

I

Introduction

Matters of Method

In 2003 the eminent British New Testament scholar N. T. Wright¹ published the third volume of a series on Christian Origins and the Question of God. This particular volume was titled *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.² It is an impressively detailed and weighty tome, which, including indices and bibliography, runs to a whole 817 pages. Given its sheer length and the detailed nature of its prose, I am sure I cannot have been the only reader to have wilted in the course of the first attempt to read it. Indeed, if I am honest, I think I must own that on more than one occasion I skipped through some sections in order to get to the conclusions.³

Quite apart from the daunting task of working through Wright's detailed discussion, it must be said that this lack of enthusiasm at the time of the first reading of *The Resurrection of the Son of God* also surfaced because it almost immediately became apparent to me that I held some very serious reservations about the fundamental thrust of the book's basic argument. While it could be contended that the judgment "that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead" is a judgment of faith, given that it is usually understood by Christians to be a transcendental "act of God" with profound cosmic implications, not least for the salvation of humanity, Wright's contention is that Christ's Resurrection is to be handled straightforwardly, at least in the first instance, as an event of the past history of this world. Before the Resurrection is spoken of in theological terms as a "mighty act of God" for the salvation and transformation of humanity, and as something therefore that must necessarily be appropriated by faith,

1. Who had been Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey since 2000, and was appointed to the See of Durham in 2003.

2. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (hereafter RSG).

3. Markus Bockmuehl confesses to tending to "reach swiftly for the smelling salts" when faced with such a daunting prospect as tackling Wright's "high octane" and encyclopedic work. "Compleat [sic] History of the Resurrection," 489.

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Wright's contention is that it is to be handled quite simply as an event of historical time. It is of a piece with any other historical event that might be located in a particular geographical place and at a datable time in the past, such as Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon in 49 BC,⁴ or the death of Augustus in AD 14, or the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.⁵ That it actually happened can therefore be established using historical reasoning alone, employing the secular techniques of critical historical research. Thus, Wright sets out on a quest for "historical knowledge about the resurrection, of a sort that can be discussed without presupposing Christian faith."⁶

In this way, Wright's fundamental methodological contention is that the exercise of the historical reason may be relied upon to provide what is imagined to be a sure foundation for consequent interpretive judgments, including judgments of faith. These might include belief in God as the ultimate author of the event, or the belief that Jesus' Resurrection was an event with transcendental implications for the restoration and renewal of humanity. Alternatively, appeal may be made to it to ground the more general belief in life beyond death for all human believers. Once the actuality of its occurrence is proved by historical research it can be interpreted in faith as the promise of an ultimate fulfillment relating to the eternal destiny of all people. In this case, judgments of faith of this variety become a kind of optional extra that may be entertained by religiously minded people. However, the affirmation of the actual occurrence of the Resurrection itself is said by Wright not to be a judgment of faith of this kind, but a conclusion of critical historical research. This may be reached by anybody, whether religiously inclined or not, using the historical reason. Wright therefore claims that there is "no reason in principle why the question, what precisely happened at Easter, cannot be raised by any historian of any persuasion."⁷ What he means, more specifically, is that any historian of any persuasion may not only "raise the question" as to whether the Resurrection occurred, but may actually come to the conclusion that it did in fact occur, simply by employing the secular methods of critical historical research. Indeed, Wright claims that he, working purely as a historian, can actually prove the occurrence of the Resurrection to any right-thinking person of any or no religious persuasion at all. This is what he sets out to do in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

4. RSG, 685. See also Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 95, where Wright uses Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon to distinguish carefully between the factuality of an event and the multiplicity of interpretative meanings that may be assigned to it.

5. RSG, 710, where the Resurrection of Jesus is said to be as historically secured as the death of Augustus or the fall of Jerusalem, though as we shall see in chapter 7, at this point some questions are begged by Wright about the status of historical judgments generally. Even the death of Augustus in AD 14 and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 are said to be established only with "historical probability" but "historical probability so high as to be virtually certain."

6. RSG, 22.

7. RSG, 21. See also Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 15: "The great advantage of this task is that it can be seen quite clearly as a public operation. It is open to all and sundry; its methods are those of any historian reconstructing any society and its belief-systems."



My immediate misgivings about the validity of these contentions are explained by the fact that when I myself wrote on the theology of the Resurrection in *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*, which was published in 1987, I argued an entirely contrary thesis: that the primary category of “divine mystery,” if we are prepared to allow it to be brought to the discussion of the Resurrection (as St. Paul surely invites us to do⁸), entails that assent to the occurrence of the Easter Event is itself a judgment of faith, and not just a conclusion of the historical reason. It involves the interpretation of the reported experiences of the first Christians from the perspective of faith in God and even from the point of view of a pre-existing belief expressing the eschatological hope for resurrection beyond death. This already presupposes a set of dogmatic assumptions, which allowed the first Christians to interpret their Easter experiences in faith using the category of “resurrection.” Indeed, even before we begin to try to come to a conclusion about whether the Resurrection of Jesus happened or not, we have to edge towards an understanding of what it is we are setting out to prove, for questions of meaning are logically prior to questions of truth. If it is rightly approached as essentially a transcendental mystery of God we have to anticipate that we may find ourselves humbly confronted by the fundamental limitations of human reason—something quite the opposite of an over-confident conviction that Christ’s Resurrection was the kind of event that can be proved to have occurred by the exercise of the critical historical reason alone. We may anticipate therefore that the category of “mystery,” by contrast with something that is clearly and distinctly manifest to all who care to attend to it, will therefore dictate the need to utilize a multiplicity of different avenues of approach as we seek to handle its surpassing transcendental qualities.

The kind of multi-faceted approach to the theology of the Resurrection of Christ, which was therefore pursued in *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*, is anathema to N. T. Wright, who contends that the category of “historical event” is to be employed exclusively, as the only really legitimate means of dealing with it. Indeed, as he sets out to convince his readers that he can actually prove the occurrence of the Resurrection of Christ as a historical event, Wright contends that the evidence constituted by the story of the empty tomb together with the accounts of the first Easter appearances or “meetings” with Jesus, as he calls them, provides both the necessary and sufficient conditions to warrant the judgment that Jesus *was* raised from the dead and restored to life in this world, leaving the tomb in which his dead body had been laid empty.⁹

8. 1 Cor 15:51: “Behold, I show you a mystery . . .”; perhaps following 1 *Enoch* 103:2–4: “I know this mystery; for I have read the heavenly tablet . . . goodness and joy and honor are prepared and written down for the souls of those who have died pious. And their spirits will rejoice and not perish.” See also 14:8 and 39:3 for Enoch’s vision and translation into heaven. *First Enoch* accepts the idea of resurrection of the dead but does not develop it in any detail (51:1; 62:15; 91:10). In Ephesians Paul is said to speak of “the mystery of the gospel” that had been given to him to make known (Eph 6:19).

9. RSG, 706–10.

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This, he says, is the *only* really plausible conclusion that can be drawn from the available evidence.

It can readily be conceded that Wright's approach to an understanding of what is meant by the term "resurrection," together with an examination of the evidence relating specifically to Jesus' purported Resurrection, using the historical reason, may indeed be *one* way of attempting to handle the Easter Event. However, if it is not the kind of event "that can be discussed without presupposing Christian faith"¹⁰ that Wright assumes it to be, and if by definition the Resurrection is a mystery of God which "surpasses all understanding," the use of the historical reason alone is bound in the long run to be found wanting. In order to reduce the transcending mystery of it, even to reasonably manageable proportions, not just one but various hermeneutical models may have to be employed, none of which may be entirely satisfactory in and of itself. This means that no single avenue of approach is likely to be without some difficulties, not least and quite specifically, the approach to it simply as a historical event. Indeed, in *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* I argued that even the most impressive past attempts to handle the Resurrection exclusively as a historical event (notably, for example, the earnest and high-quality attempts of B. F. Westcott in the nineteenth century and of Wolfhart Pannenberg in the twentieth century) turn out, at the end of the day, to be ultimately unsatisfactory. I have come to the same conclusion in relation to N. T. Wright's own attempt in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.



Wright himself does not suffer fools gladly. Indeed, those in the past who have pursued a quite different line of approach from his own in wrestling with the theology of the Resurrection of Christ tend to be summarily dismissed, and even abruptly put down in a thoroughly unceremonious way.¹¹ Despite the fact that Wright claims to have been "in implicit dialogue" with the corpus of publications on the Resurrection over the last generation,¹² there is little apparent attempt in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* to try to understand or accommodate alternative points of view, or to see them as complementary to his own. Indeed, one reviewer, noting Wright's overall "apologetic tone" and "calculating rhetorical defensiveness," has questioned the ethics of interpreting the biblical texts while failing to accept responsibility for representing "substantial interpretations different from the author's." Wright, he says, "never seriously presents the positions of the primary scholars of our day" or "engages any of

10. RSG, 22.

11. Among those who receive Wright's finger-wagging reprimands, Alan Segal, for example, is numbered among commentators on Wisdom of Solomon who agree "with the wicked in making an alliance with death," RSG, 168; the views of Gerd Lüdemann, in *The Resurrection of Jesus* are simply written off as "almost entirely worthless," RSG, 319 n.17.

12. RSG, 4 n.3.

the critical perspectives of modern and post-modern biblical scholarship.”¹³ Another reviewer charged Wright with playing narrowly to a conservatively minded audience, particularly those contemptuous both of liberal theology and of contemporary historical-critical exegesis, “with remarks about the mental deficiencies of those of us who disagree with his gospel of salvation history and attachment to narrative realism as historical evidence.”¹⁴

In fairness, it has to be said that the discussion of whether a particular piece of theological writing stands aloof from the conclusions of others who have written on the same subject in recent times, or fails to take sufficient account of them, or of whether it falls within one specific kind of theological style rather than one that meets a reviewer’s preference, is of less importance than the public examination and discussion of the author’s own actual work in order to pass critical judgment on his or her own specific arguments. It is now well over fifteen years since the publication of *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, and it continues to stand as the reigning paradigm of the approach to handling Christ’s Resurrection as an event of the historical past, using the techniques of critical historical research. We are now challenged to move beyond concerns about whether it passes muster when judged against a canon of theological preference or style of theologizing. We may take issue with a piece of theological writing by categorizing it as “liberal,” “conservative,” “defensive,” or lacking in respect for “modern and post-modern” historical-critical exegesis, however, this kind of judgment is to some degree a matter of subjective preference. Irrespective of judgments of this kind, few will disagree that Wright has performed an important service by pursuing his own particular approach to the understanding of the Resurrection of Christ with a sustained and single-minded determination. This throws down the gauntlet of challenge to those who prefer to approach the theology of the Resurrection of Christ from other perspectives. I hope this book will be found to be just as single-minded and focused as it pursues a thorough analysis and assessment of the viability of his arguments.



Apart from Wright’s commitment to the use of critical historical research as the preferred, indeed the *only*, really legitimate method of approach to an understanding of the Resurrection of Christ, there is another basic element of Wright’s thought that needs at the outset to be brought to the foreground of the discussion of his views. Wright is anxious to persuade us to think in what he imagines to be exclusively “Jewish” or “biblical” categories of thought, almost as though it is possible to come to the biblical texts without having to take account of any extraneous considerations. We

13. Taussig, “Review,” 244–45.

14. Perkins, “Review,” 412.

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are encouraged to read and understand them from *within* as it were,¹⁵ in a pristine or unadulterated “biblical” or “Jewish” way. In the specific case of the Resurrection of Jesus, we must think in the manner of a mind-set inherited from Second Temple Judaism, which Wright alleges was received without significant developmental tampering either by the Pharisees of Jesus’ day or subsequently by, also allegedly, the first generation of Christian believers. He is therefore anxious to urge that in order to understand the Resurrection of Christ one must be free of the contamination of modes of thought derived from external sources; instead, we are to think exclusively in the same categories of thought that were allegedly bequeathed to the first Christians, whose Easter experience is said to have conformed to this inherited Second Temple preunderstanding. Indeed, their Easter experience is said to have confirmed this specific inherited understanding of things.

Already it may seem that Wright’s contention that critical historical research using the historical reason alone can establish the occurrence of the Resurrection as a historical event, which can then be used as a basis for judgments of faith and theological interpretations of its significance, actually presupposes some pre-existing faith commitments and dogmatic assumptions after all! However, to be fair to Wright, in the case of the Resurrection, the pre-existing understanding does not involve mention of any transcendental reality, such as “God” or “heaven,” for he narrows down the specific preunderstanding inherited from Second Temple Judaism relating to the Resurrection simply to the empirical dimensions of the restoration of a dead person to life in this world of historical time. This is not a faith commitment, but simply how Second Temple Judaism thought of “resurrection,” he says, and how the Pharisees and first-century Christians thought of it, and how we must think of it too. God, of course, is understood to be the author of this event, but is located at one stage remove in the background of it. Belief in a divine behind-the-scenes role might be a matter of faith, but as a historical event it is to be handled as something contained within space and time that can be literally described, and proved to have occurred, using the techniques of critical historical research.

Wright’s methodological commitment to the handling of the Resurrection as a historical event that is in principle of a piece with any other event of human history, therefore holds at bay any suggestion that the Resurrection is to be understood as “a going of Jesus to God,” whatever the precise sense in which these words might be used. In other words, the Resurrection is not to be understood in any sense as Jesus’ entry to a heavenly destiny or as a sharing in the immortality of the God; it is simply to be understood as a happening of this world of space and time, albeit if ultimately at the hands of God. Indeed, it might even be thinkable that it could be handled without any explicit reference to God at all, for the word “resurrection” is said to refer simply to the return of a dead person to life in this world of historical time after a period

15. See his declaration of the need Christian theology has of “biblical studies” in *The New Testament and the People of God*, 138.

of having been dead, regardless of how this extraordinary happening was actually brought about. Explanation by appeal to its divine cause would be a kind of second order religious judgment based upon a purely rational historical conclusion as to its occurrence.



The received dictionary definition of the meaning of the word “resurrection,” allegedly derived from its Second Temple Jewish source, therefore becomes prescriptive for Wright. The mind-set of Second Temple Judaism, he says, requires us to think not in faith-charged theological terms of a going of Jesus to heaven, or of his being vindicated by being raised and exalted to be with God, but simply in terms of his historical return from the dead to *this* world. This then allows for the accommodation of very matter-of-fact historical “meetings” with him by the first witnesses of the Resurrection in the days immediately following Jesus’ crucifixion and burial. These “meetings” are spoken of as though they were in principle not unlike the historical meeting of David Livingstone and H. M. Stanley in Africa on 10 November 1871. As in the case of Livingstone and Stanley, the reports of the occurrence may be historically examined and a judgment made as to their veracity. Paul’s “kerygmatic summary” of the Easter appearances in 1 Cor 15:3–8, and the narrative records of the discovery of the empty tomb and the various accounts of the Easter appearances in the Gospels, likewise constitute the primary evidential material upon which this purely historical judgment may be made.

Wright therefore contends that it is impossible to think of the Resurrection in any other way than as a historical event in which Jesus was restored to life in this world, for this is the way in which Second Temple Judaism thought of “resurrection” generally, and the first Christians can have thought of it in no other way. Their Easter experience simply fulfilled this aspect of their pre-existing apocalyptically colored expectations as these had been generated within this inheritance from Second Temple Judaism. To suggest that the Resurrection of Jesus may be understood, somewhat more mysteriously and in transcendental terms, as a divinely crafted and disclosed event that involved a “going to God,” in some way located in a heaven beyond this world, is entirely anathema. Furthermore, to suggest that the Easter Jesus may have “appeared” in a revelatory way *from* the heaven to which he had gone, and was therefore mysteriously perceived by witnesses in this world in a judgment of *faith* is not to be countenanced.

Indeed, in contending that the Resurrection is to be understood in only one way, which he alleges is *the* biblical or Second Temple way, Wright bids us surrender any

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suggestion that the first Easter experiences might actually have led the first Christians to modify, at least in any substantial way, these inherited preunderstandings.¹⁶ As we shall see, he acknowledges that they did in fact add to the inherited Second Temple understanding by attaching the rider that Jesus' raised physical body had become "incorruptible." But this simply "firms up" the nature of Jesus' raised body and in no way diminishes the purely observable and historical nature of it. The original Easter experiences therefore continue to be interpreted in the light of categories of thought that are said to have been acquired from the mindset of Second Temple Judaism, and we are discouraged even from entertaining the thought that these received understandings may have been in any really significant way changed, perhaps even transformed, in the light of those very experiences themselves. Instead we are obliged to think only of a rigid conformity to a "strictly limited"¹⁷ and fixed, single understanding of what "resurrection from the dead" allegedly literally meant as this form of words was inherited by the first Christians from Second Temple Judaism.



In a way that is entirely consistent with this, Wright also attempts to draw a kind of *cordon sanitaire* around "Second Temple Judaism" itself and its understanding of the term "resurrection," as though this is something generated entirely from within itself, and free of any possible influence from ideas derived from outside sources in the ancient world. It is abundantly clear that at this point it is Greek thought that he has in his sights. For, while his concern is to exclude all possible alien influences from what he imagines to be a set of purely Jewish ideas, it is clear that Wright's methodological commitment to an alleged Jewish mode of thought is understood to be in radical contrast particularly to Greek philosophical categories. Most notable among these identifiably Greek notions is the idea of the "immortality of the soul." It will not be a surprise that, by pursuing this strategy of excluding what he believes are the entirely alien philosophical modes of thought of the ancient Greek world, Wright reveals that he has a particular aversion to Plato. After all, Plato is, if not the author, then the most definitive promoter, of the Socratic idea of the "immortality of the soul"¹⁸ in the tradition of ancient Greek philosophy.

But Plato's fault is not confined narrowly to the idea of the soul's immortality. The idea of a timeless eternity outside space and time, which is the immortal soul's ultimate destination, is equally offensive to Wright. Indeed, Plato may be said to be guilty of

16. Luke Hoare has drawn my attention to the fact that it may be acknowledged that Wright does state that "there are substantial mutations from within the 'resurrection' stream of Judaism." *RSG*, 210. E.g., there is no "socio-political" metaphorical sense any more. But there is nothing in terms of a significant ontological difference apart from the alleged early Christian belief in "incorruptibility" as below.

17. *RSG*, 204.

18. As found in his account of the death of, and eulogy to, his teacher Socrates in *Phaedo*.

leading us into a fundamentally mistaken mode of thinking of a much broader kind, given that Plato initiated thought of a dualistic epistemology and its pre-supposed ontology by quite famously drawing a sharp distinction between changeless, eternal Forms or Ideas and their shadowy representations in the passing things of this material world, or between the eternal perfection of ideal changelessness by contrast with the change and decay of this passing imperfect world of matter. This kind of epistemology and its cosmological implications concerning the nature of reality are of no interest to Wright; it is altogether incompatible with the primary thrust of a genuinely Biblical eschatological understanding of things.

This dichotomy between Greek and Hebrew views of reality and especially of the afterlife is reflected in the fact that Wright tends to draw a thorough-going methodological distinction between an alleged “biblical” interest in the historical events of this world, and a more characteristically theological or philosophical focus on transcendental realities, such as, most notably, the timeless eternity of God, above and beyond history. Any theologian of the Resurrection who is inclined to focus on it from the perspective of Jesus’ vindication “at the right hand of the Father” in a transcendental life with God beyond space and time, so as to speak in turn of the Easter appearances as revelations “from heaven,” is mistaken. This alternative to an interest in the discovery of the empty tomb and the “meetings” with the Raised Jesus as evidence relating to an event of historical time in *this* world, is therefore condemned and written off as “platonistic” and *ipso facto* as fundamentally mistaken as Plato himself.¹⁹ The same may be said of interpretations of Paul’s references to a heavenly “spiritual body” as though this is to be contrasted with “physical bodies” in 1 Corinthians 15. This too is said to be “platonizing.”



The background to this methodological stance, which lines up a Jewish mode of thought antithetically to Greek categories of thought, lies in the so-called “Biblical Theology Movement,” which flourished internationally across the world of New Testament studies in the generation immediately following the Second World War. Even though Wright says that he draws also on other more recent methodological approaches to New Testament studies in an eclectic kind of way, it is clear enough that the Biblical Theology Movement accounts for this fundamental orientation of his thinking. Among the more notable proponents of this post-war fashion in New Testament studies were scholars such as G. B. Caird, with whom Wright actually worked at Oxford as a research student, and Oscar Cullmann and Krister Stendahl, both of whom worked explicitly on the theology of the Resurrection and vigorously promoted

19. In this work, where possible, a lower case “p” is used to indicate a very general or generic kind of “platonism” as an orientation of thought beyond time to the timeless eternity of God. An upper case “P” will be used of “Platonism” in the more technical sense to indicate ideas that more closely originated specifically with Plato himself.

conclusions with which those of Wright resonate. At the very least, we may think of them as kindred spirits, if not as Wright's intellectual mentors as far as his theology of the Resurrection is concerned.²⁰

The basic presupposition of this movement was the belief that there was a distinctively "biblical" or "New Testament" view of things, which could be isolated and expounded in a kind of "dictionary definition theology." Indeed, in this period the "dictionary of the Bible" or "theological word book" of the Bible became a very popular genre of theological writing. The numerous contributors to Gerhard Kittel's celebrated *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* in Germany, for example, and to *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*²¹ in the USA, exemplified this quest to unpack what was claimed to be a distinctively "biblical" way of thinking.²² In England and the extended British theological world, Alan Richardson's *Theological Word Book* was a standard and much-used primer for that generation of theological students.²³

The assumption was that *the* meaning of key Biblical terms such as "God," "Spirit," "time," "eschatology," or whatever, could be synthetically understood and presented as *the* Biblical or New Testament view of things. Unfortunately, this imposed a false harmony of viewpoint across the documents of the New Testament, which overlooked the theological diversity to be found among the various New Testament authors, not to mention nuances of meaning thrown up by the specific socio-historical contexts within which individual writers worked. In the next generation of New Testament scholarship, this homogenizing tendency was therefore enthusiastically challenged and corrected. From the mid-1960s, Redaction Criticism²⁴ began to focus on the rich variety of theological emphases that are disclosed once close comparative attention is paid to the specific editorial changes, additions, and omissions made to the Gospel traditions by successive individual New Testament authors, each of them working from their own distinctive theological perspective.

Another important methodological commitment of the Biblical Theology Movement, which also came to be challenged at the same time, and which is of particular relevance to our present concern, was that this movement very often achieved its goal by contrasting an alleged distinctively "biblical" or "New Testament" understanding of the key terms in which it took specific interest, with alternative, nonbiblical understandings of many of their semantic counterparts in differing linguistic and

20. For an outline of the agenda of the "Biblical Theology Movement," which Wright locates in the 1950s and 1960s (*The New Testament and the People of God*, 21), see Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," and Wright, *God Who Acts*.

21. See also, as representative of a more conservative approach, Morris, "Resurrection" in *New Bible Dictionary*, 1010–12.

22. For a more thorough-going critique of the methodology of this movement see Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, especially chapter 8 on the analysis of Kittel's *Theological Word Book of the New Testament*; also *The Concept of Biblical Theology*.

23. Richardson, *Theological Word Book of the Bible*.

24. A term coined by Willi Marxsen (*Redaktionsgeschichte*).

religio-cultural traditions. In particular, it drew a radical dichotomy between “biblical” or Hebrew/Christian modes of thought and pagan or “Greek” ways of thinking. Oscar Cullmann, in stressing “the fundamental differences between the two points of view,”²⁵ went so far as to say that “we must recognize loyally that precisely those things which distinguish the Christian teaching from the Greek belief are at the heart of primitive Christianity.”²⁶ The coloring of this style of Biblical theology flows on into the work of N. T. Wright.



The following generation of New Testament scholarship pointed up the fallacy of this over-drawn opposition between so-called Greek and Hebrew/Christian modes of thought. Since the seminal work of James Barr on the semantics of biblical language,²⁷ and also of Martin Hengel on Judaism and Hellenism,²⁸ we have become much more conscious of the pervasive influence of Hellenistic culture around the ancient Mediterranean world, including Palestine, and even reaching as far east as modern Iraq and Iran. At least from the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC onwards, the Greek language gradually became the *lingua franca* of the ancient world, and this naturally included Palestine. By the second century BC, the Pseudo-Aristeas saw it as no unusual thing that it was possible to recruit six scholars proficient in the Greek language from each of the Tribes of Israel to undertake the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek at Alexandria, which resulted in the production of the Septuagint (LXX). A further consequence of the Hellenization of the ancient world is that the New Testament itself was, of course, also written in Greek.

However, it was not just the Greek language as such but Greek modes of thought, that were necessarily crafted and expressed in the words and concepts of the Greek language, which permeated the cultures of the ancient world as well. The conquests of Alexander the Great thus transformed the ancient world, making trade and cultural exchange possible across great distances, but also facilitating a very fertile exchange of ideas. Indeed, if there was one thing that Hellenism excelled at it was the export of education. Hellenistic civilization thus created a meeting place of Greek and oriental ideas of such a kind that a good deal of shared outcome was inevitable. The great intellectual tradition of Greek philosophy that we associate with Plato and Aristotle naturally began to permeate neighboring cultures, including that of Palestine.

The fall of Athens at the hands of Mithridates, King of Pontus, in 88/87BC signaled an abrupt end of the orthodox philosophy of the traditional Greek philosophical schools of Athens. When the Roman general, Sulla, besieged and flattened the city

25. Cullmann, *Immortality*, 16.

26. Cullmann, *Immortality*, 8.

27. See Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*; and Barr, *The Garden of Eden*.

28. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*.

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in the following year, the enforced closure of the philosophical schools if anything facilitated the dispersal of Greek learning; as scholars scattered they founded new centers of learning at such places as Rome,²⁹ Rhodes, Pergamon, Ascalon in southern Palestine, and of course, the enormously important neighboring center of Alexandria. In this way the demise of Athens actually assisted the wider energizing of philosophical endeavors across the Hellenistic world. The resulting dispersal of intellectual talent also meant that no single philosophical teacher could dominate the scene in the way Plato and Aristotle had done in ancient Athens. The result was a rather more complex and “mixed” intellectual atmosphere.

From the second century BC, Stoicism had already established itself widely across what was to become the Roman Empire, but from 86 BC onwards down to AD 200, an amalgam of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Epicurean ideas struggled for air within the prevailing environment of popular Stoic thought. As a direct consequence of the disaster of 86 BC, a new edition of Aristotle was produced in Rome by Andronicus of Rhodes in the middle of the first century BC, which stimulated a renewed interest in Aristotle, often if only to critique his views. But it was Plato’s thought that, with the help of a transcendentalist thrust of a resurgent Neopythagoreanism,³⁰ gradually came to dominance. For this reason the period from 200 BC, when Stoicism enjoyed an ascendancy, to AD 200, when Plato had once again assumed pride of place, is justifiably spoken of as a “Transitional Period” in Greek philosophy.

Already around 50 BC Cicero had identified three schools of philosophy: Stoicism, Epicureanism and the New Academy, which developed the nondogmatic side of Plato. This transitional phase of the revival and development of the fundamental notions of Plato is therefore generally referred to as “Middle Platonism.”³¹ With some input also from the Peripatetic school derived from Aristotle, the philosophy of Plato gradually began to get the upper hand over Stoicism. Certainly, it was Platonism that was destined to rise to the ascendant. The very influential Antiochus of Ascalon (130–69 BC)³² who, after fleeing Athens was the teacher of Cicero in Rome around 79 BC, and who is often identified as the founder of Middle Platonism³³, quite intentionally sought to integrate elements of Plato’s thought with the prevailing Stoicism, and at the same time rejected inherited skeptical theories in relation to the capacity both

29. Which also benefitted from Sulla’s seizure of a library in which the works of Aristotle featured prominently.

30. The fascination with the abstractions of numerical truth, and the conviction that truth could be acquired by reason alone, in independence of countable material objects, is clearly in tension with the more empirical approach to truth through the deliverances of sense of epistemologies including the Stoic that were developed in the wake of Epicurus.

31. See the excellent survey of this period in Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*.

32. Antiochus had been teaching at Alexandria around the time of the closure of the school at Athens in 86 BC.

33. Probably incorrectly; this accolade goes to Eudorus who re-established a more transcendental orientation of thought than is found in Antiochus.

of the senses and the intellect to discover truth. In the wake of these advances, Eudorus of Alexandria, who flourished around 25 BC, is credited with turning the very Stoicized Platonism of Antiochus in an even more transcendental direction under the influence of Neopythagoreanism, and it was this that eventually led to the eclipse of Stoicism and the triumph of Platonism in the early Christian era.³⁴ One important sign of the success of this growing Platonism was the production of a new edition of Plato's writings by Emperor Tiberius' court astrologer, Tiberius Claudius Thrasyllus (who originally came from Alexandria), around AD 25.



This is not to say that there were not significant differences of religious and cultural outlook between Jews and Greeks. At times of tension and crisis, which naturally precipitated a heightened sense of Jewish self-identity, it was obviously felt necessary for Jews to define themselves over against the Greeks. Generally speaking these times of acute crisis were relatively short-lived, however, and focused on foreign interference particularly in relation to the observance of the law. The Maccabean revolt is the paradigm example of this. However, Jewish resistance to interference with its own political and cultic organization, and its more general negative reaction to foreign rule, does not countermand the contention that in the world of ideas and in literary production, extensive Hellenization is undeniable. Some of the later books of the Hebrew Bible itself exhibit the Greek influence very noticeably.³⁵

Indeed, in relation to the mind-set of Second Temple Judaism itself, we have to acknowledge that we are dealing essentially with an amalgam of thought forms made up of Hebraic and Greek elements. For all the self-conscious exclusiveness of Jewish self-identity of the kind which surfaced particularly in times of tension and crisis, we need to appreciate that in less fraught times Judaism found a natural ally, not only in an ethical monotheism of the kind that could be historically connected back to Plato's philosophical speculation, but also in his fundamental focus on the reality of what is transcendently "other" than this passing world of space and time.

While it is true that, following the publication of Martin Hengel's major work *Judaism and Hellenism*, there have been a few who have raised questions about some of his isolated conclusions, in general terms his thesis about the cross-fertilization of Jewish and Greek thought-forms across the Hellenistic world still stands. Sometimes it is imagined that Hellenistic influences on Judaism were somehow confined to the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, such as were found in Alexandria, or Antioch, or Rome, while back in Galilee and Jerusalem a more authentic and purified form of Jewish thought prevailed. However, Hengel has convincingly demonstrated that

34. Such as we see in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Philo of Alexandria.

35. For example, Koheleth (Ecclesiastes, possibly around 300 BC), Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus, second century BC), and The Wisdom of Solomon, usually dated between 50 BC and AD 50.

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Hellenizing pressures were so all-pervasive that it is no longer possible to draw a distinction between Palestinian Judaism and the Hellenized Judaism of the Diaspora in this kind of way. Hengel's follow-up book, specifically on the Greek influence on the culture of Jewish Palestine in the first century, which is supported by a plethora of recent archaeological finds, including even bilingual inscriptions (for example on ossuaries and in epitaphs), seems even more decisive than his earlier analysis of the influence of Hellenism upon Judaism. As Hengel himself says:

It is not so simple to distinguish between the 'Jewish-Hellenistic' literature of the Diaspora and the 'genuine Jewish' literature of Palestine. Almost all accounts of intertestamental Jewish literature suffer from their desire to make too simple a distinction here. There were connections in all directions, and a constant and lively interchange.³⁶

This process of Hellenization thus included the religious and cultural center of Jerusalem itself, and there is clear evidence that Galilee was likewise not exempt. To Hengel's mind, the processes of Hellenization were so extensive and all-pervading that it is even at least a thinkable proposition that Jesus was himself perhaps bilingual; witness his conversation with the Syro-phoenician woman recorded in Mark 7. In this episode the woman is specifically identified as a Greek. Also, some of Jesus' inner circle of disciples had Greek names (Andrew and Philip), and Peter (Andrew's brother) by tradition later prosecuted the Christian mission among the Jewish Diaspora of the West, which spoke only Greek.³⁷ We might also question whether it is even possible for Jesus to name Peter as "the rock" in Aramaic; at this point the use of the Greek *Petros*/rock may also indicate that in the mind of the Gospel writers it was not out of place to suggest Jesus' own acquaintance with the Greek language. However speculative these particular suggestions may be, they do alert us to the need to take Hellenization seriously in first-century Palestine.

The Jews were certainly conscious of their historical ancestry and of the historical roots of their religious identity as the covenant people of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Very notably, their eschatological hope orientated them towards a future vindication and release from foreign oppression. However, insofar as the fundamental thrust of thought inherited ultimately from Plato helped to point Hellenistic culture towards another world, in broad terms defined as "heavenly," and to think of an ideal reality above and beyond this passing world of time, then this was not only compatible with Jewish theological sympathies but could be a positive support to them.

Conversely, in a world of decaying polytheism both Plato and Aristotle propagated the idea that the perfect order of the heavenly bodies proves the existence of a Supreme Being who governs the universe. Despite the idolatry of much popular Greek culture of the time, for the more philosophically sophisticated "It was a windfall to

36. Hengel, *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea*, 26.

37. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 105.

discover a people who rejected false gods and adored the God of Heaven alone.”³⁸ Even in times of crisis when Jewish and Greek identity was most polarized, and it was necessary for Jews to stand apart from Greeks, and particularly from visual tokens of Greek culture (most notably its idolatry), it is nevertheless much less likely that people became consciously aware of a “Jewish way of thinking” over against a “Greek way of thinking,” particularly about the existence of a transcendent God. On the contrary, in the eclectic world of Jewish philosophy from Aristobulus and the *Letter* of Pseudo-Aristeas in the middle of the second century BC onwards, down to Josephus in the closing decades of the first century AD, there were those who positively argued that, even if known by other names, the God of the philosophers was fundamentally also the God of Israel.³⁹ Indeed, at the hands of Aristobulus, Moses actually came to be identified as the teacher of Plato.⁴⁰

It is incontrovertible that by the first century the use of the Greek language also meant that characteristically Greek ways of thinking informed the intellectual and cultural atmosphere. If Hellenistic influences penetrated religion and culture across the ancient world in a way that was all-pervasive, then the idea that purely Jewish modes of thought persisted in complete independence of the influence of more characteristically Greek ideas, in the way championed by the Biblical Theology Movement, has therefore become entirely problematic.

Moreover, in speaking of the Hellenization of Jewish thought by the first century AD we are not just speaking in very general terms. Rather than the integration of an alleged “Greek” way of thinking with a “Jewish” one, what we have to come to terms with was the incorporation into an identifiably Jewish worldview of an amalgam of philosophically diverse streams of thought that were quite specifically of Stoic and Platonic origin. While some quite justifiably refer to this as a Transitional Period leading to the fully confident emergence of Platonism of the triumphant kind we see in the Neoplatonism of Plotinus (ca. AD 204/5–270), this Stoic/Platonic amalgam that was characteristic of the philosophy of the time, with Plato clearly on the way to becoming the dominant partner, is what allows the period from 100 BC to AD 200 to be distinguished as the time of “Middle Platonism.”

The specific form of the Hellenization of the intellectual atmosphere out of which the New Testament emerged might naturally therefore be thought of as a type of philosophical “eclecticism” of a Stoic/Platonic kind. It is important to note, however, that this is a matter of some debate. John Dillon has questioned the appropriateness of the use of the term “eclectic” in reference to Middle Platonism on the ground that this word usually suggests a kind of freewheeling selectivity of a fairly chaotic kind. However, what we are dealing with is really a progressive “blending” and development

38. Rajak, “The Location of Cultures” 18.

39. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 266.

40. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 163–69. This was still being affirmed in Paul’s time by Philo of Alexandria.

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of various carefully selected elements of thought under the influence of key influential thinkers, all broadly contributing to the growing interest in Platonism within the already popular Stoicism. As the Danish scholar Troels Engberg-Pedersen says: “One thing particularly striking about the Transitional Period is that almost all philosophers within the period to some degree adopted ideas from philosophies other than their own.”⁴¹ In the process of the overall change from Stoicism to Platonism as the dominant force, what we find is that “many philosophers who were basically Stoics, and who saw themselves as such, also drew on ideas that had a specifically Platonic pedigree.”⁴² Similarly, those who thought of themselves as Platonists appear to have had no hesitation in drawing upon input from Stoicism if it was deemed helpful. Sometimes language was co-opted from an opposed school of thought while at the same time taking issue with it.



It should not be a surprise to find that, even though no New Testament writer would have called himself either a Stoic or a Platonist, traces both of Stoic philosophy and Platonism may fairly easily be detected in the books of the New Testament. Paul provides the paradigm case. He certainly saw himself as a “Christian” rather than as a Stoic or a Platonist, but the cultural complexion of the communities to which he wrote his epistles necessarily required him to use words and concepts understandable to them. Paul was a Jew and he worshipped the Jewish God, but inevitably his Epistles nevertheless reflect the Stoic/Platonic amalgam of concepts and ideas that informed the intellectual world of which he was part. These days we dare not try to understand Paul as the inheritor of Second Temple Judaism as though this could be conceived in independence of this Hellenistic milieu. The principal thrust of Paul’s apocalyptically-colored eschatology was undoubtedly drawn from a Jewish source. But even here the Stoic belief in a final conflagration may also have been within earshot; the Stoic view being that instead of *aether* beyond the heavens there was divine fire and that the end of the world would be marked by an all-consuming divine conflagration. Paul’s references to the shining brightness of the glory of God in the face of the Raised Jesus Christ, and especially to the Day of Judgment as a day when the final purposes of God will be “revealed with fire,” almost certainly echo Stoic images (1 Cor 3:13–15).

In recent years the remarkable congruence of Stoic ethical language with some of the key themes of the thought of St. Paul has triggered a succession of publications. Indeed, this has emerged as one of most fertile areas of advance in contemporary New Testament studies.⁴³ Troels Engberg-Pedersen, who has spearheaded this important

41. Engberg-Pedersen, “Setting the Scene,” 4–5.

42. Engberg-Pedersen, “Setting the Scene,” 5. On Stoic use of Plato, see Sedley, *Greek and Roman Philosophy*, 24.

43. Largely pioneered by Troels Engberg-Pedersen. See the collections of essays edited by him: *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, *Paul and the Stoics*, and *Paul beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*.

development, makes the salient point that we do not turn to the philosophical traditions of Hellenistic culture so as to illuminate the “background” against which Paul is to be understood, for this suggests that he, as a Jew, in some way “stands out” from it. Rather, this is the intellectual and cultural context *in which* Paul is to be placed; he is a participant in it. Certainly, apart from his apparent reliance on a model of ethical argument conditioned by the popular Stoic moral philosophy of the culture of which he was part, not to mention his use of characteristically Stoic words and phrases, there is good reason to believe that he was open to a wider range of additional philosophical influences of an epistemological and ontological kind.⁴⁴ From time to time, therefore, Paul certainly uses language that is also characteristically Platonic; this is true particularly in relation, for example, to 2 Corinthians 4 and 5.⁴⁵

We must, as a consequence, necessarily take account of the fact that from the very start, Christianity was born into a world that, for some centuries, had been thoroughly “Hellenized.” As Tessa Rajak has said, “In reality, even if contemporaries were not themselves wholly aware of the strands, Jewish and Greek cultures were deeply intertwined from the early hellenistic period.”⁴⁶ Likewise, Diarmaid MacCulloch, in his history of Christianity, aptly reflects upon “what a tangle of Greek and Jewish ideas and memories underlies the construction of Christianity.”⁴⁷



In view of this cross-fertilization of Greek and Hebrew ideas, a clear consciousness of a direct and sophisticated opposition between ideas of “the resurrection of the body” and the “immortality of the soul,” of the kind that inhabited the minds of those involved in the twentieth-century Biblical Theology Movement, calls for very careful scrutiny. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to say that an alleged consciousness of a radical dichotomy between the two was actually very unlikely, if not virtually impossible, in the fluid and eclectic context of ancient speculation about life beyond death. Certainly, we have therefore to be open to the specific theoretical possibility that even what was understood by the idea of “resurrection” was not immune from Hellenistic modifying influences.

The crucial issue for the theology of the Resurrection of Christ is whether the concept of “resurrection” must be understood in terms of categories of thought that are exclusively in line with the apocalyptic imagery of Second Temple Jewish eschatology, as the return of the Raised Jesus (after having been dead for three days) to *this*

44. It has been argued that he also followed a set of rhetorical strategies that can be traced back to Aristotle, the founding father of the study of rhetoric. See David Hellholm’s analysis of the argument in Romans 6 in relation to Aristotelian rhetorical principles in “Enthymemic Argumentation in Paul.”

45. A discussion of this facet of Paul’s thought will be found in the companion volume to this: Carnley, *Reconstruction of Resurrection Belief*, chapter 11.

46. Rajak, “The Location of Cultures,” 4.

47. MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 19.

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world, and thus as a historical event, as N. T. Wright vehemently contends. Or, alternately, whether commerce with transcendentalist ideas of Greek origin meant that the notion of “immortality with God” in a timeless eternity beyond this world was brought to bear on the understanding of resurrection. If so, we have at least to take account of the possibility that this may well have been modified by being removed from the arena of historical time to the arena of God’s eternity. In this case, it becomes an object of faith and the subject matter of theology, with only a secondary toehold in history in the form of the religious faith-claims and reported experiences of the first generation of Christian believers. The question of interest thus becomes whether the originally Greek idea of the “immortality of the soul” and the originally Hebrew idea of “the resurrection of the dead” rubbed shoulders so as to produce a kind of amalgam of these two streams of thought.



N. T. Wright is, of course, sufficiently attuned to the contemporary appreciation of the Hellenization of Palestinian culture in the first century to try to distance himself from the Biblical Theology Movement, and to avoid speaking in terms of a rigid polarity between “biblical” and “Greek” categories of thought. To his credit, for example, he is wary of drawing a clear dichotomy between the “Greek” belief in the immortality of the soul and the “Jewish” belief in resurrection, given that this is now somewhat passé in the world of New Testament studies.⁴⁸ However, after a perfunctory distancing of himself from the Biblical Theology Movement, its fundamental orientations of thought are nevertheless re-affirmed. For in practice, despite his protestations of innocence, it is abundantly clear that Wright has not been able to shake himself entirely free of the dichotomizing mind-set of the Biblical Theology Movement. *The Resurrection of the Son of God* is peppered with disparaging comments about Plato, and more generally about a theological “platonism” that is said to characterize any kind of interpretation of the Resurrection of Christ other than in terms of a return to *this* material world. Specifically in relation to the understanding of the Resurrection, he does not hesitate to draw a radical contrast between Hebrew and Greek modes of thought, and he does this repeatedly. To think of the Resurrection of Christ in terms of his going to a transcendent world so as to be eternally with God “in heaven” is branded “platonizing” and is for this reason alone declared to be anathema. This is in a sense understandable, for it is a conclusion that is methodologically driven. After all, only by locating it squarely within this world can the Resurrection of Christ be handled purely as a historical event, employing the techniques of argument of critical historical research.

48. *RSG*, 162–64: “The old assumption that Greeks believed in immortality and Jews believed in resurrection is not merely historically inaccurate; it is conceptually muddled.” He will later clarify this muddiness by explaining that when Paul used the term “immortality” he really meant “resurrection,” for “resurrection is a form of immortality”!

Wright's contention that there can be only one meaning of the word "resurrection" which is *the* Second Temple or Jewish view, and that it connotes a return of a dead body to life in *this* world of space and time, is therefore not just regularly contrasted with the technically Platonic view of the "immortality of the soul." It is even contrasted with a far more general contemporary theological propensity to think of the destination of the resurrected dead in essentially "other worldly" terms. Even the idea that the Resurrection of Christ involved a "going to God" as to a timeless eternity, outside of space and time, from whence he might then be said to have "appeared," and from whence he is in hope expected to return at the Eschaton, is written off as an essentially alien "Greek" or "platonic" idea.

Likewise, those who understand Paul to speak of the body of the resurrection as a radically transformed celestial or "spiritual body," as against the restoration of a purely physical and material body and its return to this world, are also written off as "platonizing." Clearly, it is not just a technical, full-blown Platonism with which Wright takes issue, but anything with what Ludwig Wittgenstein would have called a "family resemblance" to Platonism. What is to be contrasted with the alleged pure and unadulterated Second Temple view of resurrection becomes a kind of extended quasi-platonism, constituted by a platform of broadly related "other-worldly" or "heavenly" orientated ideas.



At the height of the Biblical Theology Movement, Oscar Cullmann confidently declared that "The teaching of the great philosophers Socrates and Plato can in no way be brought into consonance with that of the New Testament."⁴⁹ In a similar vein, Wright's antipathy and even hostility to Plato is the other side of the penny of his attempt to articulate an uncontaminated "Jewish" view of things. Sometimes his hostility to Plato is couched in somewhat intemperate language: Those who think of Paul's references to the "spiritual body" in 1 Corinthians 15 as something radically transformed and "heavenly" or nonphysical, for example, or as something "which you could not touch" and "could not see with ordinary eyesight" are said to fall into "Plato's ugly ditch."⁵⁰ Indeed, Plato is charged with conceiving unwelcome views of the afterlife; not only including images of eternal heavenly bliss for the souls of the righteous, but of hellish punishment for the wicked, accompanied by graphic scenes of judgment of the kind that became so characteristic of the Middle Ages. These, Wright suggests, may be written off, not just as "Platonized Christianity" but possibly as "Christianized Platonism," and thus categorized as an essentially pagan way of thinking.⁵¹

49. Cullmann, *Immortality*, 60.

50. *RSG*, 348.

51. *RSG*, 50. Elsewhere, in the face of this kind of possibility, Paul is said to belong "on the Jewish map rather than the pagan one," (*RSG*, 372).

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It was Oscar Cullmann's view that we must "guard against any accommodation to Greek philosophy, if we wish to understand the New Testament doctrine."⁵² This amply encapsulates Wright's methodological stance specifically in relation to the understanding of "resurrection."



As a consequence of all this, it is important to note that, insofar as God is spoken of at all by Wright in relation to the Resurrection, it is therefore only the background activity of God in some way "behind" events of historical time, and the future eschatological act of God of the End Time, that hold any real interest for him. What we might appropriately call "salvation history" (*Heilsgeschichte*) replaces any focus on the timeless, heavenly life of God as God is in God's self. This explains why Wright is disinclined to speak of the Resurrection of Christ as a "going to God" in a heaven above and beyond this world. Indeed, instead he also thinks of heaven itself in historical terms. The term "heaven" is really only legitimately used by Christians in the phrase "the Kingdom of Heaven." Rather than as the imagined timelessly eternal abode of God outside of this world of space and time, heaven awaits us in the future of *this* world, for the "Kingdom of Heaven" will only be realized on earth at the future Eschaton. This yet-to-be-realized future is the ultimate destination beyond the grave of Christian believers.

The fact that it "has not happened yet," because it is a reality that will only come to be at the End of all history as we know it, does not appear to be an issue for Wright. At that future time, all the righteous dead will be raised to be with Christ, and God will be all in all. Meanwhile, all the righteous dead are said somehow to be asleep, in an (intermediate) state of suspended animation,⁵³ awaiting their restoration to life in this world. While this will only happen in the denouement of the End Time, we are assured that they are all safely "in the hands of their maker";⁵⁴ but exactly where the Raised Christ with his materially-restored body, now made physically incorruptible, might be thought to be located in this interim period, which has now extended over two thousand years, if not with God in a heaven beyond this world, is not made altogether clear.



The idea of the Resurrection of Christ as essentially a mystery of God, an event with a transcendental face, is in this way abandoned in favor of a kind of monistic theological horizontalism. This alone is what is said to be congruent with the fundamental

52. Cullmann, *Immortality*, 49.

53. At this point, Wright also exhibits a close relationship with the seminal thought of Cullmann on this subject. See Cullmann, *Immortality*, 10.

54. *RSG*, 170.

emphasis of the apocalyptic hope regularly expressed in Second Temple Judaism, which is in turn said to have been taken over by the first generation of Christians. Wright's attempt to disconnect us from thinking in ahistorical transcendental terms also means that any suggestion that the Resurrection might be thought of in terms of "exultation" and "heavenly glorification" also tends to be dismissed as "purely platonic," and therefore as foreign to authentically "biblical" and historical categories of thought. This is despite Paul's propensity to speak in this way, apparently quoting an early hymn, in Phil 2:5–11 with its affirmation that God "highly exalted" the crucified Jesus without, perhaps significantly, any explicit reference to the concept of resurrection.

This then, is the Second Temple understanding of resurrection that is said to have been bequeathed to us also in the twenty-first century. We are allegedly bound to it no less than the first generation of Christians, who are said not to have departed from it. This basic orientation away from the quasi-platonic view of the timeless eternity of God above and beyond this world allows Wright to believe that the Resurrection of Christ may be thought of quite simply as a time-bound historical event in the sense of the return of the dead historical Jesus to life in *this* world of space and time.



In all this Wright is clearly not only anxious to keep our understanding of the Resurrection contained within spacio-temporal parameters, but also to make sure that it remains the *kind* of event that can be handled by the techniques of critical historical research. We can fully acknowledge the pressure on Wright in methodological terms to hold on to an understanding of "resurrection" in "strictly limited," clear, and distinct terms. In order to qualify for its handling as a historical event, it must conform in principle to any other happening of this world and must obviously be contained within space and time. What might be appropriate to an imagined heavenly world, or acknowledged to be less material and more immaterial and spiritual, or what might be thought to be located away from this world of time in the timeless eternity of God, might become the religious object of faith and the subject matter of theology, but hardly the subject matter of critical historical inquiry. While a historian may write an account of the way in which the first Christians described an experience that was in essence understood to be directed towards an "other-worldly" reality, the analysis of the nature of the experience of an alleged heavenly reality itself becomes a matter for speculative reflection rather than the subject matter of a purely historical enterprise.

This is why, by contrast with an understanding of the Easter appearances as revelatory or even visionary experiences that were appropriated by faith and perceived by some but not by others, Wright is obliged to portray the appearances as matter-of-fact historical "meetings" with the historically restored and reanimated Jesus. By the same token, for this methodological reason, an understanding of the Resurrection as

a “going to God” has necessarily to be entirely ruled out of court. The same applies to any inclination to speak of the first Easter experiences as “revelatory disclosures” of the Raised and exalted Christ, appearing “from heaven” and appropriated by faith. For the methodological reasons to which Wright is committed, the word “resurrection” can *only* mean the return of Jesus to life in a visibly material body after a period of having been dead, and its restoration therefore to this world of space and time. This is what he contends happened to Jesus, and given that Jesus is “the first-born of the dead,” this is what will also happen to all the righteous dead at the End of the World, when they are finally awakened from their current state of sleep: they will all be restored to life and accommodated back in this world. Only at that point of time will it be appropriate to speak of “the Kingdom of Heaven.” Thus, when “heaven on earth” is finally actualized at the Eschaton, all the righteous dead who have ever lived will be bodily restored to this world in the manner of the resurrected Jesus, with reanimated bodies made no less incorruptible than his, and with him they will rule over the entire world. At that point, “God’s people will actually be running the new world on God’s behalf.”⁵⁵



By contrast with this aggressively anti-platonic orientation of Wright’s approach to the theology of the Resurrection, it will be argued in this book that Christian thought of the kind that Wright condemns as “platonic” actually starts with the first generation of believers. This, of course, is not to suggest that the first Christians were necessarily students of Plato, or had any immediate or direct acquaintance with his writings, though this is of course not impossible. Rather, the suggestion is that their theological understanding, not least in relation to the specifics of the Resurrection of Christ, was formed within a Jewish intellectual environment already energized by the popular amalgam of Platonism and Stoicism of the day. Even for Jews, this was inescapably the world of Middle Platonism. As important as it certainly was, Second Temple Jewish apocalypticism was not the only component of their intellectual inheritance. They were certainly not uninfluenced by a basic Hellenistic orientation of thought towards a world above and beyond this one, of the very kind that Wright labels “platonic” and then urges us to avoid at all costs.

We can appreciate the difficulty for Wright of this way of thinking, for it entails that the resurrection experience upon which Easter faith is based must become essentially revelatory, “from heaven” as it were, and therefore something that must necessarily be appropriated by faith. This is clearly at odds with Wright’s own fundamental methodological commitment, which entails that it must be contained within historical time so as to ensure that access to it is by the critical historical reason alone



55. Wright, “Christians Wrong about Heaven.” Whether contemporary Christianity will respond warmly to this prospect is problematic. Leslie Houlden, in *Connections*, 149, may speak for many when he says “The apocalyptic ‘package’ can scarcely be given new currency.”