



Evans, Craig A. and N. T. Wright.

Jesus, The Final Days: What Really Happened

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It would be a bit deceiving to say that Craig A. Evans and N. T. Wright co-wrote *Jesus, The Final Days* (hereafter *JFD*) together. *JFD* began as a series of lectures in the Symposium for Church and Academy lecture series that took place at Crichton College. Wright lectured in 2003 (which comprises chapter 3) and Evans gave two lectures in 2004 (which comprise chapters 1-2) and if I read the preface correctly the lectures were revised for publication by editor Troy A. Miller. For this reason there isn't the flow that one would expect from a co-written project in which both authors consulted each other constantly with regard to the content of the book. I don't believe that this detracts from the quality of the information contained in this brief work, but it is something that readers should know before picking up their own copy.

In the first two chapters Evans mines a veritable treasure trove of ancient sources ranging from the Christian Scriptures to Philo to various Greco-Roman sources to early Rabbinic texts in order to sketch out the historical plausibility and reliability of Jesus' life and death as portrayed in the Gospels. Chapter 1 "The Shout of Death" focuses solely on Jesus' life and death covering the obvious (i.e., Jesus' existence contra the claims of 'Christ Myth' proponents) and reconstructing Jesus' trial and crucifixion from the NT with accompanying support from those other sources I mentioned above. Evans lists some reasons that Jesus aroused opposition which ultimately contributed to his death concluding that "[i]n the end, the Jewish authorities sought to kill Jesus not because he was a good man but because Jesus was perceived as a very serious political threat." (9) He closes the chapter by noting the theological implications of Jesus' death which for early Jews steeped in Messianism signified that he wasn't the Messiah they expected, i.e., a warrior king who would prevail over Israel's enemies. "But from Jesus' perspective, a perspective his disciples will embrace after the resurrection, his death has opened up a new understanding of sacrifice and atonement." (37)

In chapter 2 "The Silence of Burial" Evans turns to something that he knows very well, Jewish burial practices. In his view it's a lack of familiarity with these practices that leads to some of the more skeptical/outlandish theories of Jesus' burial (or non-burial). He gives a brief primer on

burial and reburial in ossuaries (i.e., bone boxes) which was common in first century Palestine before mapping out the regular process which looked something like this:

Burial took place on the day of death, or, if death occurred at the end of the day or during the night, on the following day. [...] Following death the body is washed and wrapped. [...] The day of burial was the first of seven days of mourning. [...] Mourning normally took place at the tomb's entrance or within the tomb itself, [...] One year after death it was customary to gather the bones and place them in a bone niche or ossuary. (43-4)

Evans tells us that the rules for executed criminals were different and while they were to receive a proper burial it was never to be in a place of honor like the family tomb. In order to debunk the idea that Jesus wasn't actually buried Evans turns to the necessity of burial in Jewish belief and practice and he examines a variety of ancient literature (mostly Jewish) and archeological evidence which all "*points in one direction: the body of Jesus was placed in a tomb according to Jewish custom.*" (68) Evans concludes that the Gospel narratives should be given a fair reading with regard to their accounts of Jesus' burial based upon all of this evidence.

Enter N. T. Wright with chapter 3 "The Surprise of Resurrection." Wright opens by defining resurrection in the ancient world which always had reference to bodily resurrection. His intention here is to correct a modern idea (that quite honestly seems like a caricature to me) that many Christians view resurrection as going to heaven. He goes on to speak of the early Christians having a future hope in the resurrection which was articulated "within [a] very Jewish system of belief, but not without some significant alterations or mutations." (84) He goes on to track seven of them:

1. There is virtually no spectrum of belief about the resurrection (contra the spectrum of belief about life after death in paganism). (85)
2. Resurrection is not as important a belief in Second Temple Judaism as it is in early Christianity, where it is central and vital. (85)
3. There is a much more detailed view of what precisely resurrection means. (86)
4. Resurrection as an event has split into two (i.e., Jesus first, everyone else second). (89)
5. Early Christians developed a quite new metaphorical use of "resurrection" (which could refer to the restoration of Israel). (90)
6. Resurrection was associated with messiahship. (91)
7. The early Christians believed not only that God had begun the long-awaited new creation, but that he had enlisted them, through the Spirit of Jesus, as helpers within that project. (95)

From here Wright goes on to list four strange features about the resurrection narratives in the Gospels. The first is the lack of scriptural allusion/citation. He sees this as evidence of very early "*prereflective eyewitness accounts in which people had not even begun to wonder whether or not this strange set of events fulfilled certain Scriptures.*" (96) The second is women being featured as witnesses since in the ancient world their testimony wasn't considered reliable. The third is the portrayal of Jesus himself. He "*appears as a human being with a body that is like any other body; he can be mistaken for a gardener, or fellow traveler on the road. In addition,*

the stories also contain definite signs that the body has been transformed." (98) Wright suggests that nobody would have just invented stories like this. The fourth and final feature that Wright considers strange is the absence of any mention of a future Christian hope from the resurrection narratives. He sees this as a call to act now, in this world, on Jesus' behalf. Wright closes the chapter by talking about the empty tomb and admitting that it's not "proof" of the resurrection, but he believes that the resurrection is the best explanation of the empty tomb.

Each chapter is rounded out with a list of books for further reading, there is an ancient sources index as well as a general subject index. You won't find a footnote or end note anywhere in this slim volume and references to other recently written works in the main text are slim to none. In the preface Troy Miller says that this book is intended for a wide audience to include scholars, (undergraduate and graduate) students, and laymen alike. Speaking as a layman who reads a little bit in this area I can't say that I came across anything that I haven't seen before. I can't imagine that the grad student or scholar will encounter anything fresh or innovative in this book either, so while intended for a broad audience I think it will best serve those who are just getting into the field. Miller has done a great job converting Evans and Wright's lectures into a written format and they read as clearly as I'm sure the lectures were originally presented orally. It's a nice little book.