

Charting the Christian Hope

BY CAMERON JORGENSEN

The authors of three recent books reviewed here agree that if Christians (and Jews) lose their understanding of the resurrection, then they will lose the central conviction that gives shape to the hope they proclaim, and they will lose sight of the God in whom they have trusted.

A few years ago I attended a lecture by the New Testament scholar N. T. Wright on the resurrection of Christ. Wright contended that the contemporary Church had veered way off course, preferring spiritualized concepts of the afterlife to the emphatic materiality of both the Easter event and the Christian hope. With our imaginations shaped more by Plato than by Jesus, we pine for the release of our souls from the prison-house of our bodies, a point he illustrated by quoting an American folk-hymn: “when I die, hallelujah, by and by, I’ll fly away!” I winced. Wright’s critique did not miss the mark.

There are plenty of saintly men and women waiting to “fly away” to heaven, escaping the limits of a physical body through their personal death or a collective “rapture,” without realizing how significantly this picture departs from both the Christian scriptures and the ancient confessions of faith. This is precisely what worries Wright, and he is not alone in his concern.

The three books reviewed here, one of which grew out of the lectures just mentioned, address the resurrection using the tools of biblical studies, history, and theology. The common thread that unites them is the authors’ shared belief that if Christians (and Jews) lose their understanding of the resurrection, then they lose the central conviction that gives shape to the hope they proclaim, and they lose sight of the God in whom they have trusted.



In *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008, 304 pp., \$24.00), Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson make the case that while modern spiritual sensibilities have led both Christians and Jews to conceive of the afterlife in wholly ethereal terms, the radical claim of both traditions is that at the end of history the dead will be raised in bodily form.

Levenson, a professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard University, is the highly regarded author of an earlier and more technical study, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (2006). The co-authored project builds on the foundation of that study, expanding its scope by way of a partnership with Madigan, a Church historian at Harvard University's Divinity School, to include the origins of Christian understandings of resurrection.

Rather than working chronologically forward from the earliest glimmers of resurrection hope in Jewish thought, Madigan begins with familiar territory for Christians: Jesus and Paul. He reminds us that, "we need to relate the Christian sources affirming resurrection specifically to the context of late Second Temple Judaism," because it is only when we hear the message of Jesus in historical context that we can appreciate its richness and complexity (p. 4). He contends that Jesus' message was consistent with the "restoration eschatology" of his day and that Jesus was, essentially, an apocalyptic prophet announcing that God's work to combat evil and to restore scattered Israel was finally at hand. Similarly, Paul—the faithful Pharisee who became the Apostle to the Gentiles—is best understood against his own theological backdrop. Because resurrection was the quintessential doctrine of the Pharisees, it is no surprise that a pharisaic rabbi like Paul would proclaim resurrection, or that he would make it the centerpiece of his theology. The distinctly Christian shape of his account, however, is that "the God of Israel had acted to redeem his people in Christ's death and resurrection. That act had triggered the dawning of the new age. All of God's people would soon be redeemed, nature recreated, and God's faithful rescued from death" (p. 27).

With the context for Christian claims in place, Levenson proceeds to describe how, despite a paucity of explicit claims about the afterlife in the Hebrew scriptures, pharisaic convictions regarding the resurrection developed. He begins by delving into the murky conceptions of Sheol, the amorphous realm of the dead, resisting the temptation to speculate where the text is silent. He urges the reader to "respect the uninterest, viewing it as characteristic of the nature of Israelite religion as it is reflected in the Hebrew Bible...[for] the focus of that *book* is not on the world of the dead but that of the living" (p. 66). Using similar care, the authors explore other themes that are pregnant with meaning for Jewish eschatology: the close

identification between heaven and the Temple, the counteraction of death through the continuation of a family line, and the powerful narratives of divine intervention in matters of childlessness, slavery, famine, and death. These themes lay the foundation for the hope in God's power to overturn human mortality, a conviction that only becomes fully articulated in the second century B.C. All of this demonstrates an important conclusion: "When the belief in resurrection finally makes an unambiguous appearance in Judaism, it is thus both innovation and a restatement of a tension that has pervaded the religion of Israel from the beginning—the tension between the Lord's promise of life, on the one hand, and the reality of death, on the other" (p. 200). Indeed, life has the last word.

In the final few chapters of the book, Levenson and Madigan turn their attention to the contemporary importance of belief in resurrection. They lament the modernizing and Gnosticizing tendencies that have jettisoned the resurrection and they suggest ways that Christians and Jews, despite persistent differences, may see the resurrection as part of their shared confession about God.

I found it difficult to appreciate some aspects of Madigan's account of Christian convictions, primarily because some critical perspectives were uncritically embraced. For example, Madigan offers a creative back-story for the Gospel of John's portrayal of "Doubting Thomas," asserting that early Christians were divided about the resurrection. He says, "whatever the historical truth of this story, John put it in his gospel in order to affirm belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus," and to combat "the 'Thomas Community,' that produced, among other things, the Gospel of Thomas" (p. 221). Although Madigan admits, "we know little about this community," he continues this line of speculation, saying, "John uses Thomas in order to speak to this community and to persuade them to surrender their doubts. One of his cleverest moves was to put the proclamation of belief in the physical resurrection on the lips of Thomas, the very apostle around whom the opposed...community was formed" (p. 222). These are far reaching claims concerning John's motives and his interaction with a community about which we know so little!

Despite this reservation, I think Madigan and Levinson do inestimable good in this book by clarifying the central convictions of the two sibling traditions of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism.



Among the thinkers who have called for a renewal of Christian understandings about resurrection and the afterlife, no one has captured the imagination of both academics and church-goers as successfully as N. T. Wright, formerly the Anglican Bishop of Durham, England, and currently a research professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at St. Andrew's

University in Scotland. This coming together of popular and scholarly sensibilities is evident in *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008, 352 pp., \$24.99). On the one hand it is a well-researched work of biblical theology, advocating for a particular understanding of the afterlife (and its implication for our daily lives) by way of careful scholarship; on the other hand, it is a feisty engagement with popular misconceptions and current events with the page-turning flavor of a best-selling work of non-fiction.

The argument of *Surprised by Hope* unfolds in three parts. The first, "Setting the Stage," covers the same biblical background as Levenson and Madigan, but pays greater attention to modern examples of eschatological confusion—particularly the way that the language of "Heaven" has often supplanted the concrete language of resurrection. Beyond reviewing biblical sources and critiquing contemporary misunderstandings, Wright goes one step further to anticipate the sorts of philosophical and historical questions that arise when one makes a strong claim for the resurrection in an age of skepticism. In this way he plays the role of apologist in addition to that of the scholar.

After establishing the biblical and historical claim that Christ is risen, Wright evaluates a wide range of Christian conceptions of the future in part two, "God's Future Plan." Briefly, here is the heart of Wright's eschatology. In keeping with 1 Corinthians 15, he asserts the centrality of the resurrection of Christ as the firstfruits of God's intended resurrection of all humanity. Furthermore, according to Romans 8, the scope of the resurrection includes the entire cosmos, enabling the wedding of heaven and earth. Wright, therefore, rejects spiritual or otherworldly conceptions of heaven; rather, he envisions eternity as the unfolding work of the kingdom of God: "the redeemed people of God in the new world will be the agents of his love going out in new ways, to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love" (p. 105).

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In the final part of the book Wright takes up the theme "Hope in Practice: Resurrection and the Mission of the Church." He makes concrete suggestions for how the Church today, as the body of Christ, can begin to live into the new order of reality ushered in at Easter. These practical concerns are essential precisely because resurrection was "an event within

our own world, [so] its implications and effects are to be felt within our own world, here and now" (p. 191). The resurrection guarantees that there is enduring significance to human activity in the world; works of justice, beauty, and evangelism become essential signs of God's kingdom. Specifically, Wright recommends that believers refocus the proclamation of the Church on the triumph of life over death; spend at least as much energy and attention in the practice of Easter as in the practice of Lent; consider the importance of sacred spaces for connecting people to the transcendent; reclaim a sense of time, the value of tradition, and the hallowing of a day of worship; and rally around the Lord's table and receive nourishment from the Eucharist. These practices are ways that we can joyfully participate in the already unfolding transformation of God's beloved creation.



Matthew Levering's *Jesus and the Demise of Death: Resurrection, Afterlife, and the Fate of the Christian* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012, 240 pp., \$29.95) makes a significant contribution to recent literature about the shape of the Christian hope. Levering, a professor of theology at Mundelein Seminary of the University of Saint Mary of the Lake, is a prolific writer who excels at contextualizing ancient and medieval theologians in order to address modern questions. In this work he commends recent efforts to recover the centrality of the resurrection, yet he believes that some recent proposals, especially Wright's, err by overemphasizing materiality as it is presently experienced.

Unfolding in two parts that examine "The Passage of Jesus Christ" and "The Passage of Christ's People," Levering covers the now familiar ground of the connection between the work of Christ and the future hope of Christians, but from a Catholic perspective. This book provides more than ecumenical balance, however. Arguably, Levering's most helpful contribution is his critique of a key assumption made by Wright, Madigan, and Levenson: namely, that most talk of "heaven" is indicative of disembodied Platonism, rejecting the scandalous bodily nature of the resurrection. He suggests that this goes a bit too far.

Levering agrees with the view of Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope (emeritus) Benedict XVI, that "biblical faith, in the Hellenistic period, encountered the best of Greek thought at a deep level, resulting in mutual enrichment" (p. 9). This conviction results in a more charitable reading of ancient and medieval theologians and it problematizes some of Wright's bolder claims. Following Aquinas, Levering emphasizes that the power of the resurrection will transform the cosmos in such profound ways that one cannot presume continuity between our lives now and our activities in the eschatological future. In contrast, Wright's "insistence on 'new creative tasks' threatens to bog us down in endless work" in his effort to avoid a

picture of the new creation that seems boring (p. 110). Levering helpfully warns that in our efforts to assert the materiality of the resurrection, we must not domesticate eternity.



Bodies renewed and transformed by the power of Jesus' resurrection—this is the news the Church has claimed as its gospel. The Christian hope is not that someday believers will “fly away.” Therefore, we do not expect, with Hamlet, that one day we will “have shuffled off this mortal coil” in a final escape from materiality. Rather, as these books remind us, the structure of the Church's hope is firmly fixed on the promise of the risen Lord who comforts his people by saying, “See, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5).



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