

## *Reconciling History and Faith: Approaching Jesus' Resurrection with Pannenberg, Wright, and the 'Third Millennials.'*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since Gotthold Lessing's claim that contingent and accidental historical events cannot determine universal and necessary truths of reason – the “ugly great ditch” between historical and rational truth – it became an almost ubiquitous assertion that Jesus' resurrection was a ‘matter of faith,’ and thus not a ‘matter of history.’ Historical research into the claim that Jesus was resurrected was seen as impossible or unnecessary, seen through Strauss' demythologisation and Troeltsch's homogeneity of history, both of which had enormous influence on 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars, especially Kähler, Bultmann, Barth, Brunner, Tillich, Bornkamm, Frei, Schillebeeckx, and Marxsen. Common among these is the claim that historical research cannot be the ground of faith. This assertion was challenged by Wolfhart Pannenberg and N.T. Wright, both of whom have attempted to reconcile history with faith. Pannenberg famously declared history to be the very locus of faith, and Wright has asserted that theology and history are inseparable. Several other scholars have recently argued similarly, whom David Bruce has labelled as the ‘Third Millennials.’ Central to many of their arguments is the objection to a positivistic and foundationalist historiography, seen especially in the belief that history cannot be the *foundation* of faith. This article assesses the epistemological and historiographical claims of Pannenberg and Wright, as well as those classified as ‘Third Millennials,’ which allow them to consider the resurrection as a viable object of historical inquiry. This article argues against the foundationalism that led scholars to reject the possibility of historical research into the resurrection, arguing that the division between ‘history’ and ‘faith’ is arbitrary and methodologically impossible. The resurrection is, in fact, a matter of both history and faith, and must not be relegated to one or the other.

### **INTRODUCTION**

No story or theological claim has been quite so divisive and vexing as the proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. This is especially so in light of the developments in epistemology and the advancements of scientific and historical methodologies in the last few hundred years. One methodological issue that I would like to pay particular attention to in this paper is Lessing's “ugly great ditch” and the pervasive influence this has had on research into Jesus' resurrection. I shall argue that the implicit (and sometimes explicit) epistemic foundationalism within the arguments of those who adopted Lessing's thought lead to a distortion in the methods utilized to assess miracle claims, Christian or not, but especially Jesus' resurrection. I shall also analyse the way in which Wolfhart Pannenberg, N. T. Wright, and two other more recent thinkers, have challenged this foundationalism and the modernistic application of Lessing's argument to theology, highlighting their contributions to this debate, and the ongoing discussions of historical and theological methodology, miracle claims, and

religious faith. Where Lessing and his followers attempted to divorce history from faith, some are now attempting to reconcile the two.

### **WIDENING THE GAP BETWEEN MATTERS OF ‘HISTORY’ AND MATTERS OF ‘FAITH’**

For the early Christians, and the New Testament authors, in particular, the claim that Jesus rose from the dead very quickly became a central tenant of the new burgeoning faith. References to resurrection saturate the gospels and epistles, from the earliest written passages to the latest, with reference to Jesus’ resurrection in almost every chapter of Acts. Perhaps the most significant discussion on the notion of resurrection is found in 1 Corinthians, wherein Paul even goes so far as to claim that there would be no Christian faith without the resurrection (v.17). This extended argument for Jesus’ resurrection begins with what is likely one of the oldest creedal formulations of the early church:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I, in turn, had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles (vv.3-7).

Paul then, of course, adds his own name to this list, but the formulation of this passage suggests that it was an early creed, which thus demonstrates the central significance of Jesus’ resurrection in early Christian theology. The point here is that from the beginning of Christianity, the resurrection claim was intimately connected with Christian faith. It wasn’t until much later that this connection was questioned and even challenged, particularly with regard to the problem of history. The issue was distilled into the question: if the resurrection of Jesus need no longer be understood as a historical phenomenon, does the Christian faith as a whole become foundation-less and thus irrelevant? Or, in other words, if the early Christians understood Jesus’ resurrection as vital to their faith, what happens if the historicity of the resurrection is challenged or even negated?

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the German philosopher Gotthold Lessing argued that contingent and accidental historical events could not determine universal and necessary truths of reason; there is an irreconcilable gap between historical and rational truth, the “ugly great ditch.” On this basis, Lessing argued that miracles, such as Jesus’ resurrection, due to the contradistinction of the purported miracle account with other attestable natural occurrences, elude historical accessibility. Therefore, it is impossible to rationally argue that a miracle is a historical event, synonymous with any other historical event. Consequently, religious faith cannot rest upon

such a claim, or in this case, Christian faith cannot be founded upon that belief that Jesus was risen from the dead.<sup>1</sup>

Along with the scepticism and criticism of David Hume and Hermann Reimarus, Lessing subsequently influenced generations of thinkers, and the divide between history and faith widened. The resurrection of Jesus became a “matter of faith” and not a “matter of history.” This is seen in David Strauss, who insisted that the resurrection was merely a primitive expression of a subjective religious experience, mythological language that requires dissection in order to determine the true historical event.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Ernst Troeltsch argued for the homogeneity of history, wherein only those events analogous to contemporary experience can be considered historical, and all else is relegated to that ambiguous ghetto, the realm of faith.<sup>3</sup>

For Martin Kähler and Rudolf Bultmann, the historical Jesus is beyond the historian’s grasp, protected by an impenetrable layer of myth, and the only Christ academics should be interested in is the Christ of faith, the one preached through the ages. Karl Barth famously said, “In the resurrection, the new world of the Holy Spirit touches the old world of the flesh, but touches it as a tangent touches a circle, that is, without touching it.”<sup>4</sup> The concern of the New Testament authors was not to lead their readers to a historical inquiry but to lead them to a decision of faith. Emil Brunner argued that the resurrection is inaccessible without faith, for faith should not be established upon “anything so unsafe as a historical science.”<sup>5</sup>

This concern that historical faith not be built upon historical certainty continued through Paul Tillich, Günther Bornkamm, Edward Schillebeeckx, and toward the end of the twentieth century, Willi Marxsen, to name just a few, all of whom stressed the existential experience of the resurrection and that the evangelists were primarily witnessing to Jesus’ messianic nature, as opposed to presenting historical biography. To quote Schillebeeckx, “Historical study of Jesus is extremely important, it gives a concrete content of faith, but it can never be a verification of the faith.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “On the Proof of Spirit and Power,” in *The Christian Theology Reader*, ed. Alister E. McGrath, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 249-50.

<sup>2</sup> David Strauss, “Reimarus and his Apology,” in *Fragments*, ed. Charles H. Talbert. Trans. Ralph S. Fraser (London: SCM Press, 1971), 52-55.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology,” in *Religion in History*, trans. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 13-14.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1942), 153.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (London: William Collins Sons & Co, 1979), 73-74.

As this brief survey has hopefully demonstrated, research into Jesus' resurrection has, in many quadrants historically been seen as either impossible or unnecessary, categorized as a "matter of faith," and thus not as a "matter of history." This fixation on ensuring that historical research does not function as the foundation of faith resulted in the emergence of ambiguous and fideistic statements on the resurrection, whereby many – including some of those mentioned above – have argued that the resurrection was a physical and historical event, but cannot be demonstrated as such. We can have faith in a literal resurrection, but we cannot know it for sure, at least not by any rationalistic definition of knowledge.

### **FOUNDATIONALISM AND THE HISTORICITY OF MIRACLE CLAIMS**

The core problem with this dichotomy between history and faith is the epistemological presupposition of foundationalism. The ever-changing nature of historical research and the constantly evolving knowledge of history was seen as an unstable and unsuitable foundation for faith. A line was drawn in the sand when it came to the resurrection: only so much could be said about it before it posed the threat of becoming the foundation of faith. Furthermore, foundationalism demanded, and demands, a narrow and selective field of evidence. The miraculous nature of the resurrection claim, or any miracle claim, precluded the possibility of its demonstrability. It could not be justified in the same way as any other historical occurrences because it is unlike any other historical occurrence, and thus could exist merely as an object of faith, and not of history.

It is not my intention in this paper to repeat the well-rehearsed argument against foundationalism apart from its central and most significant weakness, which is the infinite regress in attempting to justify what can be considered a foundational belief. Or put differently, to justify a belief as properly basic or foundational requires the justification of another belief as being properly basic or foundational, which in turn requires the justification of yet another belief and then another ad infinitum.

When we apply this criticism to the belief that the resurrection cannot be considered a matter of history, we can note two observations. First, the fear that historical inquiry into the resurrection might become some sort of foundation for faith is superfluous, for this implicit foundationalism must be rejected. Second, the argument that the resurrection cannot be considered a historical event due to it being utterly unlike any other historical event is flawed because this would require the justification of the belief that only events with some sort of contemporary analogy can be considered historical, a position which shall be seen to be unsubstantiated.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge the need to avoid reducing the purported miracle to being the *same* as every other event. It is precisely because of the miracle's otherness and peculiarity that it is afforded significance; otherwise, it would not be called a 'miracle.' If resurrections occurred frequently, the claim that Jesus rose from the dead would have borne no more significance than any other event in his life, and the apostle Paul certainly wouldn't have made the radical claims of 1 Corinthians 15 noted above. In our zeal to redeem miracle claims from foundationalist historiography, we must not allow our methodology to fall into the opposite trap of modernism and attempt to 'prove' the miracle as though it is indistinct to ordinary historical events.<sup>7</sup> However, this should not preclude the possibility of historical analysis, so long as the uniqueness of the miracle claim is acknowledged and upheld.

### **TOWARD A POST-FOUNDATIONALIST METHODOLOGY**

Reconciling the tumultuous relationship between history and faith is a challenging task, not dissimilar to the notorious science-theology debate. Lessing's "ugly great ditch," especially when conjoined with, and expanded upon by a foundationalist epistemology, makes the task seem impossible. It escapes the scope of this paper to present a comprehensive epistemology and historical or theological methodology, but a few of the contributions of Wolfhart Pannenberg, N.T. Wright and several others who have recently grappled with this issue can help guide the discussion forward into a post-foundationalist era.

One of Pannenberg's core concerns throughout his career was to demonstrate the coherence of Christian doctrine with all knowledge. His work is characterized by a proliferation of explorations into disciplines other than theology, particularly philosophy, history, and anthropology. He argued that Christian doctrine is largely preoccupied with demonstrating how the Judeo-Christian God is Lord over all of reality, and therefore the essence of Christian truth must be universal. Furthermore, it must, therefore, be public, advanced in an open, cogent argument, and cannot be immune to critical scrutiny from other areas of knowledge.

In his 1965 lecture, "Faith and Reason," he argued that "The Christian faith manifestly cannot withdraw from every kind of cooperation with rational thought," insisting that every theological statement must prove itself on the field of reason.<sup>8</sup> However, he maintains that faith

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<sup>7</sup> This is I believe is a significant failure of historians and theologians like William Lane Craig and Gary Habermas, whose methodology in attempting to demonstrate the historicity of Jesus' resurrection bears distinctly foundationalist tendencies. Rushing to prove Jesus' resurrection, without due consideration into how *peculiar* and *unique* the claim is, so often results in the resurrection being stripped of any significance.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Faith and Reason," in *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 2. Trans. George H. Kelm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 46.

is indeed a very different sort of knowledge to empirical, testable thought. Faith must never fall into a form of fideism but is directed toward the future, awaiting its eschatological consummation in the return of Christ. It is helpful here to note that Pannenberg neither attempts to demonstrate reason, including historical knowledge, as the foundation of faith, nor faith as the foundation of reason. He holds the two in tension.

This tension is seen throughout his work, particularly in his Christological methodology. In his *Jesus – God and Man*, he attacked what he saw as a Christology “from above” in theologians such as Barth, where the theologian begins their exploration of Christ with the assumed presupposition that Jesus is divine. Pannenberg, on the other hand, insisted that this was the goal of Christology and thus should not be assumed. His Christology “from below” began with the attempt to ‘get behind’ the New Testament texts to discover the real, historical Jesus, and then work up to his divinity from there.<sup>9</sup> He later discovers, however, that such a methodology is, in fact, impossible, for the New Testament texts themselves do not present pure, unadulterated history, and getting behind the text is therefore methodologically implausible. His later *Systematic Theology* demonstrates a far more nuanced methodology, balancing the concerns of both “from above” and “from below,” alternating between history, doctrine, and anthropology.

For Pannenberg, all knowledge is partial and provisional, for all truth statements require the demonstration of their reliability and are thus worked out in the course of history, oriented toward their future justification. All statements, including theological statements, are not self-evident and must, therefore, take the form of hypotheses to be tested. In his 1976 publication, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, he states,

Theology, precisely as a theory of the history of the transmission of the Christian tradition, cannot be just a positive science of Christianity, either from a supernaturalist point of view or from that of the history of culture. Its real task is to examine the validity of the thesis of faith as a hypothesis. In doing this, it cannot, as the science of God, have a field of investigation which can be separated or isolated from others.<sup>10</sup>

He does not attempt to reconcile the tensions between history and faith in a neat, comprehensive manner, but manages these tensions by emphasizing the provisionality of knowledge, inter-disciplinary methodology, and the formulation of truth statements as hypotheses. Rather than viewing any one area or discipline as foundational, he insists upon

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<sup>9</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (London: SCM Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 296.

mutual conditioning between disciplines.

The New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, asks many of the same questions as Pannenberg and has many similar concerns, particularly around the role of history. He has argued in his recent tome, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, “History and theology...do not stand alone,” and reflecting upon his *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series, states that his aim has been to present “neither a ‘New Testament Theology’ nor a ‘New Testament History,’ but a kind of dialogue between the two.”<sup>11</sup> For Wright, history and theology are not mutually exclusive disciplines.

When discussing epistemology in his earlier book, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Wright responds to the two antipodal epistemological positions of positivism and phenomenism.<sup>12</sup> He criticizes the former for its emphasis upon absolute objective observation, which he argues is impossible and naïve, and the latter for its extreme relativism and subjectivism. However, he acknowledges the strengths of both and argues that external reality does indeed exist and can be known, but that this reality will always be interpreted through a subjective lens.

His proposal of ‘Critical Realism’ attempts to find a mediating position, acknowledging the provisionality of knowledge. He defines this Critical Realism as

a self-critical epistemology which, in rejecting the naïve realism which simply imagines that we are looking at the material with a God’s-eye view, rejects also the narcissistic reductionism of imagining that all apparent perception is in fact projection, that everything is really going on inside our own heads. Critical realism engages determinedly in a many-sided conversation, both with the data itself and with others (including scholars) who are also engaging with it. This conversation aims, not of course to an unattainable ‘objectivity,’ but at truth none the less, the truth in which the words we use and the stories we tell increasingly approximate to the reality of another world, in the historian’s case the world of the past.<sup>13</sup>

Any truth claims, or statement about history or theology is formulated as a hypothesis to be tested and brought into a debate with others. He calls this Critical Realism a ‘hermeneutic of love’:

We must renounce the fiction of a god’s-eye view of events on the one hand and a collapsing of event into significance or perception on the other. ...I suggest a possible hermeneutic model...of *love*. In love, at least in the idea of *agape* as we find it in some parts of the New Testament, the lover affirms the reality and the otherness of the beloved. Love does not seek to collapse the beloved into terms of itself; and, even

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<sup>11</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God: Parts 1 and 2* (London: SPCK, 2013), 25, xvii.

<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 51.

though it may speak of losing itself in the beloved, such a loss always turns out to be a true finding. In the familiar paradox, one becomes fully oneself when losing oneself to another. In the fact of love, in short, both parties are simultaneously affirmed.<sup>14</sup>

This is a helpful reminder for the theologian and historian. Knowledge is neither absolute, objective perception, nor merely subjective, but is, in fact, found in the interaction between the perceiver, or the lover, and that which is being perceived, the beloved. An absolute and objective perception of reality is unattainable, but we can continuously refine and expand our knowledge, with the aim of getting as close to objective reality as possible. Wright's epistemology demands humility, for knowledge is not founded upon some 'objective truth,' but rather consists of a set of coherent hypotheses. Furthermore, it requires inter-disciplinary dialogue and ongoing debate.

Pannenberg and Wright both attempt to find a way forward beyond foundationalist epistemologies, and demonstrate the methodological impossibility of separating history from faith. They both argue that knowledge is provisional, and as such, knowledge claims must be formulated as hypotheses to be tested within an open and inter-disciplinary context. Against the claim that events can only be considered historical if they share a contemporary analogy, and thus the resurrection cannot be considered historical, they both argue that because knowledge is provisional, it is sheer arrogance to assume we know enough to declare definitively what can and cannot be considered 'natural' or 'ordinary.' Therefore, we cannot approach history or the question of the resurrection or other miracle accounts with an *a priori* conviction concerning what can and cannot be considered historical.

In a small but profound book on the resurrection, particularly exploring questions of history, theology, and methodology, David Bruce highlights several recent thinkers who have questioned the divide between so-called matters of history and matters of faith, whom he has labelled the 'Third Millennials.'<sup>15</sup> He includes amongst these thinkers Peter Carnley, Pieter Craffert, Gerald O'Collins, Hans Frei, Alan Padgett, and N.T. Wright. Each deserves a detailed examination of his or her own, but I will here briefly touch on Padgett and Craffert.

Alan Padgett has argued that there is simply no such thing as a purely historical approach to religious studies, for there is no such thing as a value-neutral methodology. He cites Gary Habermas and Willi Marxsen as examples, who insist that personal prejudice and bias can be overcome through a neutral and scientific method. The irony is that they arrive at

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<sup>14</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 63-64.

<sup>15</sup> David Bruce, *The Resurrection of History: History, Theology, and the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014).



entirely opposite conclusions regarding the historicity of the resurrection, thus indicating that value-neutral methodologies are, in fact impossible, and negates the foundationalist belief that when people view the same evidence, they will arrive at the same conclusions. Padgett asserts the need to embrace subjectivity on the way to objectivity, maintaining that recognizing the influence of personal prejudice upon historical inquiry does not invariably deny the fact that the historian is nevertheless dealing with reality.<sup>16</sup>

Pieter Craffert has argued for a social-scientific, post-modern approach that is characterised by a culture-sensitive and interdisciplinary method. When analysing a historical claim, the historian can either declare the event to be a real event or declare it to be myth or simply wrong. Craffert, however, reacting to the modernistic tendency to apply modernist criteria to historical accounts, and in this case, the gospel narratives argues for a third way, which is to recognize those events as real for those who reported the event. Many events recorded in the gospels may seem extraordinary to twenty-first-century readers but considered acceptable to first-century readers.<sup>17</sup>

I have highlighted these two, Padgett and Craffert, to demonstrate that contemporary thinkers have recently been responding to the foundationalism and modernism implicit in a great deal of the theology of the last few centuries. Padgett and Craffert especially orient us toward acknowledging the historical situation of the theologian or historian, that our particular context greatly influences the way in which we interpret data, and, like Pannenberg and Wright, stress a humble epistemology.

### CONCLUSION

To briefly summarize, I have attempted to demonstrate how Lessing's "ugly great ditch" resulted in the division between history and faith, with the resurrection being considered a matter of faith and thus not of history. Jesus' resurrection can neither be demonstrated as a historical event nor can be considered a foundational truth. This methodological conviction resulted in various fideistic statements regarding the resurrection, whereby we can have faith in a physical and literal resurrection, but cannot demonstrate it as such. Implicit within this is a foundationalism and a modernistic worldview and understanding of reality and justification. However, this foundationalism has repeatedly been shown to be a flawed epistemology, which

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<sup>16</sup> Allan G. Padgett, "Advice for Religious Historians: On the Myth of the Purely Historical Jesus," in *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus*, ed. Stephen T. Davis et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 287-307.

<sup>17</sup> Pieter F. Craffert, "Did Jesus Rise Bodily from the Dead? Yes and No!" *Religion and Theology* 15 (2008), 133-53.

thereby necessitates a rethinking of how we approach miracle claims such as Jesus' resurrection.

Pannenberg, Wright and the 'Third Millennials' have recently provided ways in which we can approach these claims in a post-foundationalist era. Specifically, they remind us of the importance of adopting a humble epistemology. By this, I mean we must recognize the provisionality of knowledge and the influence of our historical context as theologians, historians, and philosophers, and must, therefore, approach historical and religious studies with an inter-disciplinary methodology, avoiding foundationalist tendencies, and present truth claims as hypotheses to be tested in open dialogue. We cannot, therefore, approach miracle claims either with the *a priori* conviction that miracles do not happen or with a strict and definitive *a priori* conviction regarding what constitutes as evidence. Therefore, it is entirely possible to consider the claim that Jesus was risen from the dead, or any miracle claim, Christian or not, as a viable object of historical inquiry. It is neither a matter of history, nor of faith, but is indeed a matter of both.

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