

Excerpt From: N. T. Wright, “How Do We Know that Jesus Existed?” in Antony Flew, *There Is A God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (2007).

that about himself really must have been mad, deranged, deluded.”

To this I would say: okay, fine, but just hold those a priori off for the moment, keep the dogs at bay. And just hold in your mind the picture of a first-century Jew believing and doing all that I have said. And then ask the question about the resurrection. And then ask all the other questions about what we mean by the word *God* anyway. Because, of course, the early Christians said most emphatically that the word *God* remains systematically vague, and that it’s only when we look at Jesus that we find it comes into focus. John says, “No one has seen God at any time; but the only begotten Son, who lives in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” The Greek at this point means, literally, “He has provided an exegesis of him, he has shown us who God really is.”

That’s a long answer to a vital question, but I don’t think I can make it any shorter. Most people, in my experience, don’t think through the question of Jesus and God in this way. But this is how, I think, Jesus himself, the earliest Christians, and those who wrote the Gospels were thinking, and we do well to get our minds around it.

### **What Evidence Is There for the Resurrection of Christ?**

Let me make this as short as I can. My father read my long book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, when he was

eighty-three. It took him three days to read seven hundred pages. He read right through it; he just did nothing else. He phoned me up and said, “I’ve finished it.” And I said, “You what?” He said, “Yes. And I really started to enjoy it after about page 600.” I thought it was a wonderfully back-handed compliment. My father used to be in the timber business. I said, “Dad, you need to know that the first five hundred or so pages are the root system. And if the tree doesn’t have a root system, it won’t be able to stand up and it won’t bear any fruit.” And he said, “Yes, I sort of figured that out. But I always preferred the upper branches myself.”

So I need to delve into the root system a bit. One of the things I really enjoyed when I wrote that book was going back to my classical stomping grounds and researching ancient beliefs about life after death, Greek and Roman and Egyptian beliefs about life after death. And there’s a huge range of beliefs about life after death, but “resurrection” doesn’t feature in the Greco-Roman world. In fact, Pliny, Aeschylus, Homer, Cicero, and all sorts of early writers say, “Of course, we know resurrection doesn’t happen.” Now, at the same time, the Jews had developed quite a specific theology about resurrection: that God’s people would be bodily raised from the dead at the end of time. The time element is very important, because most Christians in the Western world use the word *resurrection* as a vague word to mean “life after death,”

which it never did in the ancient world. It was always a very specific term for what I call life *after* life after death. In other words, first you die, you are dead and not bodily alive, and then you are “resurrected,” which means you begin a new bodily life, a new life *after* whatever “life after death” may consist of.

We can track the way in which *resurrection* belief occurs in Judaism. Resurrection is a two-stage sequence: right after you die you’re immediately in this holding pattern or waiting state; and then you have this entirely new life called *resurrection*. Now, in the book I had great fun drawing a map of Jewish beliefs in life after death on the larger map of ancient beliefs in life after death in general. And within Judaism itself there are additional variations. The Pharisees believed in resurrection, and this seems to have been the majority belief in Palestinian Judaism at the time of Jesus. The Sadducees didn’t believe in life after death at all, certainly not resurrection. And people like Philo and perhaps the Essenes (though that’s controversial) believed in a single-stage disembodied immortality, in which, after death, you simply go wherever you are going and stay there, rather than experiencing a subsequent resurrection.

Now, this is all the more interesting because, in all the societies that have been studied in this respect, beliefs about life after death are very conservative. Faced with

death, people tend to lurch back to beliefs and practices they know, to where they came from, to how their tradition, their family, their village, and so on, has always done burial customs. So it is truly remarkable that all the early Christians known to us, right through till the late second century when the Gnostics start to use the word *resurrection* in quite a different sense (but we’ll leave that aside)—all the early Christians known to us for the first four or five generations believed in a future bodily resurrection, even though most of them came from the pagan world, where this was regarded as complete and utter rubbish.

A modern myth circulating at the moment says that it’s only we who have contemporary post-Enlightenment science who have discovered that dead people don’t rise. Those people back then, poor things, were unenlightened, so they believed in all these crazy miracles. But that is simply false. A lovely quote by C. S. Lewis relates to this. He is talking about the virginal conception of Jesus and says that the reason Joseph was worried about Mary’s pregnancy was not because he didn’t know where babies come from, but because he did. It’s the same with the resurrection of Jesus. People in the ancient world were incredulous when faced with the Christian claim, because they knew perfectly well that when people die they stay dead.

And what we then find—and this to me is utterly fascinating—that we can track, in early Christianity, several

modifications in the classic Jewish belief about resurrection. First, instead of resurrection being something that was simply going to happen to all God's people at the end, the early Christians said it had happened to one person in advance. Now, no first-century Jew, as far as we know, believed there would be one person raised ahead of everybody else. So that's a radical innovation, but they all believed that.

Second, they believed that resurrection would involve the *transformation* of the physical body. Those Jews who believed in resurrection seem to have gone in one of two directions. Some said it would produce a physical body exactly like this one all over again, and others said it would be a luminous body, one shining like a star. The early Christians didn't say either of those things. They talked about a new sort of physicality—this is very clear in Paul, but not only in Paul—a new type of embodiedness that is definitely bodily in the sense of being solid and substantial, but seems to have been transformed so that it is now not susceptible to pain or suffering or death. And this is quite new. That picture of resurrection is not in Judaism.

Third, of course, they believed that the Messiah himself had been raised from the dead, which no Second Temple Jew believed because, according to Second Temple Judaism, the Messiah was never going to be killed. So that was novel.

Fourth, they used the idea of “resurrection” in quite new ways. In Judaism, the idea had been used as a metaphor for “return from exile,” as we find in Ezekiel 37. But within early Christianity—and I mean very early Christianity, for example, Paul—we find it being used in connection with baptism, holiness, and various other aspects of Christian living that were not in mind within Judaism and its use of “resurrection.” This again shows quite a radical innovation, a mutation from its form in the Jewish viewpoint.

Fifth, we find that for the earliest Christians “resurrection” comes to be thought of as something to which God's people in the present actually contribute. Christians are called to work together with God to implement what was launched at Easter and so to anticipate the new world God will make eventually. This too is quite new, but only explicable as a mutation within Judaism.

Sixth, we find that in early Christianity “resurrection” has moved from being one doctrine among many others—important, but not that important—which is where it is in Judaism, to become the center of everything. Take it away from Paul, say, or 1 Peter, Revelation, or the great second-century fathers, and you will destroy their whole framework. We have to conclude that something must have happened to bring “resurrection” in from the periphery to the center, to the focal point.

Seventh, and finally, we find that in early Christianity there is virtually no spectrum of belief about what happens after death. In Judaism there were several different viewpoints, and in the pagan world there were a great many, but in early Christianity there was only one: resurrection itself. Granted how conservative most people are in their views about life after death, this is truly remarkable. It really does look as though the earliest Christians had good reason to rethink even this most personal and important point of belief. And when we look at the spectrum of early Christianity, we see that the early Christians disagreed about quite a lot of things, but they are remarkably unanimous in their view not only of resurrection as their belief, but of how resurrection plays out and how it works. All this is spelled out in my book in great detail.

All this forces us as historians to ask a very simple question: Why did all the early Christians known to us, from the earliest times for which we have evidence, have this very new, but remarkably unanimous, view of resurrection? That is a genuinely interesting historical question in its own right. Of course, all the early Christians known to us would say, “We have this view of resurrection because of what we believe about Jesus.” Now, if the idea that Jesus had been raised from the dead only started to crop up after twenty or thirty years of Christianity, as many skeptical scholars have supposed, you would find lots of strands of early Christianity in

which there really wasn’t much place for resurrection—or, if you did find resurrection, it might have a different shape from the very specific one it has in early Christianity. Therefore, the wide extent and unanimity of early Christian belief in resurrection force us to say that something definite *happened*, way back early on, that has shaped and colored the whole early Christian movement.

At that point we have to say, “All right then, what about the Gospel narratives?” What about Matthew 28, that short narrative in Mark 16 and the longer one in Luke 24, and the much longer one in John 20–21? And, of course, I, like virtually all Gospel scholars, believe that those were written down much later. I don’t actually know when the Gospels were written. Nobody knows that, although scholars keep on telling us they know. They could have been written as early as the 50s of the first century; some would say even earlier. They could have been written as late as the 70s or 80s; some would even say the 90s. But for my argument at the moment this doesn’t matter at all.

The point is this: The Gospel resurrection narratives (and the related material at the start of Acts) have certain key features, common to all four of them, demonstrating historically that, though they were written down later, they go back in a way that has not been altered very much at all, lightly edited but not substantially altered, to very early oral tradition. This is, obviously, of huge importance.

The first feature is the portrait of Jesus in the resurrection narratives. It has been said again and again (and when I was researching the big book I got very tired of reading scholars saying this) that (1) Mark was written first, and he's hardly got anything about the resurrection; (2) Matthew comes next, and there's not much more; and then (3) toward the end of the century we get Luke and John, and then and only then do we find stories about Jesus eating broiled fish, cooking breakfast by the shore, inviting Thomas to touch him, and so on. According to the theory, then, there were Christians toward the end of the century who started to believe that Jesus wasn't really truly human, that he wasn't really a true man, and so Luke and John make up these stories at that stage in order to say, yes, he really was human, the risen Jesus really had bodily form, and so on.

The trouble with that theory—which, as I say, has been very popular—is that those narratives (about Jesus cooking breakfast by the shore, breaking the bread at Emmaus, inviting Thomas to touch him, and so on) have this same Jesus coming and going through locked doors, sometimes being recognized and sometimes not being recognized, appearing and disappearing at will, and finally ascending to heaven. Let me put it like this. If I were making up a narrative in, say, 95 C.E. because I knew that some of my folk were a little insecure on the question of whether Jesus was

a really solid human being, I wouldn't put all that material in. It's a kind of "own goal."

From the other point of view, if you were a first-century Jew wanting to invent a story about Jesus being raised from the dead, the natural biblical source for you to draw on would be Daniel 12, which is one of the big texts on resurrection for Second Temple Judaism. Daniel 12 says that the righteous will shine like stars in the kingdom of their Father. In fact, Jesus quotes that in an earlier passage in Matthew 13. It is therefore all the more fascinating that none of the resurrection narratives have Jesus shining like a star. He should have done so if they were making it up from the text.

Thus, from these two points of view, the portrait of Jesus in the resurrection narratives is very, very odd. It's not what you would expect. There is no portrait like that in the Jewish narratives of the time. And yet, remarkably, it is consistent across Matthew and Luke and John. (Mark is too short for us to know what he might have said if he had gone on.) So something very odd has happened. It sounds as though the Evangelists are trying to say to us, "I know you're going to find it very difficult to believe, but this is actually what happened." Something extraordinary has happened that's left its footprints in the narratives. People would not have made these things up off the tops of their heads. Anyone writing fictitious

accounts of Easter would have made Jesus more clearly recognizable.

Let me say something here as an aside. If you take the resurrection narratives in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the original Greek and compare them side by side, they're quite different—even when they're telling the same bit of the story about the women going to the tomb and so on. They use different words again and again. So it looks as though they haven't simply copied it from each other.

The second thing is that there's an almost complete absence of echo and allusion to the Old Testament in the resurrection narratives. In the crucifixion narratives, it's clear that the story of Jesus's death has been told again and again by the early Christian community, and it's woven Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, Zechariah, and other Old Testament allusions into the crucifixion narrative, even into the burial narrative. But then you turn over the page to the resurrection narrative, and you don't find this in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. (And we remind ourselves that Paul has already said in 1 Corinthians 15 that Christ was raised from the dead "*according to the scriptures*,"—Paul already in the early 50s had a rich arsenal of Old Testament texts with which to interpret the resurrection.) It would have been very easy for Matthew, who loves telling us about the fulfillment of Scripture, to say, "This happened in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled that said . . ." But Matthew

doesn't do that. Similarly, John says that when the disciples went to the tomb, they didn't yet know the scripture that he must be raised from the dead. But he doesn't actually quote the scripture or tell us which it was. And, on the road to Emmaus, Luke has Jesus expounding the Scriptures—but, again, Luke never tells us which scriptures or what Jesus said about them.

This is very odd. Either we have to say that the early church wrote resurrection narratives replete with reflection on the Old Testament and that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John went through independently and took those references out, or we have to say that these stories go back substantially to an early oral tradition that precedes the theological and exegetical reflection. In my judgment the second of these is far and away the more likely.

The third fascinating feature of the narratives is the place of the women. (This is well known; the point is not original to me.) In the ancient world, Jewish and pagan, women were not credible witnesses in the law court. And already by the time Paul is quoting the public tradition about Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15, he is saying: "Here's the story the way we told it. He was crucified for our sins, according to the scriptures, raised on the third day, according to the scriptures, and then he was seen by . . ."—then he has a list of men—"Cephas, by James, by the other early disciples, by five hundred at once, last of all by me." We

put up our hands and say, “Excuse me, Paul, where are the women?” The answer is that, already in the early 50s, the public tradition has airbrushed the women out of the account, because the public tradition knew that they were going to be in trouble. We see the trouble they had when we read Celsus, who a century later pours scorn on the resurrection by saying, “This faith is just based on the testimony of some hysterical women.”

So it’s fascinating that in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John we have Mary Magdalene, the other Marys, and the other women. And Mary Magdalene, of all people (we know she had a very checkered career in the past), is chosen as the prime witness: there she is in all four accounts. As historians we are obliged to comment that if these stories had been made up five years later, let alone thirty, forty, or fifty years later, they would never have had Mary Magdalene in this role. To put Mary there is, from the point of view of Christian apologists wanting to explain to a skeptical audience that Jesus really did rise from the dead, like shooting themselves in the foot. But to us as historians this kind of thing is gold dust. *The early Christians would never, never have made this up.* The stories—of the women finding an empty tomb and then meeting the risen Jesus—must be regarded as solidly historical.

So to the fourth and final fascinating feature of the accounts. Here I speak as a preacher who has preached

pretty much every Easter Day for the last thirty-five years. Preachers in the Western tradition who, at Easter, preach about Jesus rising from the dead tend to preach about our own future life, our own resurrection, or our own going to heaven. But in the resurrection narratives in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, there’s nothing about our future life. By contrast, almost every time Paul mentions the resurrection, he is making a point about our own future life as well. In Hebrews we’re told about Jesus’s resurrection and our future resurrection; in the book of Revelation, again, we find the link made between our resurrection and Jesus’s resurrection. Justin Martyr, Ignatius of Antioch, and Irenaeus, right across the tradition, all agree: “We think about Jesus’s resurrection in order to reflect upon our own.”

But Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John don’t say, “Jesus is raised, therefore we’ll be raised one day.” They say—and this often comes as a surprise to people: “Jesus is raised—therefore he really was the Messiah. God’s new creation has begun. We’ve got a job to do. And, what’s more, we find ourselves drawn to worship this Jesus, because we find that he has embodied Israel’s God, the creator of the universe.” In other words, those stories, as we find them in the Gospels, go back to a primitive way of telling the story that hasn’t even gotten around yet to saying, “Christ is risen, therefore we will be raised,” as we find it solidly in Paul

right through from the late 40s. So we have to conclude that these narratives go back way behind Paul to a time when we see the very, very early church reeling in shock from this totally unexpected event of the resurrection and figuring out what it means.

From all this I reach certain conclusions. In order to explain the rise of early Christianity, in order to explain the existence of those four resurrection accounts plus the bits and pieces in Acts and in Paul, we have to say that the very early church really did believe that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead. We have no evidence of any very early Christians who believed anything else. But how can we as historians explain that?

Obviously, as a Christian you can short-circuit this argument at any point. Many Christians have done that, which is a shame, actually, because they miss the vital point. Often people say, “Of course, he was the Son of God. He could have done anything. Stands to reason, doesn’t it?”

But I don’t want to do that. I want to be faithful to the texts themselves, which don’t say that. We have to ask: How do we explain this extraordinary phenomenon, the fact of early Christianity arising in the first place, taking its very specific shape, and telling the very specific stories that it did? I discover, as I look for historical explanations, that two particular things must have happened: (1) there must have been an empty tomb that was known to be the correct

tomb; it couldn’t have been a mistake; (2) there must have been appearances of the risen Jesus. Both of these must have occurred.

Why? Because if there had been an empty tomb and no appearances, everybody in the ancient world would have drawn the obvious conclusion (obvious to them even if not to us): body snatchers. Tombs were regularly robbed, especially if the people were rich or famous; there might be jewels in there, there might be something worth stealing. So they would have said what Mary said: “They’ve taken away the body. I don’t know what’s happened to it.” They would never ever have talked about resurrection, if all that had happened was an empty tomb.

Equally, you cannot explain the historical data we have looked at simply by saying that the disciples must have had some sort of experience they took to be a meeting with Jesus. They knew Jesus had been killed. But they all knew about hallucinations and ghosts and visions. Ancient literature—Jewish and pagan alike—is full of such things. It goes back to Homer; it’s in Virgil; it’s all over the place. Recently some people have tried to say, by way of arguing that the resurrection couldn’t have happened, something like this: “Ah, well, when those you love die, sometimes you will experience them in the room with you, smiling at you, maybe even talking to you; and then they will disappear again. Maybe that’s what happened to these disciples.” And



it's true; I've read some of the literature about that. This is a well-documented phenomenon as part of the grief process, and you can explain it how you like. But the crunch is that *the early Christians knew about phenomena like that as well*. They knew perfectly well that there were such things as visions, hallucinations, dreams, ghosts, and so on. In other words, if they'd had an experience, however vivid it seemed, of being with Jesus, but if the tomb had not been empty, they would have said, "My goodness, this was very powerful, and quite consoling in a way; but he hasn't been raised from the dead, of course, because dead people don't get raised (until all the dead are raised at the end)—and anyway, there is his body in the tomb."

At this point we need to remind ourselves of the way Jews buried people in those days. Most Jewish burials in Palestine at the time were done in the two-stage method. First, you wrap up the body in cloth, with plenty of spices, and place it on a ledge in a rock tomb or perhaps even in the basement of a house. You don't "bury" it the way people do in the modern Western world, in a grave dug in the earth and then filled in, because you would be coming back to pick up the bones once all the flesh had decomposed. (That's why you had spices, because of the smell of decomposition; you wouldn't go to the trouble and expense of spices if you were putting the body underground.) Then, when all the flesh had decomposed, you would collect the

bones, fold them up, and put them in an ossuary, a bone box, which you would store either in a loculus (a little niche at the back of the tomb) or in some other convenient place. Archaeologists keep digging up ossuaries in Jerusalem—dozens of them—every time a new road, a new Hilton Hotel, or a new housing estate is built. Archaeologists have hundreds, even thousands, of them.

The point is this. If the body of Jesus had still been in the tomb, the disciples could easily have found out. Then they would have said, "However strong these hallucinations are that we've been having, he hasn't been raised from the dead." So we as historians have to say that there really must have been an empty tomb and there really must have been sightings or, if you like, meetings with somebody discovered to be Jesus, even though he seemed to be strangely transformed in ways they weren't expecting and ways we as readers find quite confusing.

We come at last to the final move in the chess game. How, as a historian, do I explain these two facts, as I take them to be: the empty tomb and the appearances and visions of Jesus. The easiest explanation by far is that these things happened because Jesus really was raised from the dead, and the disciples really did meet him, even though his body was renewed and transformed so that now it seemed to be able to live in two dimensions at once. (That, indeed, is perhaps the best way to understand the phenomena: Jesus

was now living in God's dimension and ours, or, if you like, heaven and earth, simultaneously.)

The resurrection of Jesus does in fact provide a *sufficient* explanation for the empty tomb and the meetings with Jesus. Having examined all the other possible hypotheses I've read about anywhere in the literature, I think it's also a *necessary* explanation.

#### ANTONY FLEW: CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

I am very much impressed with Bishop Wright's approach, which is absolutely fresh. He presents the case for Christianity as something new for the first time. This is enormously important, especially in the United Kingdom, where the Christian religion has virtually disappeared. It is absolutely wonderful, absolutely radical, and very powerful.

Is it possible that there has been or can be divine revelation? As I said, you cannot limit the possibilities of omnipotence except to produce the logically impossible. Everything else is open to omnipotence.