

## The Resurrection: Nine Recent Approaches

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**Abstract:** *Writings in biblical studies and Christology in recent years have shown a range of approaches regarding the theme of the resurrection. In this article the author surveys nine contributions to the topic and assesses them according to their strengths and weaknesses.*

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**Key Words:** resurrection; Easter; empty tomb; Jesus; Christology; contemporary theology

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**W**e would come up with a tediously long list if we were to reply comprehensively to the question: what have they been saying about the resurrection of Jesus in the last ten years?<sup>1</sup> In any case many authors go over the same ground and do not add very much either to the debates about the resurrection or to the conclusions that can be reached. Hence I have decided to select nine books that have significant things to say, either positively or negatively, about the resurrection and the possibility of Easter faith and hope. This representative sample will bring readers into the current state of resurrection studies.

In presenting these nine works, I do not intend to take readers through them in complete detail and provide full-length book reports. Instead, I shall choose and highlight significant features that should interest students of the resurrection.

### SOME POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

*Anthony Kelly, The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought (2008)*

Anthony Kelly deserves to lead the team of those who have contributed positively to the study of resurrection.<sup>2</sup> He brings together biblical, theological and philosophical thinking to show how the resurrection of Jesus “saturates” the whole of Christian faith and should transform the life and thought of believers. As *the* key to God’s relationship with Jesus and human beings, the resurrection eludes any precise definitions that would pin it down. Rather it provides the broadest horizon within which we can recognize what human life ultimately means, how we should live, and what we can expect from the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

This latest plea for the utter centrality of Easter faith follows earlier attempts to focus Christian thinking and life on the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. In the run up to

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<sup>1</sup> This article constitutes the first chapter in a forthcoming book by the author on the resurrection.

<sup>2</sup> A. J. Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); see my review in *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 478-80.

the Second Vatican Council, François-Xavier Durrwell helped to “rehabilitate” Easter as the central mystery of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> In the postconciliar years some writers, like the Lutheran Wolfhart Pannenberg and myself,<sup>4</sup> tried again to revitalize theology and its various specializations by recalling where they should constantly go to draw meaning, values and guidelines: the light of the first Easter Sunday.

But the strange neglect of the resurrection persists. Sadly, leading figures in liberation theology have reflected only a little on Christ’s rising from the dead.<sup>5</sup> Themes other than the resurrection continue to engage the attention of Catholic moral theologians and, even more surprisingly, the resurrection can be seriously neglected by those who write in the area of sacramental theology.<sup>6</sup> We will return later in this book to ways in which Easter faith should enliven those two branches of theology, as well as liberation theology itself. Here I wish only to endorse Kelly’s call to engage ourselves much more fully with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

### *N. T. Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God (2003)*

A magisterial volume by N. T. Wright offers over eight hundred pages in response to basic questions about the origins of Christianity and the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> What did the first Christians mean when they proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead? Where does the historical evidence lead us when we investigate what precisely happened at the first Easter? What should be said about believing today in Jesus’ resurrection?

The historical and biblical strength of this book emerges right from the first two hundred pages that map ancient beliefs about life beyond death in both pagan and Jewish worlds. Wright takes us through a panorama of what Greeks and Romans held about where souls went after death. The pagan world assumed that resurrection was impossible. Among the Jews, earlier hints (e.g., Isa 26:19; Ezek 37:1-14; and Hos 6:1-2; 13:14) developed in response to the deaths of those martyred in God’s cause, and became a full-blown belief in coming resurrection (Dan 12:2-3; 2 Macc 7). Of course, some like the Sadducees rejected any life beyond death worth speaking of, and others expected only a disembodied immortality. But by the time of Jesus “most Jews believed in resurrection.”<sup>8</sup> They expected a general resurrection at the end of the present age: that is to say, a newly embodied life at the end of history. But no one imagined that any individual had already

<sup>3</sup> F.-X. Durrwell, *The Resurrection*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960). Years later Durrwell took up again the main themes of *The Resurrection in Christ Our Passover: The Indispensable Role of the Resurrection in Our Salvation*, trans. John F. Craghan (Liguori, MI: Liguori Publications, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991-98); G. O’Collins, *Jesus Risen: An Historical, Fundamental and Systematic Examination of Christ’s Resurrection* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Even if Jon Sobrino has reflected on the resurrection (see O’Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 94-97), the way liberation theologians have generally neglected that theme is reflected by the fact that resurrection is not mentioned in the index to Christopher Rowland ed., *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> On the way moral theologians and sacramental theologians neglect the resurrection, see Kelly, *Resurrection Effect*, 159-68 and 5, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); see my review, *The Tablet* (April 19, 2003): 28-29.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection*, 205; “most” may be too strong, but certainly many Jews at the time of Jesus (like the Pharisees) believed in resurrection.

been raised from the dead or would be raised in anticipation of the great last day. Here one should note that Hosea 6:1-2 (“us”) and 13:14 (“them”) speak in the plural and of a community resurrection, and not in the singular or of an individual’s resurrection. Nor was there any agreement among those who believed that (general) resurrection would eventually happen as to what it would be like. Would it involve being woken from the sleep of death to “shine” forever like the stars and “the brightness of the sky” (Dan 12) or to enjoy a reassembled body and the restoration of limbs cut off by executioners (2 Macc 7)?

On two scores, as Wright shows, Christian faith in resurrection had no strict precedent even in Judaism. First, it proclaimed that one individual (Jesus) had been raised from the dead in anticipation of the general resurrection at the end of all history. Belief in Jesus’ resurrection could not have been generated by prior Jewish beliefs or study of the biblical texts expressing those beliefs. Second, the other striking difference appears in a distinctively Christian consensus about the nature of resurrection. The newly embodied life of the resurrected Jesus involved a glorious transformation of his human existence, the “spiritual body” of 1 Corinthians 15. That made Christians agree in expecting that kind of risen existence for themselves. Thus when compared with Jewish hopes for resurrection, the Easter message of Paul and other early Christian witnesses contained two strikingly new elements.

Through the heart of his book Wright deploys the historical data that support accepting the appearances of the risen Christ and the discovery of his empty tomb. Those two events prompted the resurrection faith in Jesus as the messianic Son of God, a faith that set Christianity going and provided its essential shape Wright traces to the third century the trajectory of Easter faith and resurrection hope triggered by Jesus’ own victory over death.

In such a monumental study different readers will have their favorite sections. I was particularly struck by what Wright wrote on the Easter stories found in the closing chapters of the four Gospels. They contain surprising, even strange, features.<sup>9</sup> For example, up to the death and burial of Jesus, all four Gospels constantly quote and echo the Jewish scriptures. A familiar theme in Matthew is his “all this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet,” to which the evangelist then attaches one or more biblical citations. Surprisingly such biblical “embroidery” does not show up in his final, Easter chapter. The other evangelists also leave their Easter narratives biblically “unadorned.” A second unexpected feature is the absence of personal hope in the Easter stories. Elsewhere the New Testament writers repeatedly express their own hope for risen life when they refer to the resurrection of Jesus. A classic example of this connection being made comes in 1 Corinthians 15, a letter written years before any of the Gospels took their final shape. These and further strange silences and unexpected features of the Easter chapters in the Gospels should encourage us to think with Wright that the substance of these chapters represents a very old telling of the discovery of the empty tomb and of Jesus’ encounters with the disciples - a time before biblical and theological reflection

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 585-615. Kelly was also struck by Wright’s theme of the surprising items in the Gospel accounts of the appearances of the risen Jesus, but he regrets Wright’s failure (in a monumental historical and apologetic study) to attend to the resurrection as “the phenomenon that saturates the whole life of faith” (*Resurrection Effect*, 4, 61-52).

began working on connections and implications to be drawn from that discovery and those appearances. There is a haunting, ancient simplicity in the Easter stories that speaks for their credibility.

*Richard Swinburne, The Resurrection of God Incarnate (2003)*

Like Wright, Richard Swinburne is concerned to put a case for faith in Jesus' resurrection from the dead.<sup>10</sup> Being a philosopher rather than a biblical scholar or historian, he takes a "broader" approach and concludes that there is a high probability that Jesus rose from the dead. This "broad" approach involves four major steps: (a) God, being perfectly good and perfectly powerful, had good reasons for "intervening" in human history by becoming incarnate. (b) Since the life and teaching of Jesus show him to have been the incarnate Son of God, we can conclude that he was uniquely the kind of person God could be expected to have raised from the dead. (c) In making his case, Swinburne paints with broad sweeps of the brush, but also introduces some specific questions and arguments. (d) He draws together his case by concluding with a calculus of logical probability. It expresses in a formal manner his previous steps, and aims at showing how it is very probable that the resurrection happened. I know of no other book on the resurrection that ends in such a mathematical way with twelve pages of axioms, theorems and the whole apparatus of calculus.

Let me comment on each of the four steps. As regards (a), the suffering and sinning of human beings make it plausible that in his infinite love God would act by personally coming on the scene to set right a tragic situation. After all, John wrote: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). Nevertheless, the incarnation did not have to happen. God might have dealt in other ways with the tragedy of human sinning and suffering, or—to use Swinburne's way of putting things - have "fulfilled" the divine "obligations"<sup>11</sup> in ways other than the incarnation. In the light of the divine freedom, may one allege that, given the human predicament, the incarnation was highly probable? Here I must also express a quibble about the language of "intervention" that Swinburne (and others) constantly use. To call the incarnation an "intervention" can too easily suggest an "outsider" God, who comes on the scene for the first time, even a kind of "meddlesome" God. This is inappropriate language when we recall that God is always intimately present everywhere and in every situation, from moment to moment sustaining in being everything that is. It would be less misleading to characterize the incarnation as a "special divine act" or, rather, together with the resurrection as "the special divine act" that differs qualitatively from such special divine acts as miracles.<sup>12</sup>

Here too I must also protest against Swinburne "reducing" the resurrection to the category of "miracle" and describing "miracles" as a "violations of natural laws."<sup>13</sup> First, the

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<sup>10</sup> R. Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>12</sup> On divine activity and special divine acts, see G. O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn; 2009), 112-18; and *id.*, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology Toward a New Fundamental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22-29; Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Swinburne, *The Resurrection*, 186, 190. On p. 31 Swinburne speaks of "suspending" the laws of nature, but at once returns to the language of "the violation of the natural laws." Kelly is also troubled by the way Swinburne

resurrection of Jesus should not be called a miracle or even a super-miracle. Miracles, like the healing miracles of Jesus, are, to be sure, signs of what he wishes to do for us in the final kingdom (in the perfect bodily "healing" of the resurrection). Nevertheless, they happened and happen within our historical world of space and time, even if they point to what is to come. The resurrection of Jesus goes beyond any such miracles; it was and is the real beginning of the world to come, the event that initiates a sequence of final events that will fulfill and complete his personal rising from the dead (1 Cor 15:20-28). Second, "violate" has four meanings, all of them negative and even ugly: (i) disregard or fail to comply with; (ii) treat with disrespect; (iii) disturb or break in upon; (iv) assault sexually. Presumably Swinburne uses "violate" in sense (i). But when working miracles occasionally and for good reasons, God is surely better described as suspending or overriding the normal working of natural laws. Since it is God who created the precise shape and functions of natural laws, it looks odd to speak of God "disregarding" or "failing to comply with" them. "Suspending" or "overriding" seems more appropriate language.

As regards Swinburne's second step (b), what he calls "the marks of an incarnate God," or "the life required of an incarnate God," are found exemplified in Jesus. He was the one and only prophet to satisfy the requirements for being and being recognized as God incarnate. Obviously Swinburne cannot go into much detail about the life, preaching, claims and miraculous deeds of Jesus and what that implied about his personal identity. But a good case can be made for concluding that, when revealing the divine mystery and working for the salvation of human beings, Jesus gave the impression of claiming to be on a par with God. To put matters the way Swinburne does, Jesus was indeed the kind of person God could be expected to raise from the dead. I would prefer to say that Jesus, while being rejected and crucified as a blasphemer and threat to public order, was in fact so truly identified with God and the divine cause that one would expect God to vindicate him in resurrection. Luke cites in Acts 2:17 a psalm that suggests what one might or even should expect from God after the execution of Jesus: "You will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption" (Ps 16:9). (c) Swinburne introduces something valuable in some specific questions and arguments. He names, for instance, the new celebration of Sunday as a question to be answered. Why did the Jewish disciples of Jesus, his first disciples, no longer give priority to the Jewish Sabbath or Saturday and turn "the first day of the week" or Sunday into the day for meeting and celebrating the Eucharist (which, after all, was instituted at the Last Supper seemingly on the day that we call Thursday)? What made them hold Sunday so special that they changed not only their manner of worship (1 Cor 11:23-26) but also their special day for worship? An obvious answer is close at hand for this momentous switch away from the Sabbath, the day that God was understood to have assigned for rest and worship. Sunday was the day when the tomb of Jesus was discovered to be open and empty and the day when the disciples first encountered the risen Jesus.

Swinburne also spends a chapter examining and refuting five rival theories of what happened to Jesus: for instance, that Jesus did not die on the cross but was taken down alive and recovered, or that he did die and was buried, but his body was then removed by friends. As regards the first theory, which sensationalist but totally unscholarly writers revive every year or so, Swinburne points to several large difficulties it faces: for example, if Jesus continued to live on, "is it really plausible to suppose that he would have taken no

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presents the resurrection as a "super-miracle" in a world of natural laws; "the idea of a new creation is not evident." (Kelly, *Resurrection Effect*, 8).

further interest in the mushrooming movement which his passion and apparent resurrection had inspired? Would he (in view of what we know about him from the Gospels) really have colluded with such massive deception?"<sup>14</sup>

What of the theory that friends (e.g. the female disciples) removed the body of Jesus from the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea had given him burial, took the body for proper burial elsewhere (e.g. in Nazareth), and concealed this act from most of the disciples. But why would such disciples have wanted to conceal from the other disciples what they had done out of devotion to Jesus? Even more importantly, could they have been able to keep secret their actions in removing the body from the tomb, transporting it somewhere else and giving it honorable burial there? As Swinburne remarks, "even if they had tried to keep the theft secret from the other disciples, it is most unlikely that they would have succeeded."<sup>15</sup>

In an appendix Swinburne assigns numerical values to the various probabilities involved in his four-step argument. He maintains that, if these values do not "exaggerate the force of the arguments by which they are supported,...it is indeed very probable that Jesus was God incarnate who rose from the dead."<sup>16</sup> In view of the Trinitarian faith which Swinburne accepts, it would be preferable to speak of Jesus being the Son of God incarnate who rose from the dead. But, more importantly, while appreciating Swinburne's vigorous defense of the resurrection, I wonder how many people could come to believe in the resurrection simply on the basis of numerical values which they might assign to probabilities constituting various steps in the arguments that they develop from the historical testimony of the New Testament. Personal factors and experience, not to mention, the influence of the Holy Spirit, feed into the making of Easter faith, as I will argue in a later chapter.

*Sandra Schneiders, Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel (2003)*

Unlike the three authors we have just examined, Sandra Schneiders did not write her acclaimed book on John's Gospel precisely as a work on the resurrection.<sup>17</sup> But the subtitle could easily have been "encountering the *risen* Jesus in and through the Fourth Gospel" (emphasis mine). The book shares the aim of John's Gospel: to prompt its readers into encountering and believing in the risen Jesus. To be sure, the Fourth Gospel assigns only two chapters out of twenty-one to the Easter story. But, as Schneiders points out, "the Johannine resurrection narrative is one of the literary jewels of the New Testament."<sup>18</sup> What is more, the Jesus of the entire Fourth Gospel is no mere historical memory but a living presence. Right through the whole text and especially in the stories of various representative individuals who meet Jesus, readers are invited not to return to the past but to relate here and now in faith to the risen Jesus. The story of the man born blind (John 9:1-41), in particular, synthesizes the challenge of seeing the risen Christ with the eyes of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 174-75. See also G. O'Collins and D. Kendall, "On Reissuing Venturini," *Gregorianum* 75 (1994): 241-54; reprinted in G. O'Collins and D. Kendall, *Focus on Jesus* (Leominster, UK : Gracewing, 1996), 153-75.

<sup>15</sup> Swinburne, *The Resurrection*, 184.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>17</sup> S. M. Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 57.

faith and committing oneself to him.<sup>19</sup> In the text such episodes belong to the history of the pre-Easter Jesus, but they move beyond the past to put the timeless questions: do you here and now experience in Jesus the One who is utterly true and good and brings us the face of God? If so, are you willing to become his disciple, and so “find life in his name” (John 20:31)?

The presence of the risen Christ permeates the Fourth Gospel, not least the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-53).<sup>20</sup> It is faith in Jesus as the resurrection and the life (John 11:25) that allows Martha, Mary, and other disciples to face and cope with death in their own families and the prospect of death themselves.

The risen and glorious Jesus remains intimately present in and among his community of friends (John 15:15). In the struggles and disappointments of their lives and ministry, experiences of the glorified Jesus will be actualized over and over again when they hear the word proclaimed “It is the Lord” and sit down at table with him (John 21:1-14).

Schneiders joins forces with the Fourth Gospel to remind us that the resurrection of Jesus is something much more than a matter of historical debate; at its heart it is an existential issue, a spiritual challenge, and a personal relationship. In the haunting words with which Albert Schweitzer ended his 1906 classic,

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their experience Who He is.<sup>21</sup>

In recent years the western world has witnessed a growing interest in personal religious experience and various forms of spirituality, including alternative spiritualities not embodied in nor often addressed by traditional religion. Reading Schneiders’ book on encountering Jesus and re-reading what Schweitzer wrote a hundred years ago suggests that, unless we take up again the experiential reference of resurrection faith as proposed by John’s Gospel, we will fail to provide what is urgently needed: a revival of that Easter spirituality, which can provide life and life in abundance.

### *T. Peters, et al., eds., Resurrection and Scientific Assessments 2002*

The fifth and final book to be considered among “the positive contributions” is a theological and scientific study of bodily resurrection produced by an international, team.<sup>22</sup> In 1987, after a study week at the papal summer residence in Castel Gandolfo involving theologians, philosophers, and scientists, John Paul II wrote to the director of the Vatican Observatory encouraging such dialogue and raising a series of striking questions on how the findings of modern science might enrich our understanding of some Christian

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 149-70.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 171-83.

<sup>21</sup> A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: A. & C. Black, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1954; orig. German 1906), 401.

<sup>22</sup> T. Peters, R. J. Russell and M. Welker, eds., *Resurrection and Scientific Assessments* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002).

beliefs. What, for instance, are the implications of science for faith in the life of the world to come? *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* responded to this question by bringing together distinguished scientists and theologians to explore the belief in bodily resurrection in the light of the laws of nature.

Through a meeting in Heidelberg in 2001 and a series of conferences elsewhere, the three editors gathered a seminar team that represented research and teaching faculty in physics, biology, neuroscience, biblical studies, Egyptology, church history, philosophy, and systematic theology. The eighteen contributors (ten from Germany, six from the USA, and one each from England and South Africa) pursued the question: How should we assess the resurrection of Christ and our own future resurrection religiously and scientifically?

One of the editors, Ted Peters, not only skilfully introduces the book by summarizing the particular issues to be handled but also draws together in a conclusion some major conceptual challenges. How, for instance, can faith in the resurrection present (a) the nature of the risen body and (b) the preservation of personal identity in the resurrection? Peters quotes at the end the radiant lines of Rabindranath Tagore: "Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come."

While the "Big Bang" cosmology seems to favour the biblical doctrine of the first creation, two major scientific scenarios for the future threaten the Easter promise of the new creation to come. In a masterly chapter, "Bodily Resurrection, Eschatology, and Scientific Cosmology," Robert Russell faces the two scenarios for cosmic death: the universe will either freeze itself out of existence or collapse back into a dense fireball. But we may not presume that the laws of nature, which have governed the past and continue to govern present, will also necessarily govern the future. In the ongoing history of the cosmos, God is free to act in new ways and transform the laws that he has created. Christian hope rests on something radically new, which we have already glimpsed through the resurrection of Christ himself.

John Polkinghorne, familiar to many through his work on science and religion and winning the Templeton Prize in 2002, shows how the final hope of Christians cannot be truly maintained by those who play down the empty tomb and bodily resurrection. That hope involves, along with a personal and spiritual continuity, some element of material continuity between the pre-resurrection and the post-resurrection Jesus. Those who disagree end up arguing for a "full" tomb, which means an "empty" Christian faith. They also have to reckon with the clear evidence that all four Gospels found it very important that the tomb of Jesus was empty. In some real sense, a genuine resurrection must be bodily. The message of the empty tomb also reinforces a sense of a redemption that enjoys a cosmic scope; in other words, the resurrection brings the well founded expectation of a "new heaven" and a "new earth."

Among the many fine chapters in this book let me also mention those by Brian Daley (on early Christian ways of articulating faith in the resurrection), Nancey Murphy (on the resurrection and personal identity), and Noreen Herzfeld. She demolishes as science fiction the thesis of cybernetic immortality that reduces the human self to mere information patterns.

All in all, this valuable dialogue between scientists and theologians illuminates the Christian hope that the end of the world will bring the healing and transformation of our



personal history and the renewal of all things. It translates into modern terms the link St Paul had drawn in Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15 between (a) the resurrection of Jesus, (b) the bodily resurrection of human beings, and (c) the new creation of the whole universe.

The five books chosen for this sample of positive contributions to resurrection studies represent distinct fields: theology (Kelly), biblical studies (Wright), philosophy (Swinburne), spirituality (Schneiders), and science (Peters, Russell and Welker). Before turning now to two works that fail to advance the cause of resurrection studies, let me first recall two learned but ambivalent books that provoke a “yes, but” reaction.

### BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

After co-authoring a major commentary on Matthew's Gospel and publishing other significant works on the New Testament, Dale Allison has long ago established himself as not only a notable, learned biblical scholar but also at times a provocatively independent interpreter. Not surprisingly he was chosen to write the entry on Jesus for the 2006 edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*.<sup>23</sup> His *Resurrecting Jesus*,<sup>24</sup> despite its title, also contains essays on other topics. But it belongs in this chapter, since it contains nearly two hundred pages on the Easter appearances, the empty tomb, and the whole question of historical research and belief in the resurrection.

After the death of Jesus, something happened to set the Christian movement going. What was it? After stating the orthodox belief that defends the reality of the empty tomb and the objectivity of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, Allison takes us through six rival theories (e.g. hallucination, deliberate deception, and so forth), indicating their exponents and noting various difficulties that tell against these theories (199-213). He skilfully groups together these hypotheses and alerts readers to their origins, import, and weaknesses.

Over specific questions connected with the resurrection, Allison engages with N. T. Wright and Richard Swinburne, as well as with me (mainly on the issue of bereavement experiences, of which we will speak below). He probes Wright's claim that the resurrection of Jesus is the best historical explanation of the biblical evidence (345-50). Like many others (including myself in *Easter Faith*)<sup>25</sup> he insists that we all evaluate questions about the resurrection from within our own worldview; background theories (about such matters as accepting or denying the possibility of special divine actions and, indeed, about the existence and nature of God) can be decisive (346-50; see 340-44). Hence he “understands” why Swinburne, “in his recent defence of the resurrection, commences by first seeking to establish the existence of a certain sort of God and the likelihood of such a God communicating with and redeeming the human race” (341). Allison also joins with Swinburne in putting the question: was Jesus someone who “should have been raised from the dead” (349). In other words, when reflecting on the resurrection, we need also to assess the teaching and actions of Jesus. Allison draws

<sup>23</sup> “Jesus,” in Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Vol. 7 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 7:4843-52.

<sup>24</sup> D. C. Allison, Jr, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York/London: T. & T. Clark, 2005); hereafter references to this book will be given intratextually.

<sup>25</sup> G. O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 1-24.

together the two requirements: "if judgment about the resurrection cannot be isolated from one's worldview, it equally cannot be isolated from one's estimation of the pre-Easter Jesus" (350).

In some sections Allison shows himself at his incisive best: for instance, in an excursus eliminating the arguments of John Dominic Crossan (and others) and defending the historicity of the burial story and Joseph of Arimathea's central role in it (352-63). He rightly observes that the historicity of the burial story always plays some role in evaluating the historicity of the empty tomb story. It is not that the former "proves" the latter. But, as Dan Kendall and I wrote, "for a critical assessment of the New Testament traditions about the empty tomb much depends on one's evaluation of the burial story."<sup>26</sup> Our article took aim at the questionable case Crossan made against the historicity of the burial story that we find in Mark 15:42-47. As Allison was to do, we concluded that Crossan "has done nothing to undermine its historical credibility, which remains accepted by very many biblical scholars from Bultmann to Fitzmyer and beyond."<sup>27</sup> As far as I know, my article with Kendall and then Allison's excursus are the only detailed examinations and rejections of the way Crossan dismissed the story of Jesus' historical burial by Joseph of Arimathea. Given Allison's penchant for adequate and even extensive documentation, it is a little strange that he made no mention of the article I published with Kendall.

In general, Allison's documentation is breathtaking: 692 footnotes for his 178 pages on the resurrection and many of these footnotes contain multiple references. Unlike some scholarly books, his index of names covers books and articles that appear in the footnotes. Again unlike some modern scholars, Allison does not limit himself to recent or even very recent years when citing writers who meet with his approval or disapproval. His exceptionally wide reading enables to quote nineteenth-century or even earlier works that express with clarity, and at times elegance, notions that Allison endorses or deplors.

But, regrettably, when comparing the post-resurrection appearances with reports of people experiencing their beloved dead and, in particular, alleged collective experiences of that kind, he introduces in an undifferentiated way references to a mass of literature, some of it unreliable popular publications, some it coming from parapsychologists of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and some of it not dealing, at least directly, with the matter in question, the experiences of bereaved persons (269-75, 278-84). It almost seems as if the sheer quantity of the references is meant to replace the quality of the argument. Apropos of "reports of collective apparitions," Allison notes that they are "prominent in the literature of parapsychology but not in normal psychology" (279, n. 292). That should have warned him against introducing, as he does, references to a number of long-discredited parapsychologists. Very many scholars, including professional psychologists, find only pseudo-science in the works of parapsychologists.

But let me come to the heart of my "quarrel" with Allison. He scrutinizes carefully the New Testament data about the appearances of the risen Jesus (or, as he and others call them, "christophanies") (232-69) and the discovery of the empty tomb (299-337). As regards the former, he states what "appear to be the facts": "several people reported christophanies," and "Jesus ostensibly appeared on more than one occasion to more than one person" (269). Reviewing the arguments against and for the historicity of the empty

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<sup>26</sup> G. O'Collins and D. Kendall, "Did Joseph of Arimathea Exist?," *Biblica* 75 (1994): 235-41.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

tomb (300-11 and 311-31, respectively), he tentatively concludes that the story of the empty tomb is “more likely to be history than legend” (344). As a biblical scholar, Allison feels himself at an impasse: historical reasoning cannot by itself decide the issue and produce certain conclusions about the alleged resurrection of Jesus. The evidence seems inconclusive. In Allison’s words, “historical criticism cannot judge the extraordinary experiences of the disciples to be true or false, or attribute them either to the Spirit of God or to *psychology*” (342, n. 564; italics mine). Yet it is to psychology and reports of bereavement experiences that Allison himself turns.

Encouraged by his own experience of a deceased friend and by experiences of his deceased father that happened to several members of his immediate family (275-77), Allison moves to interpret the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus as instances of such bereavement experiences. He presses “the similarities between reports of post-mortem encounters with Jesus and visions of the recently departed” (364), and never pauses to review the dissimilarities.<sup>28</sup> He ignores, for instance, the way the bereaved who have enjoyed such visions do not claim that their dear departed are risen from the dead and that their graves have been found empty. Where the Easter narratives do not supply some alleged feature of the bereaved disciples’ mourning experience (for instance, the anger that they felt), Allison supplies it himself: they “would not have been human if they had not felt anger and resentment toward those they held responsible for crucifying the man to whom they were devoted” (372).

Allison concludes his book with twelve pages on “the disciples and bereavement” (364-75). Some final words sum up his thesis: “shortly after his death, the followers of Jesus saw him again, sensed his invisible presence, overcame their guilt by finding sense in his tragic end, idealized and internalized their teacher, and remembered his words and deeds” (375). This summary reduces all that happened after the death and burial of Jesus to what happened on the side of the bereaved disciples, to their subjective experience, and to their activity. They “saw him again” and “sensed his invisible presence,” rather than the risen Jesus himself taking the initiative to “appear” to them (1 Cor 15:5-8). They “overcame their guilt by finding sense in his tragic end,” rather than the risen Jesus and the Holy Spirit conveying to them forgiveness (e.g. John 21:15-19) and insight (e.g. John 16:13). They “idealized and internalized their teacher,” rather than their risen Lord encountering them and enabling them to “live in him” and “abide” in his love (e.g. John 15:1-10). They “remembered his words and deeds,” rather than the Holy Spirit coming to “teach” them everything and “remind” them of all that Jesus had said and done (e.g. John 14:25).

This one-sided privileging of the disciples’ experience and activity runs dead contrary to the primacy of the divine initiative that pervasively shapes the Easter narratives and theology of Paul and the evangelists. It also leaves behind Allison’s own theological tradition.<sup>29</sup> The leaders of the Protestant Reformation rightly highlighted God’s prior activity in Christ and the Holy Spirit over anything that human beings, including the

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<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion of the similarities and dissimilarities in the analogy proposed by Allison and others, see O’Collins, *Christology*, 97-100.

<sup>29</sup> Towards the end Allison talks about handing the discussion over to “the philosophers and theologians, among whose lofty company” he is “not privileged to dwell” (351). Some dialogue with them might have stopped Allison from dismissing resurrection as “the recovery” of one’s “current flesh and bones” (344; see 219-28).

first disciples, might by themselves see, sense, overcome, find, idealize, internalize and remember. In Allison's version of things, the coming to Easter faith and the foundation of the Christian Church looks very much like a human "work." Allison properly recognizes that the findings of historical research, even that practiced by someone as expert as himself, are insufficient in themselves to bring him or anyone else to faith in the risen Jesus. Once or twice he recalls the setting in which such faith flourishes and grows, the Christian community at worship on Easter Sunday (xi, 352). The Easter faith of generations of worshipping and practicing believers provides what Allison looks for: the experiential and religious "warrant" for accepting that God has raised Jesus from the dead (342). A pity that he did not turn in that direction rather than use (or misuse?) psychology and engage in what amounts to a serious "reduction" of the New Testament's message of the resurrection. If one might adapt some words of St Paul (1 Cor 15:54-55), "resurrection has been swallowed up in psychology. Where, O resurrection is your victory? Where, O resurrection is your sting?"

Allison begins with a moving "confession," in which he shows his longing to endorse a faith that holds that Jesus was truly resurrected from the dead (213-19). But, bewitched by possible analogies with bereavement experiences, he ends with his own version of psychological reductionism. In an article to appear in the *Irish Theological Quarterly* I explore the bereavement analogy, which is both like and unlike the Easter experiences of the first disciples.

*Daniel Smith, Revisiting the Empty Tomb: The Early History of Easter (2010)*

In a very recent book Daniel Smith takes on a more limited project than Allison but practices a similar (yet not identical) form of reductionism: it draws not on modern psychological research into the experiences of bereaved persons, but on a mass of "assumption" stories from Graeco-Roman and Jewish sources that are supposed to unlock the "real" meaning of the empty tomb story in Mark 16:1-8.<sup>30</sup> Let us see some of the details.

Smith limits himself to (a) exploring the tradition of Jesus' empty tomb (as he reconstructs its religious background) and the tradition of the post-resurrection appearances, and (b) accounting for the differences of perspective between these two traditions. He explains the differences by arguing that the empty tomb tradition did not originate as a way of stating that Jesus had been raised from the dead but as a "disappearance" tradition or a way of expressing that Jesus had been assumed from the tomb into heaven and would be seen again at the Parousia. He associates the earliest form of the disappearance tradition as he finds it in Mark 16:1-8 with, for instance, the disappearance of Elijah in 2 Kings 2. One might raise a doubt here: Elijah, unlike Jesus, had not died and been buried before being assumed.

Smith has studied assiduously many ancient texts that seem relevant to his argument, along with modern authors who comment on them. He notes significant differences between Jewish accounts of assumption (through which Elijah and others escape from death by being "taken up" with a view to their eschatological functions to come) and Graeco-Roman stories. The latter usually involved an apotheosis in which some

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<sup>30</sup> D. A. Smith, *Revisiting the Empty Tomb: The Early History of Easter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

hero was taken alive into the presence of the gods or else his spirit ascended while his dead body was buried.

Smith recognizes that we have something unique in the case of Jesus: Christian belief in him involved both resurrection and assumption/ascension (e.g. Phil 2:9; 1 Tim 3:16). But he never acknowledges a key difficulty thrown up by the cases he cites of Herakles, Romulus and other such heroes and heroines. Unlike Jesus (who lived and died shortly before the New Testament came into existence), they were understood to have lived in a very distant past, and—one can reasonably maintain—most probably never existed at all. A similar difficulty also affects the way in which Elijah and other ancient biblical figures might be pressed into service as parallels for the traditions that arose about what happened to Jesus. Whatever one's verdict on the historical reality of these ancient figures, they certainly did not exist, as Jesus did, within living memory.

Smith does not refer to Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*,<sup>31</sup> a work that might have qualified his willingness to credit the New Testament authors and their sources with a high degree of "creativity." Bauckham recognizes how the period between Jesus and the final composition of Mark and the other Gospels was spanned by the continued presence and testimony of those who had participated in the history of Jesus: namely, such original eyewitnesses as Peter, Mary Magdalene, and the sons of Zebedee. They played a central and authoritative role in guiding the transmission of the traditions about Jesus and would not have tolerated "creative" innovations. Bauckham's historical reconstruction of the role of the original eyewitnesses does not allow for the kind of imaginative developments Smith alleges. Smith imagines Mark and/or his sources fashioning, on the basis of a saying from "Q": "You will not see me" (Matt 23:39; Luke 13:35), an empty tomb tradition that involved not resurrection from the dead but Jesus being taken up into heaven.

Dealing with this and other texts from the sayings-source used by Matthew and Luke, Smith (like many others) writes of those (in the plural) who compiled Q and, to support his theory of an "assumption," speculates about their theology and community life. But surely it was entirely possible that it was only one individual who put Q together? After all, it was, for example, only one individual, Luke, who put together the third Gospel—not to mention the case of other Gospels.

Smith offers various helpful insights when treating details in the Easter chapters of Luke and Matthew. But the arguments in favor of his central theme (that, as we move from Mark to John, we see a progressive accommodation of a disappearance/assumption tradition, first found in Mark, to an appearance/resurrection tradition) do not convince.

To begin with, the Graeco-Roman material used to support Smith's interpretation of Mark 16:1-8 as a disappearance/assumption story seems largely irrelevant to a Gospel that most scholars interpret against a Jewish background. This evangelist sets the story of Jesus within the framework of Jewish salvation history; his text is permeated with quotation and echoes of the Jewish scriptures, as he goes about illustrating how Jesus fulfilled various Jewish motifs. Graeco-Roman motifs do not provide a key, let alone a master-key, for interpreting what Mark wrote either in his final chapter or in the rest of

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<sup>31</sup> R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006).

his Gospel. Paul Danove, in a literary and rhetorical study of this Gospel, finds little or no evidence of Graeco-Roman influence.<sup>32</sup> Years ago, in a paper that anticipated the thesis of Smith's book, Adela Yarbro Collins "explained" Mark's empty tomb story largely on the basis of Graeco-Roman ideas of a notable figure being translated into heaven. But she had to admit that "it is hard to find" in Mark much influence from Graeco-Roman sources.<sup>33</sup>

Second, as we move from Mark to John, we do find a progressive linking of two traditions. But it is one that links the discovery of the empty tomb tradition (entailing Jesus' resurrection from the dead, not his assumption into heaven) with the tradition of his appearances and the individuals and groups to whom he appeared.

Third, the central statement in the Easter chapter of Mark is "he has been raised" from the dead (along with "he is going before you into Galilee and there you will see him"), not "he has been taken up into heaven" (and "you will see him again at the parousia"). Smith tries hard to explain (or explain away?) Mark's text in favor of his disappearance/assumption thesis, but the arguments seem contrived. The language of "assumption" or "ascension" turns up elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g. Phil 2:9; 1 Tim 3:16), but not in Mark 16.

## TWO BOOKS ON THE FRINGE

### *Geza Vermes, The Resurrection (2008)*

Geza Vermes secured his place in the modern history of biblical studies through (a) *Jesus the Jew*, which prompted many Christian scholars into taking seriously the Jewishness of Jesus and the Gospels, and (b) *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*,<sup>34</sup> which helped curb bizarre theories that misuse the Scrolls. But *The Resurrection* fails on two accounts.<sup>35</sup> First, Vermes is a less reliable guide to Jewish views on the afterlife than Jon Levenson and Alan Segal.<sup>36</sup> Second, Vermes' thesis, that Jesus "rose" only in the sense of being loved by his followers who "felt" that he was still with them, is no more convincing now than what his friend Paul Winter (whom Vermes cites on this point) wrote nearly fifty years ago.<sup>37</sup> According to this thesis, what happened after the death and burial of Jesus was merely a change in the disciples, not a new, transformed life for Jesus himself. In these terms, "resurrection" is not a fact about Jesus himself, but simply a fact about his disciples, past and present.

<sup>32</sup> P. L. Danove, *The End of Mark's Story: A Methodological Study* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993).

<sup>33</sup> A. Yarbro Collins, "The Empty Tomb in the Gospel According to Mark," in E. Stump and T. P. Flint. In her *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), she wrote of "the possibility of the influence on Mark 16:1-8 of ancient notions of the translation or transference of a body of a favored person to the ends of the earth or to heaven, where he or she is made immortal. Ancient notions of deification or apotheosis may also have influenced the story of the empty tomb." She concluded: "The author of Mark was probably aware of the idea that some Roman emperors had ascended into heaven and become gods. He may also have known that their deifications were modeled on that of Romulus" (791-92, 793; emphasis mine).

<sup>34</sup> G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading* (London: Collins, 1973); id., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York/London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1997; orig. edn., 1962).

<sup>35</sup> G. Vermes, *The Resurrection* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> K. J. Madigan & J. D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008); see also Alan Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> P. Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1961).

The basic problem with any such change of heart thesis is that it must deny the obvious meaning of what the New Testament authors repeatedly say and say in a variety of ways. Let me take just one example, the formula of proclamation cited by Paul: "I handed on to you what I also received that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he has been raised, and that he appeared to Cephas [= Peter], then to the Twelve" (1 Cor 15: 3-5). In this formula, Christ is the subject of all four verbs, the last two ("has been raised" and "appeared") being just as informative as the first two ("died" and "was buried"). In the case of both pairs of verbs, the second verb explains and supports what the first claims. We know that Christ died because he was buried; burial is a certain pointer to death. We know that Christ has been raised because he appeared bodily alive to a number of individuals and groups; dead persons do not appear like that.

For all the moving sincerity with which Vermes and his dead friend Winter have put forward their thesis, they must suppose that Paul and other New Testament writers, although seeming to claim some new fact about Jesus (his personal resurrection from death to new life), were using a deceptive form of discourse and "merely" talking about a fresh love that now possessed their hearts. They spoke only of themselves, not of a new event affecting Jesus himself.

En route to his epilogue ("Resurrection [Merely] in the Hearts of Men"), Vermes not only illustrates his rich historical knowledge but also makes judgments that invite challenge. First, while rightly observing that the theme of resurrection does not enjoy a central place in the preaching of Jesus, he ignores some texts which imply resurrection: "many will come from the east and the west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 8: 11). How will the patriarchs and those many others who join them at the final feast of the kingdom do so unless they have been raised from the dead? The longest passage explicitly concerned with resurrection comes in Jesus' debate with some Sadducees (Mark 12: 18-27). Vermes asserts that "most critical commentators rightly assume" that this story is "inauthentic" and "probably reflects by anticipation" later conflicts between Sadducees and Christians.<sup>38</sup> Sampling some critical commentators on Mark, I found that, while Adela Yarbro Collins agrees with Vermes, John Donahue, Joel Marcus, John Meier and Francis Moloney hold that the dispute on resurrection goes back in its substance to the historical ministry of Jesus. In any case all five scholars argue for their position and do not simply "assume" that the passage is authentic or inauthentic.<sup>39</sup>

Vermes spends a chapter on the predictions made by Jesus about his coming death and resurrection and concludes that they are "authentic" (he meant to write "inauthentic").<sup>40</sup> In so joining Rudolf Bultmann and dismissing the historicity of the three predictions in Mark (8: 31; 9: 31; 10: 33-34) as prophecies after the event, Vermes fails to notice that one early and pervasive Christian interpretation of Jesus' death is missing. It is not stated that "the Son of Man must suffer and be killed for us and for our sins and then

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<sup>38</sup> Vermes, *Resurrection*, 65.

<sup>39</sup> Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 558-59; J. R. Donahue, "A Neglected Factor in the Theology of Mark," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 101 (1982): 563-94; at 575-76; J. Marcus, *Mark 8-16* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 826-36, at 830; J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 431-44; F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 237n117.

<sup>40</sup> Vermes, *Resurrection*, 82.

rise again." Nor do these three predictions include one enormously important detail, the killing by crucifixion. These omissions support the (now widely held) view that the passion predictions are by no means free inventions and contain an historical kernel: Jesus anticipated his violent death and hoped for a divine vindication through resurrection.

When discussing a resurrection text from late in the first century, John 6: 54 ("he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day"), Vermes speaks of "eating of blood" (surely it should be "drinking of blood?"), dismisses this as a "cannibalistic allegory" (introduced by a Gentile Christian), and appeals to a council held in Jerusalem around AD 50 and its injunction about "abstaining from blood" (Acts 15: 20).<sup>41</sup> But Vermes says nothing about a letter from the 50s where Paul, a Jewish Christian par excellence, provides the earliest account of the Eucharist and writes of "drinking" the Lord's "blood" (1 Cor 11: 25-26).

In short, for an historical account of the resurrection in the New Testament, read N. T. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (dismissed by Vermes as "faith wrapped in scholarship,"<sup>42</sup>) and query the claim made on the dust jacket that Vermes has been "the greatest Jesus scholar of his generation." Such praise belongs rather to Raymond Brown, John Meier, or others.

### *Philip Pullman, The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ (2010)*

Every year or so sensationalist books debunking the resurrection of Jesus are published. They often make a great splash but normally leave hardly a ripple. Some of them rehash an old theory about Jesus being taken down alive from the cross. They differ by dispatching him to continue his life in various parts of the world, like France, Rome, the Dead Sea Community, or India. Apropos of the Indian connection, with his 1894 book, *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, Nicolas Notovitch fashioned the first part of the legend: Jesus, he alleged, spent some pre-ministry years in India.<sup>43</sup> The second half of the legend was created by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad; in an 1899 work (in Urdu) he asserted that Jesus was saved from the cross, went to Kashmir, and eventually died there at the age of 120 in Srinagar, where tourists are still shown his "grave." Without a shred of evidence in its support, this whole story was simply made up, spread among a gullible public, and is due to be rehashed any year now.

Let me, however, speak of a book that was the talk of the town at Easter 2010 and eliminated the resurrection of Jesus as a case of deliberate deception: Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*.<sup>44</sup> Pullman invests Jesus with a twin called "Christ," who becomes more and more alienated from his brother and led astray by a mysterious, demonic "stranger". Eventually Christ plays the part of Judas in being paid to lead a guard to Jesus and identify him with a kiss. In Pullman's version, Christ does not then give way to remorse but agrees to do worse by masquerading as his dead brother and deceiving people into thinking that Jesus has risen from the dead. After Jesus has been buried by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, "the stranger" organizes several men to

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>43</sup> N. Notovitch, *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, trans. J. H. Connelly and L. Landsberg (New York: G. W. Dillingham, 1894).

<sup>44</sup> P. Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2010). On this book see G. O'Collins, *Philip Pullman's Jesus* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010).



remove the body of Jesus during the night of Saturday/Sunday. He persuades Christ to return the next morning and play the part of the "risen" Jesus.

Mary Magdalene, who has discovered the tomb to be open and empty, then meets and talks with the twin brother of the dead Jesus. She thinks she has seen the risen Jesus and runs to announce the wonderful news to the other disciples. Later the same day, the disciples set off as a group for a village called Emmaus. Christ joins them on the road. They reach the village at night and invite him to join them for a meal. A disciple called Cleopas brings a lamp close to the face of Christ and takes him to be the risen Jesus. Christ plays out the deception and encourages the disciples to identify him as his twin brother raised from the dead.<sup>45</sup>

Many of those who reviewed Pullman's book found little plausibility in the way he "explains" the empty tomb and the Easter appearances. Right from New Testament times, sceptics have repeatedly accounted for the emptiness of Jesus' tomb by alleging that his body had been removed by friend or foe (e.g., Matt 28:11-15). The only new twist added by Pullman comes when he attributes the removal of the corpse to a sinister "stranger" who is intent on creating organized Christianity.

As regards the post-resurrection situation presented by Paul and the Gospels, Pullman ignores the appearance(s) of the risen Jesus in Galilee (Matt 28:16-20; John 21; and implied by Mark 16:7), the appearance to Peter (1 Cor 15:5; Luke 24:34), the appearance to "more than five hundred" disciples (1 Cor 15:6), the appearance to James and then to "all the apostles" (1 Cor 15:7), and the appearance to Paul (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8; Gal 1:12, 15-16; Acts 9; 22; 26). Pullman selects the appearance of Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-19) and the Emmaus Story (Luke 24:13-35), and rewrites them. He not only remains silent about so much testimony to post-resurrection appearances but also leaves us with a strange puzzle. Could the early Christian witnesses have lived such heroic lives and spread the message of Jesus with so much effective devotion, if all that lay behind their missionary outreach were two episodes in which first a credulous woman (Mary Magdalene) and then a group (the disciples at Emmaus) mistook the identity of someone they met?

Pullman's version of what happened after the death and burial of Jesus is so contrived and plays so fast and loose with the evidence that it loses even its superficial plausibility. At the end does he turn the greatest story ever told into the greatest puzzle ever imagined? The "reconstruction" proposed by Pullman, the body of Jesus being spirited away and then one individual and one group misidentifying his twin as if he were Jesus risen from the dead, is historically speaking quite implausible. To be sure, Pullman has written a work of historical fiction. But, by its nature, historical fiction should be plausible, even and especially from an historical point of view.

History shows us an effect, a propagation of the Christian message and community throughout the world, a propagation that took place despite ruthless persecutions and other terrible setbacks. If Christ did not personally rise from the dead, what else might have caused this visible and public effect in world history, the development and massive presence of the Christian religion? Pullman asks us to believe that this effect was brought

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<sup>45</sup> Pullman did not first create the "theory" that credited Jesus with a twin brother who faked his resurrection; it had been proposed some years earlier; see Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 213n60.

about by (a) fraud (namely, the theft of Jesus' body), and (b) a mistaken identification, deliberately provoked by a twin of Jesus masquerading as his dead brother brought back to life. That such an odd turn of events was sufficient to cause the rise and spread of Christianity will convince only the credulous, and those who cannot imagine that there is a God who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him a new and glorious life.

Such then are nine books that have been published in the first decade of the twenty-first century and that represent current writing on the resurrection. Against this background, let me now turn in this work (to be published by Paulist Press) and set out what I want to say about Easter faith, both biblically and theologically.

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