



*“On Pentecost, Peter gives a short, two minute, sermon and the church is born. 3,000 people are baptized and the Spirit-filled church is unleashed upon the ancient world. In this short sermon, Peter shares the central message of the Gospel of the Kingdom- Christ’s coronation in His assassination, vindication in His resurrection, and jurisdiction in His elevation to the right hand of the Father. The Kingdom is here and Jesus is King. Glory be to God!”*

## Resurrection and the Renewal of Creation

By N.T. Wright

Use the QR code to download a free copy of the Ebook “Resurrection and the Renewal of Creation” by NT Wright. It’s a great book that talks about the New Kingdom impact of Christ’s resurrection



## Can a Scientist believe in the Resurrection of Jesus?

By Jeff Hardin at BioLogos

Part 3 of our review of N.T. Wright’s *Surprised by Scripture* focuses on the third chapter, “Can a Scientist Believe in the Resurrection?” As Wright notes with tongue firmly in cheek, one answer to the title question, is of course, “Sure! I’ve seen it done!” As recent surveys have shown, many scientists believe in a personal God who answers prayer, and in the U.S., many of those are Christians, for whom the the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is central to their faith.<sup>1</sup>

The question Wright wrestles with here is different: should a scientist believe in the resurrection? We might have expected Wright to lead by citing evidence for the resurrection. This sort of evidential apologetics has been ably tackled by many Christian thinkers.<sup>2</sup> The evidence matters of course, and Wright deals with it, but he is more interested in assumptions than in a battle over data. He explores what motivates the question in the first place. His answer is that it depends on how we know—what the philosophers call epistemology. At this point, of course, the scientist in me was tempted to say, “Enough with philosophy. Let’s get to the data!”, but I have read enough of Wright’s work to know that patience is rewarded. He quickly dismisses naïve scientism: if we think that science can exhaustively explain feelings of beauty or our love for those dear to us then, as Sir Peter Medawar pointed out long ago, we are seriously mistaken.<sup>3</sup> But Wright just as quickly dispels any notion that an easy solution is to spiritualize the resurrection as some sort of private mental experience of the disciples: “[r]esurrection in the first century meant people who were physically thoroughly dead becoming physically thoroughly alive again...resurrection therefore necessarily impinges on the public world (44).”

This sounds an awful lot like something open to the scientist, whose stock and trade is the public analysis of nature. So should we seek a scientific explanation for the resurrection? Not exactly, says Wright. The resurrection is history, and so it differs from science: “[S]cience studies the

repeatable, while history studies the unrepeatable(44).” Wright reminds us that the historian, like the scientist, usually makes assumptions about what is possible, and here one’s openness to possibility is heavily conditioned by worldview. Even granting this point, however, Wright acknowledges that “faced with the thoroughly repeatable experiment of what happens to dead bodies (45),” some evidence is in order.

Wright discusses the evidence lightly here; he has dealt with this in great detail in his monumental *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (see the blog post by Jim Stump), his accessible *Surprised by Hope*,<sup>4</sup> and other articles.<sup>5</sup> First, he dispels the notion of what C. S. Lewis might call “chronological snobbery”: Ancients knew dead people stayed dead just as we moderns do. A geneticist like myself cannot help but smile at Wright’s next move. He describes Christian expectations as unique “mutations” of Jewish ideas. First, early Christian writers are unified about the centrality of the resurrection. As the Apostle Paul puts it, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”<sup>6</sup> Significantly, however, resurrection is a split event: it happened to Jesus in history as Messiah, anticipating what will happen to all at the end of history. For Wright, this shift in thinking demands historical explanation.

That leads Wright to consider the primary written sources: the Gospels. He notes the notorious differences in the stories. Using an analogy he has used before,<sup>7</sup> Wright recounts the fateful tale of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his poker. As with the brandishing of hot metal by the renowned philosopher, so with the resurrection: “surface discrepancies do not mean that nothing happened... they are a reasonable indication that something remarkable happened (52).”

Wright then goes on to deal with the strangeness of the Gospel accounts. The prominence of female eyewitnesses, the lack of idealization regarding Jesus’ death, and the downright odd way in which he appears and disappears all argue against later fabrication. For Wright, the stories reflect the events as they happened.

Wright then circles back to the original topic. On the one hand, Wright poses a question to the “scientific” historian. If this is the best explanation, as shocking as it is – can we accept it? This is a key question. My colleagues might grudgingly say, “Well, all right. There is something here that is hard to explain, but look – dead people stay dead. There must be another explanation.” Here Wright brings worldview back into play: “I respect that position, but...it is...a matter of choice, not a matter of saying that something called scientific historiography forces us to take that route (57).” On the other hand, lest Christians simplistically say, “Aha! I knew scientists were a closed-minded bunch!”, Wright then presses them to move beyond wooden rationalism: “The most important decisions we make in life are not taken by post-Enlightenment left-brain rationality alone (59).” Wright seeks a rational faith, but faith nonetheless: a “faith in Jesus risen from the dead transcends but includes what we call history and what we call science (61).” For Christians, belief in the resurrection also provides hope, and, ultimately, something more: “If we are even to glimpse this new world, let alone enter it, we will need a different kind of knowing...an epistemology that draws from us not just the cool appraisal of quasi-scientific research but the whole-person engagement and involvement for the best shorthand is ‘love’... (62).” This sounds very much like what John Polkinghorne terms “motivated belief”, as discussed nicely by Ted Davis in a recent BioLogos blog series.

Where does this leave the average Christian, especially a Christian who is a scientist at a major research university? First, Wright’s piece is a reminder that believing in one of the central claims of Christian faith is reasonable. Second, he reminds us of the centrality of love. Using evidence as a bludgeon rarely works; blunt instruments usually cause blunt force trauma. My colleagues and I are not simply rational automata, but whole persons with motivations that include, but almost always extend beyond, mere evidence. Wright compares his epistemology of love to the love of a dedicated scientist for her craft. This kind of commitment is something that my colleagues can affirm, and can serve as a touchpoint between us to dialogue on larger issues. Finally, Wright reminds us that robust Christian faith takes evidence on board, but fuses reason with faith, hope and love. And, to quote Wright (quoting Paul) “the greatest of these is love.”