

## ***Beyond Resurrection? A Review Essay***

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A. J. M. Wedderburn. *Beyond Resurrection*. London: SCM/ Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999, xiv + 306 pp.; ISBN 1-56563-486-1. \$19.95.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, a significantly large number of articles, essays, and books were written both popularly and critically on the resurrection of Jesus, representing just about every imaginable historical, hermeneutical, and faith perspective. When yet another volume appears on this subject, we rightly ask why and what contribution it makes to the discussion of such an already extensively examined topic. One initial response is, of course, that as long as the resurrection of Jesus is considered foundational for Christian faith (1 Cor 15:12-20) scholars will continue to find new ways to examine and test its veracity and meaning for every new generation of believers.

It is important for all Christians to ask questions about the major teachings and assertions of their Bible and the Christian faith, but it is also quite helpful to know how others have responded to such questions in previous generations. Frequently students of the Bible ask questions that have already been addressed by earlier scholars. A. J. M. Wedderburn's book allows us to examine many of these questions and view the responses to the resurrection of Jesus and the Christian faith during the last 150 years. He is conversant with most of the critical literature on this subject and generally arrives at conclusions that are familiar to us from earlier critical examinations of the resurrection of Jesus. There is very little in his volume that is new and without earlier parallel in the history of biblical studies.

However, he does provide a useful survey of the historical, theological, and even philosophical problems related to belief in the resurrection of Jesus and belief in God.

Wedderburn himself rejects the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as a historical event and calls such belief outmoded and too imprecise to be credible. His investigation has much in common with earlier studies, especially the works of Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Grass, C. F. Evans, Willi Marxsen, and Gerd Lüdemann. By the end of his inquiry, Wedderburn attempts, like many before him, to establish Christian faith on what he considers a more credible foundation than the vulnerable and indefensible historical claim that God raised Jesus from the dead. Like Bultmann, he also adopts a historical-critical methodology with positivistic assumptions about history.

Wedderburn begins his investigation of the resurrection of Jesus by stating his philosophical and historical starting points (chap. 1). He asks whether God acts in history by suspending the natural laws that govern the universe. If he does, Wedderburn concludes that a historian ought to be able to assess the arguments for these claims. Since early Christians made claims about an activity that took place in time and space, namely the resurrection of Jesus, he concludes that a critical historical investigation of this alleged event is a legitimate activity. Furthermore, since traditional Christianity asserts that God has acted in history, then these claims should also be subjected to the same critical historical evaluation to which all alleged historical events are subjected (p. 9). Wedderburn rejects attempts to shelter the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus behind a special historical category reserved for divine acts that is incapable of being investigated by critical historians, which was the case with the Salvation-Historical (*Heilsgeschichte*) perspective that was earlier advocated by Karl Barth, Oscar Cullmann, and to some extent Jürgen Moltmann.

Wedderburn maintains that all historical events are essentially of the same order and that they are therefore open to historical investigation. Christians, he says, cannot argue for a faith that is rooted in historical events and at the same time shelter those events from the uncertainties of historical inquiry (pp. 9-16). He rightly rejects arguments for the resurrection of Jesus based on theological necessity—that is, that Jesus was raised from the dead because of who he was (the Son of God) or because the church needed a resurrection (p. 7). Since such arguments skirt the issue of the reality of the resurrection and are in any case based on a faulty understanding of the Bible, they should be avoided. For example, Rom 1:3 indicates that it was because Jesus was raised from the dead that he was perceived to be the Son of God with power, not the other way around. Wedderburn ac-

cepts a positivistic understanding of history that requires analogy for inquiry; that is, what is absolutely unique is absolutely unknowable, and this view has significant effects on his understanding of the resurrection of Jesus, as I will presently show.

When Wedderburn turns his attention to the resurrection narratives and the Easter traditions in Paul (chaps. 2-7), like many others before him (especially Rudolf Bultmann, C. F. Evans, and Willi Marxsen), he focuses his attention on the many inconsistencies between the resurrection narratives and Paul. He concludes from his investigation that it is not possible to know either what happened in regard to the resurrection of Jesus or even what was meant by the alleged event. Consequently, Wedderburn looks for a more firm historical foundation for Christian faith than the past proclamation that the almighty creator-God of the universe has invaded or interrupted the course of nature by raising Jesus from the dead (chaps. 8-10). In part two (chaps. 5-10) he moves his discussion from Jesus to God, who is at the heart of what he is trying to say. Like Bultmann, Wedderburn seeks to establish Christian faith on a more solid and substantiated historical foundation than the resurrection of Jesus. Bultmann, however, appealed to God's activity in the undisputed fact of the cross, in which the disciples received a disclosure of the hidden activity of God. Wedderburn rejects this conclusion as absurd, appealing instead to something that is historical but earlier than the cross: the life and ministry of Jesus.

In this regard he is very much like the nineteenth-century historical Jesus "questers," who tried to establish grounds for Christian faith in the life and ministry of Jesus and directed faith away from the unsure foundation of the supernatural intervention of God in history, especially the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. He rejects a popular notion that Jesus is only risen in the apostles' faith (pp. 20-21) but is unsure in what sense we may speak of the resurrection of Jesus. Wedderburn centers Christian faith in the life and ministry/teaching of Jesus and argues that to some extent the Evangelists in their own way did the same thing, since the majority of their work focuses not on the resurrection of Jesus but on the significance of his life and ministry. Like others before him, he claims that the Easter traditions are a later, unnecessary addition to the story of Jesus and that they add essentially nothing to what was already claimed by the Evangelists about the significance of Jesus' life and teaching. I will return to this point later. The resurrection tradition, he claims, was added to the story of Jesus because of the Pharisaic religious traditions of the day that conceptualized hope primarily in terms of bodily resurrection. However, he claims that this tradition essentially adds nothing to the faith that Jesus demanded and the hope that he

promised. Wedderburn further claims that Mark and John say very little about the resurrection of Jesus that is not also found in the life and ministry of Jesus and that this consequently points "Christian faith elsewhere for its basis and its orientation" (p. 111). In this sense he concludes that Mark and John go beyond Paul, and since they did, so should we!

Wedderburn accepts that Paul's list of witnesses to the resurrection appearances of Jesus (1 Cor 15:5-8) has an apologetic concern that is strongly influenced by the Jewish apocalyptic thought that dominated his background. Even though he acknowledges that belief in the resurrection of Jesus was at the heart of the earliest Christian proclamation, Wedderburn does not believe that the language is sufficiently clear or that we can say with any precision what in fact happened in the resurrection of Jesus. Paul's discussion of the nature of the resurrection body (1 Cor 15:35-54), he contends, speaks of something considerably more than a mere resuscitation from the dead. Paul speaks of a transformed existence that does not include a resurrection of the flesh (v. 50; pp. 118, 144-45). In other words, Paul's understanding of the nature of the resurrection of Jesus is other than a physical or fleshly resurrection. In fact, he claims that Paul rejected such a notion (v. 50) but argues that others after Paul went *beyond* Paul to conceptualize the resurrection of Jesus in more physical categories (pp. 149-52). He says that, unlike Paul, the Gospel writers and the producers of the Apostle's Creed, for instance, argued for a physical resurrection of the body.

Wedderburn is certainly correct when he admits that there are a number of things that are not clear in the resurrection traditions. He contends that we do not know with any historical certainty what in fact happened in regard to the resurrection of Jesus since, as scholars have long known, the resurrection narratives cannot be readily harmonized and are not clear on the matter. For example, he says that the nature of the resurrection of Jesus in the resurrection narratives is unclear, and it is not certain where the resurrection appearances occurred or what was communicated during them. Additionally, the number, identity, and timing of the women coming to the empty tomb are vague in the narratives. He is also well aware of the historical problems in the resurrection narratives that critics have long noted and have used to discredit the biblical story of Easter. To his credit, he does not dismiss these questions but examines each one.

In chap. 3 he asks what reality stands behind several important facts in the resurrection narratives and in what Paul affirms about the resurrection of Jesus. What lies behind the disciples' remarkable coming to faith, the celebration of the resurrection on the first day of the week in the early church, the strong tradition that Jesus arose

on the third day, the role of the women in the Easter narratives, the failure of anyone to produce Jesus' body after his death, and the absence of any strong cultic traditions surrounding the burial place of Jesus? Interestingly, he follows J. D. Crossan regarding the empty-tomb tradition. He suggests that the body of Jesus was lost and that it was the inability to find the body that led to the empty tomb tradition in the Gospels and the account of the manner of Jesus' burial (pp. 62-63). He is not convinced that the disciples would have known where to look for the body of Jesus and concludes that the fruitless search for the body of Jesus led to a belief that he was raised from the dead (pp. 64-65). He also maximizes the differences between Paul's more spiritual understanding of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15) and the more physical or fleshly nature of the resurrection in the Evangelists, especially Luke (24:39-43). Furthermore, he does not grant the possibility of a transformed bodily resurrection in which the old is incorporated into the new (1 Cor 15:35-44, 51-54). Instead, he suggests that the disciples' inability to find the body of Jesus gave rise to the empty-tomb tradition and to the notions of a bodily resurrection (p. 96).

Wedderburn fails to appreciate the fact that there is a difference in kind in the Easter manifestations given to the disciples and the revelation given to Paul. This is certainly the case in Luke–Acts, whose author shows that the resurrection appearances to the disciples (Luke 24:36-43) were of a different sort than the appearance experienced by Paul (Acts 9:3-9). Luke saw a difference in the nature of the appearances to both, but the reality of the appearance was the same. It was the same risen Jesus who appeared and made himself known to both. We should also observe that the nature of the resurrection appearances in the Gospels is not as physical or concrete as some have thought, at least not in the way in which many creeds have represented them. In Matt 28:17, for instance, there were some who doubted after seeing the risen Jesus. In Luke 24:15, 31 and John 20:19-20 there are described: (1) a sudden appearing and disappearing of the risen Jesus, even through closed doors; (2) a lack of recognition by the disciples until the breaking of bread (Luke 24:35); (3) a lack of recognition by Mary, who supposed Jesus to be a gardener (John 20:15). The appearances that incorporated the old (the body of Jesus) and the new (a spiritual body) were of a much different kind than a mere resuscitation would suggest. Wedderburn makes a fair point that the appearances were first in Jerusalem and later in Galilee, but he seems to allow for several options. The spiritual (transformed; see 1 Cor 15: 52) nature of the resurrection appearances accounts for this.

Wedderburn believes that something happened to change the disciples' faith and initiate the origins of the church, but historical investigation cannot tell us what it was. He does not easily accept the psychological theories of Gerd Lüdemann that base the appearance experiences of Peter and Paul on extreme conditions and inner guilt, but he cannot rule out these possibilities either (pp. 76-77, 268-69 nn. 204-5, and pp. 96-97). Wedderburn simply has difficulty in finding suitable historical categories for understanding a unique event. It appears to him that because the resurrection of Jesus has no analogies to other contemporary resurrection beliefs, whether in 2 Macc 7:9-13, 20-23 or the raising of Lazarus in John 11:17-44, we must look beyond biblical assertions about the resurrection of Jesus to other explanations. Here he limits himself to agnosticism, asserting that we really cannot know what happened (pp. 98-99).

Wedderburn acknowledges that Paul argued for a continuity between Jesus' former body and his new one (1 Cor 15:43-44) but concludes that this was a weakness in Paul. Due to his earlier training in Pharisaic Judaism, Paul could speak of meaningful existence beyond this life only in some bodily form. He says that, while Paul is prior to the rest of the NT writings and wrote the most important resurrection traditions (pp. 70-71), he still left behind an "ambiguous legacy on the matter of the resurrection" (p. 119). Because of the ambiguity of the resurrection language, we should avoid using it altogether (pp. 120-21). The very confusion in the resurrection narratives and even in Paul himself, however, suggests to Wedderburn that we cannot claim that Jesus' resurrection is a historical event in the same sense that other events are historical. Further, we must look for other ways of rooting faith in history. As noted above, because the Gospels focus more attention on the life and ministry of Jesus than on his resurrection, and since the Gospels were all written after Paul, Wedderburn concludes that they have all gone *beyond* Paul and anchored faith in the life and ministry of Jesus. The Easter proclamations in the Gospels of Mark and John, he argues (as does Gerd Lüdemann), essentially add nothing to their message about Jesus (pp. 135-44, 161). Consequently, he concludes like Bultmann before him that this tradition was probably a late addition to the Gospel tradition. The problem with this view, however, is that both Gospels have an Easter story, not just a proclamation.

He also credits Mark with a more sophisticated understanding of the hidden activity of God than many scholars believe is reasonable, while his claim that Mark is an artful interpreter of the story of Jesus, seeking to shroud it in mystery, is less convincing (see pp. 139-44). Unquestionably the first evangelist was more crude in style and language, and Matthew and Luke saw fit to improve on his account of

the story of Jesus. Wedderburn's argument depends on making Mark more sophisticated than he in fact is, and it also depends on the highly disputed ending of Mark (it may have been at 16:8, or it may have been lost). At any rate, for Wedderburn the confusion in the resurrection narratives suggests that we cannot make Jesus' resurrection the foundation of Christian faith. As a result, Christian faith must be rooted in something other than the disputable and historically incredible resurrection stories.

Wedderburn further removes authority from the sacred text itself and places it within the reader (p. 110). This is a significant hermeneutical shift with enormous implications. He justifies this step by observing that, since the early church went well beyond Paul and interpreted the resurrection traditions by making them more fleshly or physical than Paul did, it is appropriate for us to go well beyond scripture in interpretation.

Interestingly, in chap. 6 Wedderburn says that, while Paul (1 Corinthians 15) only argued for the continuity between what was buried (the body of flesh) and what was raised (the spiritual body), the church that followed him went further and sought to root faith in the resurrection of the flesh rather than in the spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15). Paul, he claims, was ambiguous on what this relationship between flesh and spirit was, but the church changed this ambiguity into certainty in the later traditions (pp. 119-20). He himself questions the continuity between the old human (current) body/self and the new body/self (the resurrected body) and argues that, like the early church, we too should move beyond such conceptualizations of the Christian faith.

In chap. 7, Wedderburn questions whether life after death is best viewed from a "bodily" perspective at all and rejects the Gospel's emphasis on the empty tomb. He says that it is nevertheless difficult to determine what it was that brought about the change in the disciples' lives (pp. 122-23). More importantly, he asks why we need to continue using resurrection language, since it is not clear in the traditions what is meant by it (p. 151). Since we cannot demonstrate once and for all through critical-historical methodology what precisely happened regarding the resurrection of Jesus, it is time to find more meaningful language to express Christian faith (p. 152). This is what he means by "beyond resurrection."

It is this "going beyond" that lies at the heart of Wedderburn's book. Since the biblical view of an omnipotent creator-God who also raises the dead to life is no longer credible, he believes it is necessary for us to go beyond what the NT says about God, the resurrection of Jesus, and even our own resurrection (pp. 150-52). For him, it is no longer credible or historically responsible to claim that God is the

omnipotent (almighty) creator of the universe who freely suspends the natural selection process of history in order to intervene in the affairs of humanity. Further, one cannot consistently claim that God is creator of the universe, that he loves humanity, and that he has placed humanity in a world with so much pain and suffering (pp. 180, 191-200). If God is loving and all-powerful, why did he not place humanity in the best creation now rather than have them wait for a kingdom that will put all things in order? Readers no doubt recognize this criticism, often leveled at faith in an all-powerful, loving God. For Wedderburn, God cannot be an omnipotent creator and at the same time a loving God and fellow-sufferer with humanity. He gives up on the first of these assertions and clings to the latter. He further adds that we can no longer hold to Jesus' world view since the kingdom did not come, as he claimed that it would. Jesus was simply wrong about the matter, and it is time to put these incredible views behind us (p. 167). He even believes that Jesus' understanding of God was flawed and that we must also move beyond that view (pp. 179-80).

The last third of Wedderburn's book (chaps. 8-10) is more focused on the historical, philosophical, and theological problems that the traditional view of Christian faith poses for moderns who want a biblical faith. Chapter 8 is entitled "A Faith for This Life Alone" and questions whether Christian faith really needs life beyond the grave at all. Indeed, he questions the appropriateness of Paul's assertion that faith is futile without the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15:12-20). After pointing to the weaknesses of Paul in such assertions (pp. 155-56), Wedderburn argues for a more "realized eschatology" for Christian faith, following Bultmann (pp. 156-62).

This realized eschatology is based on Paul's understanding of the presence and power of God in the Christian life (1 Cor 4:8) and on his call to walk in the "newness of life" (Rom 6:4). Wedderburn also appeals to John's Gospel, which emphasizes the continuing life of the person who believes in the importance of life now (John 11:25; pp. 158-61; see also pp. 166-67). The problem with Wedderburn's thinking at this point, of course, is that John does not conclude his story of Jesus *without* an Easter tradition and neither do the other Evangelists. Wedderburn also, like Bultmann, does not give sufficient weight to the fact that John, very early in his Gospel, affirms the resurrection from the dead and life beyond the grave (John 5:25-29). The story of Jesus in the canonical Gospels ends with the proclamation of Jesus' triumph over death through his resurrection (Matt 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20). The Gospel writers have this much in common with Paul (1 Cor 15:3-8; Phil 3:21; Rom 8:11).

What Wedderburn also fails to appreciate sufficiently is that, after Jesus' death on the cross, there was a complete lack of faith in the disciples who had walked with Jesus and observed his life and ministry. Contrary to Wedderburn's view that the Easter story added nothing to the message of the Evangelists, the Evangelists and the author of Acts are of one voice in claiming that the renewed faith in God that led the disciples to establish the church did not come until after the events of Easter. This fact is minimized in Wedderburn's account of the Easter traditions. No one had faith like the faith suggested by Wedderburn after the death of Jesus on the cross. Faith did not come until it was faith in the resurrection of Jesus. A world-changing, pre-Easter faith based only on what people had seen in Jesus' life and ministry, is not apparent in the accounts of the early followers. While it is true that the thief on the cross recognized something in Jesus' agonizing on the cross that was worthy of his confidence *before* Jesus' death, and he asked for Jesus' help as he passed from this life to the next (Luke 23:42-43), there was no surviving community of faith that was prepared for mission and community until *after* Easter. Likewise, while the centurion confessed that Jesus was the Son of God at the cross (Mark 15:39; Matt 27:54), still the faith that gave birth to the church was all post-Easter. Even though the disciples of Jesus acknowledged that he was God's messiah before his death on the cross (Mark 8:27-29)—otherwise they would not have left all to follow him—this faith did not sustain them through the despair and gloom of the cross. The earlier belief in his identity did not sustain them through the bitterness and disappointment of the arrest and crucifixion. The faith that gave birth to the church came only after Easter, and all of the Gospels and Paul agree on this point.

E. C. Hoskyns and W. D. Davies, in their much older work on *The Riddle of the New Testament*, understood well that something gave rise to the new and vibrant faith of the disciples. They did not hesitate to identify what this was, even if modern-day historians are unable to do so. Wedderburn claims that the confusion in the resurrection narratives and in Paul justifies a "thoroughgoing agnosticism" about what really happened after the resurrection of Jesus and also allows for the development of a new understanding of Christian faith that goes beyond the resurrection tradition (pp. 151-52). This can only be true if he rejects what the NT says gave rise to the disciples' powerful faith.

Unfortunately, Wedderburn is more skeptical of the resurrection traditions and of Paul's witness than is warranted. The traditions, on the other hand, are clearer than he allows: according to them, God raised Jesus from the dead, and the appearances of Jesus were the

foundation or root of faith in the disciples. If one dismisses these presentations as myth and foolishness, then of course it is impossible to say what happened to create a new faith in the disciples. We might note also that the postresurrection appearances were foundational for faith not only in those who followed Jesus during his ministry but also in those who did not originally follow him—namely, James, the brother of Jesus, and Paul.

In chap. 9, Wedderburn takes his argument a step further and asks whether the God who is acknowledged in the notion of resurrection from the dead is appropriate to Christian faith. He questions whether God as creator and as one who interrupts the natural order is the best conceptualization of God. Although he wants to confess the existence of God and does not deny the existence of God, his God must fit with his agnostic view of Easter and his everyday experience, which is influenced by his historical-critical assumptions (p. 171). If the created order is bad or evil, and we are looking to a new order for deliverance from all the pain and suffering of this world, why did the all-powerful God not create a better order for humanity in the first place? We encountered the same objection to traditional views about God above.

Wedderburn also questions whether a belief in the resurrection of the dead that promotes a theodicy such as the one at the base of the story of the martyrdom of the seven sons in 2 Maccabees 7 is appropriate to Christian faith (pp. 170-73). He contends that Christians need to move on to a more appropriate notion of God—that is, God as one who cares for and suffers with humanity. Wedderburn rejects the ancient Jewish apocalyptic notions of life after death and redirects our focus to the events of this life only. He dismisses a future mode of existence in favor of living this life, with all of its ambiguity, to the full. Any cosmic perspective that offers a theodicy that delivers a final blow to evil and justifies and vindicates God's purpose in life (see, for example, Acts 2:22-24, 32-36) is unacceptable to him (pp. 179-84).

The traditional understanding of the omnipotence of God is in keeping with God's activity in raising Jesus from the dead, but Wedderburn also has a problem with this notion. He argues throughout his investigation that, if we cannot demonstrate the reality of an event through the use of the empirical methodology of the historical positivists, then the event did not happen. If we therefore cannot prove the resurrection of Jesus historically, which he concludes that we cannot, then our understanding of God ought to be revised and established on other foundations (pp. 170-73).

Interestingly, Wedderburn appeals to Jesus' example as a basis for this re-imaging of God. He argues that Jesus himself radically re-

interpreted the Law and the notion of God's willingness to forgive those who obey. He asks whether it is not time for us to go beyond (that is, revise) Jesus' teachings and his understanding of God (pp. 177-79). Indeed, Wedderburn's defense of using new definitions and categories of thought in order to advance our understanding of God beyond the biblical models comes close to severing from what is theologically responsible today (pp. 182-83). He questions the continuing viability of the almighty God of the Christian tradition and asks, "should one not be able to check this description [of God] against something to see whether it really matches what our senses and experience and those of our predecessors tell us?" He concludes that this "is a self-discipline to which most Christian theologians at least pay lip service, regardless of how they then go about describing God" (p. 184). Since in the Christian tradition we see that God was revealed in Jesus, who was "hardly an all-powerful figure" should we not rethink this traditional understanding of God? (p. 184). Wedderburn clearly prefers the pre-Easter, not-so-powerful Jesus who suffered as the basis for redefining our idea of God.

The problem with Wedderburn's view, of course, is that the Gospels were all written post-Easter, yet most scholars recognize in them an elevated understanding of who Jesus was—both in Jesus' view of himself and in the writers' view of him—from the beginning of the story on. The Evangelists tell us a story of Jesus, but they already knew the conclusion of the story before they began to write. One would expect that their prior knowledge of the outcome of the story would show somewhere in their work, and in fact it does. Many scholars have recognized that it would be difficult to write the pre-crucifixion story of Jesus as if Easter had not already taken place. On what basis, then, does Wedderburn pick and choose between the Jesus before the cross and the Jesus after the resurrection? In principle the two images are distinguishable, but the account of the significance of Jesus in his life and ministry is difficult if not impossible to distinguish from the Evangelists' knowledge of the final chapter of his life and triumph over death.

Wedderburn also questions whether the Christian God should be equated with the creator-God if he has allowed the strong to survive in the selection process when Jesus sided with the weak and the poor in society (p. 187). There are several familiar Gnostic overtones in Wedderburn's separation of God from a creator-god (Demiurge). He rejects this depiction of God as creator and omnipotent (p. 191), arguing that Jesus in his ministry taught that those who would save their lives must lose them (Mark 8:34-35), a reversal of the natural order of things. He contends that the natural order is based on selection, and it is natural for one to preserve oneself. He concludes

that Jesus' call for self-denial involved God working in a self-contradictory way. This was because Jesus presented God as working through and for the weak, contrary to the natural order (pp. 189-90). If the whole creation is subject to frustration and futile hopes, as Paul argues (see Rom 8:22, 26), does this not speak against equating the God of creation with the God of Jesus? Did not Jesus, he asks, go beyond the traditional understanding of God? It follows, claims Wedderburn, that we must go beyond even what Jesus himself taught. Furthermore, Wedderburn does not consider relevant the biblical view of the fall of humanity that also affected creation (Genesis 3; Rom 5:12-20), which is the Bible's way of accounting for an apparently fallen world.

Finally, Wedderburn asks whether we can continue to affirm that God is a personal God. He wonders whether God is really responsible for "the cruel and unlovely-seeming ways of reality to which nature must adjust" (p. 191). According to him, we must not make God responsible for a world that operates on the basis of selection of the fittest, and we also must not regard God as omnipotent, "in the sense of being over and above the laws governing our world and able to change or suspend them at will" (p. 192). He contends that we must know more before we can conclude that this "Other" can be meaningfully described as "personal" (p. 194). Ultimately he does not resolve the question of whether God is personal but leaves it open in such a manner that the reader concludes that either the answer is no or that the question is irrelevant to God. Wedderburn uses the biblical traditions as a means of justifying going beyond the biblical notions of life after death, resurrection, and even God as a personal, almighty creator, who also intervenes in history. For him, the church was clearly wrong in the conclusions it drew about these matters. Even Jesus himself was wrong about the nature and character of God because he believed that God would rescue him, and obviously God did not (p. 199). Once again it seems that Wedderburn's understanding of history and his view of what can and cannot happen (his historical assumptions) determine for him what is theologically responsible.

This God of Wedderburn's construction is also unavailable in prayer. Prayer, according to Wedderburn, "might be more a matter of 'style of thinking' than an address to another person." He struggles with whether God is an "it" or a "you" and with the way that we ought to address God (pp. 206-7). He admits that there is a mysterious relationship between the remote impersonal God and the personal suffering God of Jesus (that is, the one who suffers alongside the faithful and the poor or weak). He uses Jesus' understanding of God as a starting point for this reflection and concludes that the

omnipotent God of the philosophers is not the true God. He backs up his view with reference to the suffering God, found in the crucified Christ (1 Cor 1:22-23). This view of God is foolishness to the wise but central to the biblical message (p. 217). He concludes that

once we recognize the uncertainty that surrounds the resurrection of Jesus and thus our own future, the way in which one thinks of God is . . . robbed of the security of a certain framework of thought (and similarly is freed from) a world-view that is increasingly difficult to sustain. (p. 218)

Wedderburn prefers the suffering God to a "Mr. Fix-it" God who demonstrated his irresistible power by raising Jesus from the dead (p. 219).

Wedderburn concludes his volume (chap. 10) by appealing once again for a new understanding of Easter, for the God of the Christian faith, and for a faith that is vulnerable but does not seek security in the resurrection stories. He does not believe that we can ever know what happened concerning the resurrection of Jesus, and so he pleads for an agnostic stance about this foundational event of the Christian tradition (p. 220). He grounds a "vulnerable" Christian faith in "the intrinsic worth of the life of Jesus lived and the message that he delivered" and also in "the inherent value of the quality of the life which is lived in this world by the community which follows him" (p. 221). He believes that this is the only credible option for Christians once they have come to grips with the mysteriousness and inscrutability of the founding event of the Christian church, the resurrection of Jesus.

This new kind of faith, he claims, does not look for "triumphalist manifestations of divine power either in this world or in another" (p. 221). He calls into question the notion of an afterlife as a basis for hope within the community of the faithful. Instead, he offers the bereaved who had hoped to be reunited with their loved ones no hope beyond the grave. He rejects the faith of the simple and chides people who do not accept the conclusions of biblical criticism regarding life, death, and triumphalistic notions of life after death (pp. 224-25). In the end, Wedderburn wants to identify Christians with a God who suffers with them and to move away from a Christian theology that includes a resurrection of Jesus or even a notion of life after death. This is not to mention his desire to move away from a mighty God who acts in history. The vulnerable faith to which he subscribes is rooted in the suffering Christ, where he also finds the very nature of God. One wonders, however, how or why the impersonal God that he presents would love or suffer for humanity.

Another obscure factor in his discussion is how one might encounter this god who is beyond the God of Jesus and traditional

Christianity. Wedderburn has radically redefined Christian faith so that it is hardly recognizable as either Christian or biblical. God does not enter history through mighty acts or miracles, such as bringing the dead to life, but God is encountered through suffering, as Jesus himself showed in his own suffering. There are many similarities between Wedderburn and other scholars who have argued for negative historical-critical conclusions about miracles, the activity of God, and in particular the resurrection of Jesus (Strauss, Bultmann, Marxsen, Lüdemann, and many others). However, Wedderburn's *Beyond Resurrection* is also well beyond viable Christian traditions and the Christian scriptures. While Wedderburn is consistent with his historical assumptions, these assumptions exclude a God who acts in history. He chastens readers who want respectability within the academic world but who hold onto archaic notions of an almighty God, who involves himself in human affairs by violating the laws of the universe.

While we may disagree with Wedderburn's conclusions and even the parts of his exegesis that are clearly determined by his historical assumptions, he has given us much to think about, especially in regard to our historical methodology. Who is the God of the Bible, and what are the most appropriate assumptions about the activity of God in history? These are critical questions that deserve careful attention and that will necessarily affect the conclusions that we draw from our investigation of the resurrection of Jesus.

Wedderburn wants to secure a credible (invulnerable) place for theology in a secular society that will allow him to speak credibly of the activity of God without having to argue for a God who intervenes in the historical continuum in ways that cannot be determined by the historical processes. It is easy to show the parallels between Wedderburn and the earlier-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century historical Jesus "questers," who likewise attacked the traditional underpinning of Christian faith, while seeking a more safe mooring for Christian faith. The significant question here is whether he has in the process also so redefined the Christian faith that it is no longer recognizable as *Christian* in any traditional sense of the term. Wedderburn denies just about everything that the early Christian community believed was important for faith—especially the resurrection of Jesus (Rom 10:9-10), the power of God to intervene in human affairs (Rom 4:17), and a God who hears and answers prayer (Matt 6:6-13; Mark 14:32-36; Rom 15:30-32; and others). One cannot help but ask, therefore, why he believes that what remains after all of his radical redefining of the Christian faith is Christian at all? In the end, he has said little that is new, if he has taken the argument for a demythologized Gospel further than many scholars before him, even Rudolf Bultmann. How can one continue to call something

*Christian* if it has no resurrection faith, no acknowledgment of the lordship of Christ, no belief in the death of Jesus Christ for our sins, and no hope for life everlasting? Like the ancient Gnostic Christians who rejected the creator-god (the Demiurge) of the OT and who, on the basis of a Hellenistic understanding of the activity of God and the origin of matter, also rejected the resurrection of Jesus, Wedderburn selects for his faith what is compatible with his understanding of history and philosophy, and he has no hesitation in rejecting the traditional tenets of the Christian faith.

Wedderburn believes that we must reject an ancient apocalyptic world view (*Weltanschauung*) that speaks about theodicy and resurrections from the dead and reinterprets the activity of God into meaningful modern language (this sounds something like Bultmann's "demythologizing"—a term that Wedderburn does not use) if faith is to continue to be viable. He severs the traditional image of the God of the Bible as an almighty, omnipotent Creator from the image of the loving God who identifies with humanity in its suffering that is seen in the life and ministry of Jesus. This shift to the *beyond* enables him to adopt a more contemporary historical and philosophical mooring for the Christian faith, one that is no longer rooted in a view of history that he believes is not tenable. Wedderburn knows the pastoral value of proclaiming hope to the bereaved who have lost loved ones to death, even tragic death, but he rejects it as wishful thinking and a false hope (p. 225). He concludes in this regard that "whatever God can or will do, we believe that it will be in love, for the life and death of Jesus show us no other God" (pp. 225-26).

In this book, Wedderburn abandons most of the traditional beliefs that have defined Christianity since its inception because he contends that this foundation is not sufficiently established in history and is illusory (p. 112). Unfortunately, he fails to give sufficient weight to the fact that, along with the ambiguities in the traditions, there are several things that are quite clear in the resurrection narratives and traditions. Among these indisputable facts is the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was executed in Jerusalem. Within a few days of his death, his disciples began to proclaim that he was alive and had been raised from the dead. The cause of the transformation of the disciples within a few days of the death of Jesus is never a mystery in the NT traditions. While historians may claim that the answer that brought about this transformation is unknowable and they may plead agnosticism as does Wedderburn, Christian faith is under no such obligation. The answer to what happened is proclaimed everywhere in the NT and in the early church's faith.

We admit that those who have traditionally affirmed the biblical witness that Jesus was raised from the dead have also tended to ignore the problems in the resurrection narratives. On the other hand,

those who have rejected the NT writers' claims about the resurrection of Jesus have tended to maximize these differences in the traditions and ignore what they hold in common. Surely there is a more adequate position! While it is true that there are many ambiguities in the resurrection traditions, as Wedderburn rightly contends, there are also a number of things that are clear and unambiguous in the resurrection narratives and traditions. These include the uncontested fact that Jesus of Nazareth was executed in Jerusalem and, within a few days of his death, his disciples who had been devastated by his earlier arrest and crucifixion began to proclaim in Jerusalem that he was alive and had been raised from the dead. This belief was what transformed the disciples' cowardice and lack of faith into a fearless courage to proclaim Jesus' resurrection and to found a community of dedicated followers of the risen Jesus. Wedderburn passes over this too quickly, but it is too significant to hide behind some appeal to agnosticism. The NT traditions are unanimous in their conclusions about what happened to transform the disciples.

There is much value in Wedderburn's work for students of the Bible because he shows familiarity with the classical and more recent critical literature on the resurrection of Jesus and also an awareness of the critical issues of the Christian faith of the Bible, even if he rejects the central affirmations of the Christian faith. He offers a useful bibliography and critically examines the resurrection traditions, asking important and penetrating questions. In the final analysis, however, he is governed by historical assumptions that do not allow for a God who acts in history, whether in raising the dead, parting the waters of the Red Sea, or the like. There is very little in his conclusions that could be cogently argued as Christian, even in the broadest sense, even when he appeals to certain examples of the story of Jesus that fit with his preferences. He simply leaves out too much of value in the Christian or biblical traditions to call his conclusions "Christian" in any sense. Ultimately, Wedderburn's *Beyond Resurrection* is also beyond what can reasonably be called Christian, even though it is a scholarly book that has much to offer in terms of a careful, critical examination of the primary Easter traditions.