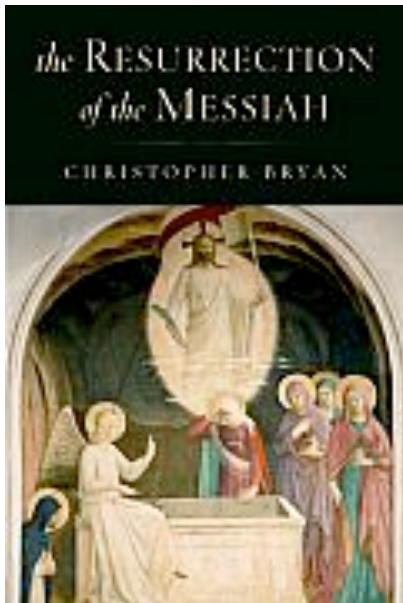


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Bryan, Christopher

The Resurrection of the Messiah

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. x + 432.
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In this work, Bryan sets out to seek a further understanding of the early Christian faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ by reexamining the earliest Christian documents concerning this faith and the resurrection as such. In doing so, Bryan places himself consciously in a tradition of theological exegesis, *fides quaerens intellectum* (ix), that is also committed to academic rigor. The book consists of acknowledgements in which Bryan's position is given as well (ix–x), a prologue (3–5), chapters on “The Setting” (7–41) “Witnesses” (43–156), and “Questioning the Witnesses” (157–89), as well as a series of additional notes (191–234), followed by substantial endnotes (235–381; they make in this case for a pleasant reading experience of the well-written main text), a selected bibliography (383–416; including primary sources), an overview of abbreviations (417–21) and an index of authors and sources (423–32; in three parts: until 1000, between 1000 and 1850, and from 1850 onward). The book also includes nine (black-and-white) images that Bryan uses to expound particular aspects of the resurrection and its interpretation (between pages 191 and 192).

In the prologue (3–5), Bryan lays out some key aspects of his study, especially with regard to the aftermath of the crucifixion, which is where he locates the resurrection and faith in it. Bryan notes: (1) the postcrucifixion emergence of a group of followers of Jesus; (2) the

explanation for the existence of this group given by it in terms of “Jesus having risen from the dead” (3); (3) the observation that also in the first-century Mediterranean world, it was generally assumed that the dead stayed dead, which stands in stark contrast to the claims of this group of followers of Jesus about his resurrection, backed up by references to eyewitnesses and the memory of group members (4).

In part 1 of his book, Bryan outlines aspects of the views held about death and the afterlife (including the resurrection) in the two contexts of the early Christian movement, namely, “Israel” (9–18) and “the Greco-Roman World beyond Israel” (19–34), before discussing the place of the “Christian Claim” (35–41) in this setting. In well-documented outlines, Bryan nuances both the thesis that belief in the resurrection was quite a common thing in (Pharisaic) Judaism, especially by emphasizing that what was at stake here was primarily resurrection in the context of the eschatological renewal of creation and by drawing attention to the broad diversity of opinions in the broader Greco-Roman world, both showing some exceptions to the “ruling assumption” as well as the ruling assumption itself, that the dead stay dead. After considering a number of alternative interpretations, Bryan formulates the central Christian claim as follows: “they [the early Christians] claimed that Jesus the Messiah had *already* risen from the dead and ascended into union with God. They also claimed that they themselves, by virtue of their position as Jesus’ people, were *already* in possession of the Spirit ... and that they therefore *already* experienced the forgiveness of sins and a way of living based on that” (39). The technical term that Bryan uses for this position is “inaugurated eschatology.”

Section 2 (47–156), which covers a large part of the book and is, strictly speaking, the most exegetical in nature, provides a broad overview of “the witnesses”—Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John—concerning the resurrection. Taking Paul as a starting point for chronological reasons (and because Bryan seems to consider Paul to be the greatest early Christian theologian, 45), Bryan looks to 1 Cor 15 (assuming Paul’s knowledge of an empty tomb, 47–51), from which Bryan then deduces a lens for reading the accounts of the four Gospels, namely, the apostolic formula “that Christ died, that he was buried, that he has been raised, and that he appeared” (69). When reading the Gospel accounts, Bryan places them in the structure provided by this formula, thus arriving at a picture of early Christian witness with regard to the resurrection that is highly consistent in itself, this notwithstanding the differences among the Gospels.

In the book’s third section, Bryan first asks what the significance of the witnesses that he has studied is (159–72). In doing so he confronts five alternative explanations (different from the one that he gives, i.e., one in terms of inaugurated eschatology, including the physical reality of an empty tomb), namely, explanations viewing the resurrection accounts/experiences of the risen Christ as either deceptions, misunderstandings, the

result of Jesus' not really dying on the cross, purely subjective visions or hallucinations, and "genuine" visions given to the disciples by God that Jesus is now with him (this includes Bultmann's and others' kerygmatic view of the resurrection), engaging them critically, finally reaching a point where he states that "ultimately, indeed, the question is theological: in other words, in what kind of God does one believe, if any?" (171). He subsequently argues that some of the explanations for the early Christian resurrection faith that he considers to be (highly) improbable have their roots in a worldview that just cannot permit resurrection to be a reality in a way in which Bryan considers it to be real. Second, Bryan asks the question "so what?" in a "partially unscientific postscript" (173–89). Here Bryan first considers what the resurrection means for the relation between Jesus and God, linking the New Testament resurrection accounts and proclamation to the claim that Jesus is indeed divine, expressed most succinctly by the *homoousion* of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Subsequently Bryan also draws a line between the resurrection (as part of God's reconciling the world to himself, without reference to Rom 5:1-11, however) and justification by grace to faith (in my view, the link with grace is clear, with faith not so much). Finally, Bryan links the resurrection of Jesus to the general resurrection of the dead, true to his own understanding of Jesus' resurrection as an instance of "inaugurated eschatology" by understanding the general resurrection as part of the eschatological renewal of creation of which Jesus' resurrection is just the beginning (188).

In the eight "additional notes" Bryan addresses (sometimes very) briefly some aspects that could not be included in the main text. These are the following: (1) the variety of faith in early Christianity (191–92; Bryan does not deny that there were other kinds of beliefs about the resurrection than that he has emphasized, but he denies that these were in any way more mainstream or more authentic); (2) the usefulness of New Testament narratives for history, affirming this while also emphasizing the use of the common historical toolkit (193–204); (3) the passion narratives as prophetization of history or historicization of prophecy, largely coming down in favor of the former (205–6); (4) the resurrection of the dead and the Torah, noting the old and often-stated view that there is no such thing as the resurrection of the dead in Torah (understood as "referring to *all* texts that the rabbis recognized as 'making the hands unclean'"), noting that the issue is more differentiated than that—and consequently that the newness of the Christian resurrection faith ought not to be overemphasized (207–11); (5) the Alexamenos graffito and "texts of terror," noting that the graffito is a well-known witness to popular resistance against Christianity and also indicating that such aspects of the Christian story should not be ignored (213–16); (6) further reflections on Paul's understanding of resurrection as involving a transformed physicality, leading to agreement with Beker's statement that "Christ possess a transfigured corporeality ... into which Christians are changed" (217–

20, 220); (7) further reflections on Paul's understanding of our present experience of transformation in and through Christ, emphasizing the tight relationship between this transformation, Christ's already consummated resurrection, and the Christians' future resurrection (221–29); (8) the New Testament and the “negative eschaton,” which is a witness to Bryan's conviction that God certainly will not want the damnation of humans (even if they may condemn themselves to it or even choose it), and he leaves open the mystery of how God will reconcile himself fully to the world and vice versa (232–33).

All in all, Bryan covers much ground in this book that is not just about early Christians' views about the resurrection—or rather about one dominant view about it—but also about its theological appropriation and relationship to the articulation of Christian faith in a contemporary setting. In his clearly written book, Bryan boldly presents a somewhat provocative thesis that certainly goes against the grain of some contemporary scholarship, even if it amounts, in many ways, to a restatement of a rather classical (which is not to say irrelevant) doctrine of the resurrection. Aspects of this include his stress on the “reality” of the resurrection (in terms of an instance of inaugurated eschatology, which as such is a view held by many others as well) as well as on the consistency and coherence of the resurrection faith of early Christian communities and his emphasis on the relationship between worldview and exegetical results. If one were to ask critical questions, which certainly ought to be done, albeit not at great length here, they might be related exactly to these points. For example, (1) with regard to method: What are the benefits and drawbacks of using the “apostolic tradition” so much as a heuristic tool for reading the Gospels as Bryan does? (2) Is it indeed consistent to privilege the New Testament texts to this extent, leaving aside, for example, the Gospel of Thomas and the Didache, while also arguing in favor of the historical dominance of the view of the victors of history in their time? (c) What are the consequences for the exegetical debate of the emphasis on the relation between worldview and exegesis, this apart from more detailed debate on individual questions (e.g., Paul's knowledge of an empty-tomb tradition)?

As long as such questions are asked, Bryan's “essay” (in the classical sense of the word) is a valuable addition to the debate and may well be used for teaching purposes, probably alongside a “standard” textbook on the New Testament especially as it questions so many assumptions that are current in the textbooks generally used in undergraduate teaching and simultaneously focuses on one particular theme.