Did the son rise?

British theologian, author puts forth defense of Easter story

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Easter is a day not only of hope, but discord — at least among theologians.

Throughout modern times, liberal scholars have challenged a central tenet of Christianity: that Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead after being crucified by the Romans on Good Friday.

Whether the Resurrection occurred, they say, is ultimately unimportant compared with Christ's message.

But to myriad rank-and-file Christians — who each Sunday profess faith in Jesus' Resurrection and ultimately their own — that's heresy. And now, a conservative theologian is backing their viewpoint with a new book.

As with many religious questions, the roots of this debate are deep: The argument started in 19th-century Europe and escalated in the 20th century.

One of the key skeptics, Germany's Rudolf Bultmann, famously proclaimed during World War II that the Resurrection "is not a historical event."

Since then, doubts have infiltrated from campuses to churches' upper ranks, notably among Anglicans and their American counterparts, the Episcopalians.

The Rev. David Jenkins caused a ruckus in 1984 by scorning the idea of Jesus' bodily Resurrection as "a conjuring trick with bones."

He was later consecrated as bishop of Durham, the fourth-highest Church of England post, but days after the ceremony at York Minster, near Durham, a lightning bolt severely damaged the site. Some mused half-seriously whether a divine message was being delivered.

In subsequent years, a theologian who became head of Australia's Anglican Church didn't exactly deny Jesus' Resurrection but enshrouded it in historical fog, while the leader of the Scottish Episcopal Church and a bishop in America's Episcopal Church rejected the belief outright.

Outside Anglican ranks, the old tradition was totally spurned by writers like John Dominic Crossan of DePaul University in Chicago, a Roman Catholic school, and Gerd Ludemann of Nashville's Vanderbilt Divinity School, in a book from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) publishing house.

Meanwhile, back in Durham, the Resurrection debate quieted under Jenkins' immediate successor but could stir again this July as the restored York Minster hosts the consecration of another bishop — and a lightning bolt of a different sort.

The new prelate, the Rev. N.T. ("Tom") Wright, has just produced the most monumental defense of the Easter heritage in decades.

Wright, 54, a prolific writer of both scholarly and popular books, is currently canon theologian of Westminster Abbey and a former university instructor at Cambridge, Oxford and McGill in Montreal. He often visits the United States, lecturing in his strong baritone.

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Wright's 817-page "The Resurrection of the Son of God" (Fortress Press) marches through a clearly organized case that confronts every major doubt about Easter, ancient and modern.

He disputes Bultmann disciples, who think the Resurrection is "beyond history," or that it's unseemly to even ponder the point.

There's a historical question, Wright insists, that is inescapable: Why did Christianity emerge so rapidly, with such power, and why did believers risk everything to teach that Jesus really arose?

He concludes the best explanation is that the earliest Christians held two strong convictions that worked in tandem: 1) Jesus' tomb was discovered empty on Easter morning; 2) Jesus then appeared to his followers alive in bodily form. In other words, the unvarnished New Testament story.

Wright carefully sifts the New Testament, admittedly the only written evidence of the Resurrection, and adds to that his own circumstantial and logical arguments.

The best history can provide with ancient events is a "high probability" that they occurred, he says. The Easter story qualifies as true because all proposed alternatives fail to explain the early power of Christianity.

The oldest alternative, mentioned in Matthew 28:12-15, was the claim that Jesus' body was stolen from the tomb. Wright notes the New Testament writers presented that possibility even at the risk of "putting ideas into people's heads." They did so, he says, precisely because skeptics were trying to explain why the tomb was empty.

Some argue that modern science has taught us the Resurrection was impossible, as were other miracles. To Wright, it's silly to think first-century Christians were "ignorant of the fact that dead people stayed dead." They knew this, but were convinced Jesus was the one exception.

Wright quickly dismisses claims that Christian belief echoed the dying-and-rising gods of ancient pagan farmers, on grounds that Jews avoided paganism and that Jesus' Resurrection was a one-time occurrence totally unlike the annual, ceremonial rising of gods and crops.

Another standard challenge is that the Easter stories in the four Gospels conflict with each other: Different people arrive at the tomb, they meet different people and Jesus' first appearances are in different locations.

Wright turns that inside out. If the accounts were concocted, he said, "you'd expect a better effort to have stories come into line with each other. No, this is the rough sort of way it came out" in the four independent accounts preserved in the Gospels.

He also thinks the Gospel reports about women as the first witnesses argue against fiction: The Gospel writers wouldn't have made this up because the ancients discounted women's testimony.

Wright also contests the many modern attempts to explain away the disciples' belief as human error, or mass psychosis. In theological versions, "resurrection" is redefined from its original meaning of bodily miracle into collective spiritual experiences.

But that still doesn't exhaust all the Easter imponderables.

By the Gospel accounts, Jesus' resurrected body was like no other. He mysteriously appeared and disappeared (Luke 24:31,36 and John 20:19,26). More unnervingly, his friends did not always recognize him (Luke 24:16, John 20:14, 21:4).

"I have been very puzzled how to make sense of the stories," Wright admitted in an interview. "It is puzzling for the New Testament writers themselves."

In the New Testament portrayal, Jesus arose with a different, glorified body, which is promised to all believers as part of the Easter hope.

Wright's acceptance of that point runs into objections from Alan F. Segal, a Jewish historian at Barnard College who is completing a major work titled "Life After Death" covering Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Segal and Wright agree on many basic issues, including that the Gospels teach a material, physical concept of resurrection. But Segal opposes Wright's contention that first-century Jews and Christians all meant the same thing when they spoke about resurrection.

According to Segal, they "all talk about a bodily resurrection but not all believe it is physical," and the Apostle Paul conceived of a "spiritual" body in the pivotal passage, 1 Corinthians 15, written about 20 years after the Easter events.

In this crucial and rather technical argument, Wright insists that what Paul meant by "spiritual" was that after Resurrection the body is "animated by the spirit," not that it is a nonmaterial body.

Segal and Wright agree that many Christians today think their immortal soul will simply "go to heaven" when they die — and ignore their own bodily resurrection.

Yet Wright says Christianity has always believed that after death and an undefined period in the presence of God, each individual will receive a resurrection body like that of Jesus.

What difference does it make whether resurrection involves material bodies?

First, Wright says, because the church should teach what the first Christians believed. Second, the physical reality of a future world after death shows "the created order matters to God, and Jesus' Resurrection is the pilot project for that renewal."

With that sort of robustly materialistic theology, Wright will be a fitting successor to another former bishop of Durham, A. Michael Ramsey, who later went on to become archbishop of Canterbury.

Writing at the end of World War II, Ramsey stated that eternal life without a body would be "maimed and meaningless," although he acknowleged the Easter message is mind-boggling.