

## NT Wright on Why the Resurrection must be a Historical Fact

Wright argues that the resurrection cannot have been a myth invented by the early Christian community, because the idea of the Messiah dying and being bodily resurrected to eternal life was **completely unexpected** in Jewish theology, and therefore would not have been invented, as it would have persuaded nobody.

- *In Judaism, when people die, they stay dead.* At the most, they might re-appear as apparitions, or be resuscitated to life for a while, but then die again later. Just as it “isn’t scientific” to us now, to claim resurrection, so it was not believable to them back then either!
- *There was no concept of the bodily resurrection to eternal life of a single person,* especially of the Messiah. The Jews only believed in the general resurrection of all the righteous dead on judgment day. The Messiah was only a this-worldly political figure.

Wright’s case for the resurrection has 2 parts:

- A. The way that Christian belief about resurrection emerged (different from Jewish belief), demands an explanation. It can only be because an instance of resurrection really happened – to Jesus – that their beliefs changed.
- B. Asserting that Jesus did bodily resurrect, solves some historical puzzles, which otherwise can’t be explained

### A. The Different Christian understanding of resurrection

The early Christians held firmly, like most of their Jewish contemporaries, to a two-step belief about the future:

- first, death and whatever lies immediately beyond;
- second, a new bodily existence in a newly remade world. ‘Resurrection’ is not a fancy word for ‘life after death’; it denotes life after ‘life after death’.

Over the next 200 years, this Jewish belief underwent 7 changes, or “mutations” among Christians. Why, given that most people are conservative in keeping their beliefs. The changes are so striking, that the historian must ask, what set them in motion? Wright argues that the changes are *inexplicable* apart from the bodily resurrection of Jesus

The 7 mutations:

1. There is no diversity of belief among Christians about resurrection – unlike in Judaism, where there is a range of view about what happens, whether it is a physical or just a spiritual resurrection, and some Jews do not believe in it at all (Sadducees). In Christianity, there is only one single view of what the resurrection will involve.
2. In Judaism, belief in the resurrection is not very important. You can still be a Jew, no matter if you believe in it or not. In Christianity, resurrection is central to Christian belief.
3. In Judaism, it is vague what sort of body the resurrected body will be. For Christians, it will be definitively an incorrupt, transformed body with new properties. It is a new creation by God.
4. In Judaism, the resurrection takes place on judgment day in a general resurrection as a large-scale event happening to all God’s people, or the whole race. But never would Jews believe that resurrection had happened to one person in the middle of history, anticipating and guaranteeing the final resurrection for all.
5. In Christianity, if Jesus redeemed the world to bring it to God in resurrection, then Christians must continue Jesus’ work on earth - and transform all aspects in the world towards God. There is a new view of what collaborating with God means.
6. There is a new *metaphorical* concept of resurrection, referred to as being “born-again”. In Judaism, resurrection simply meant return from exile, coming home, in a literal way.
7. Christians claimed Jesus was the Messiah, precisely because of the resurrection. But in Judaism, the Messiah was not even meant to die, let alone resurrect, as his task was political liberation and rule.

## B. Asserting the bodily resurrection of Jesus solves some historical puzzles:

- **Hallucinations of Jesus, bringing feelings of Jesus' presence, forgiveness and love** would not be enough to make anyone say that Jesus is not actually dead and buried, or that he has been literally raised from death. Many people have such experiences of their lost loved ones, but do not claim that they are not dead.
- **The gospels speak of an empty tomb AND of resurrection appearances.** Both together strongly suggest a bodily resurrection. Each on its own proves nothing, or simply a hallucination/ vision.
- **Jewish belief was that the real Messiah would NOT die.** Jesus followers claimed he was the true Messiah, precisely because he did die – and resurrect.
- **Bodily resurrection was not a Jewish belief,** so however many visions they had, they would not have concluded that he had been bodily resurrected. There is a belief in God **exalting** people eg that they did not die, but went straight up to heaven. So if Jesus' disciples wanted to show that Jesus was vindicated by God, they would have said he was exalted, not physically raised from the dead in bodily form.
- **The gospels say that the women were the first witnesses** to the resurrection. But in women's evidence was discounted in Roman times. If the appearances were made up, they would have first mentioned men, in order to convince people.
- **Jesus' followers didn't abandon him when he died: why?** unless they knew he was still "alive" and powerful? "False Messiahs" did appear and attract followers, but when these messiahs were killed, their followers disbanded.
- **The resurrection has an immediate and concrete effect on the disciples' beliefs.** It sets them out to preach that Jesus is the Messiah. They do not stop to philosophise about what this means as a future general resurrection. Their reaction is immediate and urgent: about Jesus as the risen Lord.
- **Very early on, Christians began to refer to Jesus as "Lord",** addressed prayers to him, sang hymns to him, as they would to God. Christians contrasted the real power of Jesus, against the power of someone like Caesar, who could inflict the death penalty, but who could do no more.
- **The early church took care of the sick and scorned their own arrest, death and torture.** Why? Unless they had a strong expectation that there was life after life.
- The style of the gospel accounts
  - **The resurrection accounts in the gospels, are "bare bones"** fact-describing narrative. The resurrected Jesus is surprisingly modest, unlike a resurrected God (even mistaken for a gardener) but transformed. There are no OT quotations proving it must happen; there is no OT precedent for such an event. There are 4 gospel versions, which are not derived from one another – they are based on separate, very early oral traditions, and agree on essential points.

Conclusion; Wright says that best explanation for the historical data of how the disciples behaved, and what early Christians believed about resurrection, can only be explained if God raised Jesus (bodily) from the dead. This community would not have suddenly begun to believe in the single resurrection of the Messiah – who wasn't even supposed to die – and then recklessly live their lives witnessing to this belief. They were the only ones who saw him killed and then walking around again after his death. Their belief was based on their own *personal experiences* of such a resurrected Jesus. They witnessed to this.