with people like that is that when they are put in front of a class of first-year students, they will start talking about the textual problems in Romans 2 when students have no idea who Paul is.

**How do you make the figure of Jesus come alive for people these days?**

One way is to urge people to become a character in the story: You are on the edge of a crowd listening to Jesus. And the sacraments are important. When scripture and sacrament meet, people are driven to the intimacy of prayer and the life of discipleship.

**It seems that people these days are more open to spirituality. Do you find they are also open to the spirituality of the church?**

Under secularism, people felt embarrassed even to mention their religious hunger. And now, people are happy to talk about it. The church needs to be able to say, Yes, we do actually know a certain amount about prayer and meditation—these are things deeply rooted within our tradition. We should be running schools of prayer. We should advertise them as such .

However, if that's all we did or if that was the main thing we did, we might be in danger of, as it were, pandering to a split-level world, treating spirituality as a private hobby. So simultaneously the church has to be speaking and acting in political, public and social ways. That's terribly difficult, and it's always going to be risky. But that's one of the reasons that my political understanding of Paul is helpful. To say that Jesus is Lord means that Caesar isn't. Jesus is Savior, therefore Caesar isn't. The rhetoric about the Roman Empire in the first century has astoundingly close resonances with the rhetoric of empire surrounding the U.S. today.

I recently read George Steiner's book *Errata*, and it struck me that he illustrates the modern spiritual situation when, at the end of the book, he's struggling with the question of God. He isn't sure that he believes in God, but he believes in original sin because of the existence of child torture, abuse of animals, and all the absurdly evil things that happen. He knows that this is not what creation was meant for. That is a profoundly Jewish and Christian reaction. Steiner is in effect rejecting the existential philosophy of Sartre without embracing theism. And it seems to me that is where postmodernism at its best gets us: it preaches the doctrine of original sin to arrogant modernism.

But suppose there is somebody who has taken this torture, this meaningless, absurd evil, onto himself. That is God's project. The Christian mission as I conceive it is poised between the unique ministry of Jesus and the final new heaven and new earth. Our task is to implement the first and thereby to anticipate the second.